Women's Health Movements

A Global Force for Change

Second Edition

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palgrave
macmillan

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ISBN 978-981-13-9466-9 ISBN 978-981-13-9467-6 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-9467-6

Cover illustration: Meredeth Turshen

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd.
The registered company address is: 152 Beach Road, #21-01/04 Gateway East, Singapore 189721, Singapore

In memory of Cecile and Jerry Shore
And for Vera, Juna, and Charlotte

Preface

These headlines compel me to write: "Pro-Choice #StopTheBans rallies take place nationwide," "El Salvador's women rise up against gender violence, femicide," "Majority in Brazil's top court to make homophobia and transphobia crimes," "5,000 women from around the world attend Zapatista's first 'women in struggle' summit," and "Millions march to demand climate action." Behind each of these headlines is a story about people mobilizing to protest assaults on their rights, or organizing to gain recognition of their rights, or demonstrating to protect their livelihoods, or meeting to strategize around human rights. I am compelled to write about the movements that people form, motivated by anger at injustice, in reaction to the tragic loss of life, and fed up with pervasive harassment and assault.

Women's health matters. The issues women unite around are important: reproductive health and the right to abortion, domestic violence and the right to protection, and disability and the right to services and jobs. This book celebrates our work and warns about the new struggles ahead and the old issues that never seem to go away.

My litmus test for change used to be structural reform. If the call for correction did not lead to official commitment to adopt good new laws or overturn bad old ones, then the initiative was not likely to last. Legal changes do not necessarily mean that institutions, let alone attitudes, will be transformed, but they are goals that determine whether a movement is

a trend with the power to endure. Now we see laws and regulations being overturned, not just the bad old legislation women sought to repeal, but also the good new policies we fought for with passionate determination. I am writing from a place of struggle to preserve the access to abortion we wrested from conservatives decades ago, access that is already severely limited and may be denied for generations to come. Today, amidst evidence of a global democratic recession, repeal increasingly means tightened restrictions on women's rights, rather than a relaxation of onerous regulations.

"It is just that there be law, but law is not justice. The passing of a law and the proof of its existence is not enough to assure effective resistance to oppression," says Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/13/opinion/when-law-is-not-justice.html, accessed 31 July 2018). Recent cases of sexual assault in India tell the story: in 2012, Jyoti Singh Pandey was raped in Delhi and died of her injuries. The government responded to the huge public outcry by creating a fast-track court for rape cases. Nonetheless, the attacks continue, only coming to attention when they involve assaults on minors: a 17-year-old (Unnao, 2017), an 8-month-old (Rajasthan, 2018), an 8-year-old gang-raped and killed (Kathua, Jammu and Kashmir, 2018), an 11-year-old repeatedly gang-raped over seven months (Chennai, 2018), and a 5-year-old abducted, raped, and murdered (Mumbai, 2019). The National Crime Records Bureau recorded 19,765 cases of child rape in 2016, a rise of 82 percent from 2015 when 10,854 cases were registered. India's Union Cabinet (the nation's supreme decision-making body) approved capital punishment for the rape of girls under the age of 12 years in April 2018. But 99 percent of rapes are not reported, in part because of police intimidation and invasive vaginal exams, but also because the judicial, political, and administrative systems are dysfunctional. Then, there are the attitudes: Indian officials say people see rape "as less of a crime and more of a social deviation or aberration against the family honor" (https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/28/world/asia/india-gang-rape-chennai.html, accessed 31 July 2018).

At the same time, we see positive changes everywhere in attitudes (like greater acceptance of same-sex marriage, which is now legally performed and recognized in 27 countries) and in behavior (sexual harassment and

assault are less tolerated). Not all attitudinal changes translate into public policy, let alone law. And women's resistance does not always lead to women's emancipation. Still, movements matter: public protest does pressure governments and politicians, even courts, in policy deliberations. The mass mobilizations demonstrating changes in public perception are impressive, as is the speed with which rallies and marches materialize. Undoubtedly, social media and new information and communication technologies have provided organizers with faster and cheaper means to attract crowds and disseminate their message. This book tries to capture the current state of organizing for women's health across a broad range of concerns and to assess its impact.

When I wrote about women's health movements more than a decade ago, I was optimistic, perhaps overly so. I believed women had accomplished so much in the last century that the trend of expanded sexual and reproductive rights and improved women's health services was irreversible. The evidence was irrefutable, I thought, for progressive recognition of women's health rights in both the Global North and South. But, the world's political economy, impaired by the 2008 financial crisis and freighted with higher orders of inequality, has shifted many policy agendas to a less liberal position on human rights. Witness the Polish government's targeting of women's rights activists and organizations (https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/02/06/poland-womens-rights-activists-targeted, accessed 14 February 2019), the multifaceted discrimination against Kurdish and other minority women in Turkey (http://jwf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Womens-Rights-Under-Attack.pdf, accessed 14 February 2019), and attacks on women human rights defenders in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua (http://im-defensoras.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/286224690-Violence-Against-WHRDs-in-Mesoamerica-2012-2014-Report.pdf). In revising and rewriting this book, I realized that no gain is permanent, no win secure. We must fight many of the same battles over and over again.

The backlash against women's rights has served to awaken militant feminism: in India, mass rallies condemned the gang rape of Jyoti Pandey in 2012; in the United States, protests against sexual assault erupted on college campuses in 2014; in Brazil, 30,000 black women descended on Brasilia to demonstrate against sexual violence and racism in 2015; in

Argentina, feminists came out against domestic violence in 2016; in China, over 2 million people signed petitions in support of Young Feminist Activism in 2016; and in Poland, women pushed back successfully against a total abortion ban. Worldwide marches against the newly installed Trump administration filled the streets in January 2017. And in October 2017, #MeToo campaigns began appearing in one country after another.

This new edition of *Women's Health Movements* avoids pessimism. Although access to health services remains unequal, there are advances to report—and no end of protest. Examples of progress are impressive: since 2000, women in 28 countries have fought for and won expanded legal grounds for abortion (to protect a woman's health, for socioeconomic reasons, or without restriction as to reason), and 24 countries added at least one of three additional grounds: in cases of rape, incest, or when the fetus is diagnosed with a grave anomaly (https://www.guttmacher.org/report/abortion-worldwide-2017, accessed 24 May 2019).

On the other hand, in reaction to liberalizing changes in abortion laws, such as the remarkable vote to repeal the Eighth Amendment in Ireland, the Holy See has become a more committed and effective opponent of abortion, and the Christian anti-abortion crusade has graduated to a global stage. Access to reproductive health services in countries with newly liberalized abortion laws is further complicated by the expanded Mexico City Policy, also known as the "global gag rule," which the United States promulgated in January 2017: not only will nongovernmental organizations that provided abortion services or abortion counseling be ineligible for U.S. family planning funding, but all health services offered by such facilities will be denied assistance. Responding almost immediately to the $600 million anticipated funding gap, the Dutch minister for foreign trade and development cooperation convened a family planning conference in Brussels in March 2017, which was attended by 60 nations, private funders, and philanthropists (https://www.insidephilanthropy.com/home/2017/10/10/philanthropy-global-gag-rule-grants, accessed 20 July 2018). By July 2018, She Decides had raised $500 million for sexual and reproductive rights and health of girls and women (https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/newsroom/news/2018/one_year_she_decides, accessed 24 May 2019).

Overall, the record of the past ten years is dispiriting: the acceleration of global warming is relentless, and a hard turn to conservative politics in many parts of the world manifests as rollbacks of women's rights. Women's health movements everywhere are now making two urgent demands: we need reproductive justice and we want environmental justice. These challenges are the principal themes of this book.

Demands for reproductive justice have fallen into the hands of authoritarian politicians and religious leaders who, to further their own agendas, are distorting women's causes under the banners of tradition, nationalism, faith, and family. Emblematic of fascism (and widely copied by autocratic and dictatorial regimes) is the restoration of patriarchal authority, an archetype in which women and children are subordinate to the male head of the household. Both twentieth-century fascist regimes—those of Benito Mussolini in Italy and Adolf Hitler in Germany—promised to return women to the home and confine their activities to bearing and raising children. The Italian and German dictatorships did not just promulgate laws that relegated women to the homestead; they also built a public cult of motherhood in the names of nationalism and state power.

The rightward turn today rides on political interpretations of religious doctrine. Religious fundamentalisms use the latest technology and other forms of access to governmental powers to naturalize their version of the truth; their purpose is to take control of particular religious, ethnic, and national communities as well as society as a whole. Religious leaders, often in collusion with politicians, rally their fundamentalist adherents with extreme views of gender. In their doctrine, not only has binarism, which is predicated on the stable opposition of male and female, returned to the discourse, but also the characterization of men and women has hardened to biological basics and sociobiological caricatures. In these perspectives, women are valued for their reproductive capacity, men for their agency and performance. These characteristics are essentialized: women are said to be instinctual mothers, warm and caring, whereas men are assertive and leaders.

Religious fundamentalisms are closely related to gender, as notions of "proper" masculinity and femininity and the relations between the sexes are fundamental to the social and political order that these movements try to construct as normative values.