

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Gita Sen and Marina Durano for DAWN (eds),<sup>1</sup> *The Remaking of Social Contracts: Feminists in a Fierce New World*, London: Zed Books, 2014. ISBN: 9781780321592 (cloth); ISBN: 9781780321585 (paper); ISBN: 9781780321615 (ebook)**

## **To a World in Need of Ferocity: Feminists Organizing For a Fierce New World**

When a piece of writing is radical in form or content, the aspects of it that one critic will consider challenging are those that a more sympathetic reader will identify as its greatest strengths. This text's strength and challenge lies in the diversity of thought contained therein. The book is densely comprehensive: it absolutely teems with contributions, from short two-paragraph synopses to robust academic treatments. The longer one spends with the book, the more one is impressed, but indeed also overwhelmed, by the many different priorities identified by the (many) authors. These authors and their contributions are well organized into nodes of analytic interest, and they all usefully orbit around central and agreed-upon foci of feminist inquiry. Yet, they also fairly equally share the intention to deconstruct inequities along radical trajectories of analysis. The difficulty I found in engaging with the authors' contributions is a problem common to any feminist project: how do you welcome a wide array of priorities, experiences, and contexts without privileging any single one, and how do you translate many different understandings of the most pressing concerns for feminists into action-oriented applications? Editors Gita Sen and Marina Durano have opted to take on that feminist challenge: prioritize none, share the platform with many, and offer dozens of practical solutions as wide-ranging as the contexts from which they were generated.

It is also absolutely necessary to state clearly, and at the beginning, that the challenge of this collection is not a failure. This book is not at fault for collecting and displaying a huge array of feminist voices. Rather, the editors' decision to include as many voices as possible begins to do justice to the enormity of diversity that exists across feminist projects globally.

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<sup>1</sup> Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era – <http://www.dawnnet.org/feminist-resources/>

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This book is uncompromising in its commitment to feminist methodologies of inclusion of tactics and diversity of global feminist priorities. Somehow, Sen and Durano fit 14 chapters, a foreword and introductory note, as well as 16 miniature “box” chapters into only 300 pages; 32 authors have made the collection possible. This book is a collective triumph, a robust resource benefiting from both activist and academic circles and from expertise spanning several continents (broadly across the global North and South), age and status (the mini-boxes are mostly written by early-career researchers). Additionally, the text gives space to many competing disciplinary visions of how feminists should intervene. The complex interweaving of work by contributing authors mirrors the very organizational and solidarity-driven processes they describe: *collectives* of visionary women working in solidarity have achieved the gains described within.

To understand the collection's core vision, the reader must recognize from the beginning that DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era) is an unabashedly radical organization committed to a “fierce new world”. Exactly what fierce might here mean simmered in the back of mind throughout my reading until it dawned on me that it might mean, among other things, uncompromising: fierce as in unapologetically committed to radical analysis and change. This is the kind of collection Zed Books is famous for publishing and the sort of trajectory missing from mainstream academic work on gender. One important methodological difference between this collection and mainstream gender studies academic discourses on development and gender is that, while all the authors of *The Remaking of Social Contracts* are acutely aware of the mechanics and real material contexts within which they make prescriptions for societal reform, none appear bounded by them. These authors are all committed to a radical re-envisioning of the structural causes of the problems they identify. Radical ideas require vision embedded within, but not overly bounded by, things-as-they-are. My sense from these authors—especially those directly involved in DAWN as founders, chairs, and current members—is that they are visionaries with their mind

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on transformative action and working towards a future that is not inevitable. While feminist grassroots initiatives must be grounded closely in the material realities in which women live, the tone of this text is that these pages are a place where pragmatists share their radical, unburdened, and fierce dreams.

In terms of fierce dreams, a particularly strong current throughout is, quite naturally, a scathing economic critique of neoliberalism and neoliberal policy, as well as an incisive and unrelenting accounting of the devastating systemic changes wrought by decades of interventions by the World Bank, IMF, and neocolonizing nation-states—particularly the US—on local economic, cultural, political, and social contexts, usually in the global South. While the book states an explicit interest in remaking social contracts, it's also quite clear that the language of “remaking” inadequately captures the core intent. The book's feminist commitments are effecting transformation of current patterns of dominance and subordination, and analytically transcending oppressive systems of governance and societal organization. Sen and Durano write early on that “the untethering of finance from the world of industry and the removal of regulatory barriers to finance capital has meant great instability in the global economy” (p.9). In the final pages of the text, Josefa Francisco and Peggy Antrobus state that “feminist leaders who will make a difference are those who are in touch with their own sources of power, understanding its paradoxes and limitations in the feminist struggle along with others in the shaping of the new post-capitalist epoch” (p.305). These book-end chapters leave us in no doubt that feminist struggles are economic struggles. Feminists have a substantial stake in critique of current neoliberal policy, and are well poised to contribute ideas about structural economic reform.

Feminists have long critiqued misogynist notions of reason and liberal rationality, and the 2008 financial crisis is one of the greatest modern examples of the failings of “economic man”. Simply, economic behavior is not always economically “rational” (p.34), and rational economic decisions for “man” are not inherently rational for women. Feminists herein

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provide substantive analysis of how neoliberal policies including austerity, privatization and financialization of essential services, and deregulation of industries and private interests have concretely disturbed and desecuritized the lives of women and their families around the world. Sen and Durano explore how women's groups have worked on the frontlines of anti-neoliberal organizing since the first roll-backs of post-war Keynesian economic policies (p.11). They show how countless numbers of economic policies generated (or dissolved) by men in elite decision-making roles have repeatedly proven irrational from the perspective of women, and indeed men, outside of decision-making spaces.

The first third of the text is globally-oriented; it overviews global turns over the course of centuries and, while this broad scope comes at the expense of the localized and regionally-specific methodologies so important to feminist studies across disciplines, it proves to be an excellent introduction to the wide-ranging socio-political effects of neoliberalism. By way of critique, I'll note that in each of the five chapters of Part II, the effect or implications of gender in economics is alluded to in vague terms. For a hundred pages, the strong emphasis on gender-as-key-referent set forward in Sen and Durano's introductory overview is under-represented in most major demographic analyses presented therein. Throughout, qualitative allusions to gender are barely backed up with quantitative substantiation, and "gender" is referenced in very vague terms as an analytic referent. Lice Cokanasiga's box (p.51) was the only chapter or box throughout Part II to delve with some specificity into the effect of trade liberalization on a specific and gendered group—namely, Pacific women—and hinted in its constrained space to the activist work done by Pacific women on this area. This box could easily and usefully have been expanded into a full chapter. This strange restriction on quantitative economic analysis that substantively illustrates and centers a gendered analysis may be due to a lack of mainstreaming of feminist economics, or perhaps due to a lack of data-sets deemed appropriate. Further gendered quantitative analysis is required.

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Despite the above critique, the following two thirds of the book do a lot to expand and delve more deeply into specific case studies. In the weeks I carried this book around in my bag, dog-earing the pages in cafes and at bus-stops, people often commented that the book was “well-indexed”, making reference to the dozens of colored sticky-notes riddled throughout. The book is absolutely full of gems in terms of succinct explanations of the mechanics of multi-national, particularly UN-level, debates and policy-development processes on feminist issues such as sexual violence and the inclusion and empowerment of women in state-NGO negotiations. These women do not mince words, they take stances:

“Geoengineering is a dangerous and expensive distraction when compared to the urgent work that needs to be done on mitigation and adaptation.” (p.127)

“Advocates should never underestimate the willingness and ability of conservatives of all [political and religious] stripes to make alliances to fight sexual and reproductive rights and women’s rights ... Reproductive health and women’s health activists must therefore never cease to demand full participation rights and access to decision-making venues.” (p.178)

“Control of women’s bodies is a step towards the political control of society. The control of the state is the ultimate goal of fundamentalist groups and parties. Thus women’s struggles for their rights are deeply enmeshed in the struggle for political power and the making and remaking of a secular social contract.” (p.193)

Authors leave little doubt as to where they stand, and do not shy away from identifying their critiques of inequality as crises of structural injustice.

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As previously mentioned, many authors describe the work of women at the UN and many authors celebrate the development of the Millennium Development Goals as they pertain to gender, as well as the growth of multinational and supra-state organizations, caucuses, and committees working on mainstreaming gender concerns. Refreshingly, several chapters dwell considerably on explicitly questioning the focus on rights as a problematic metric of inquiry, and deliberate on the efficacy of the state as an appropriate agent of rights delivery. The propensity of agents of the state to jump into bed with private and conservative groups intent on rolling-back women's rights have not been lost on authors here. I found the final 60 pages, Part V, most conceptually exciting because authors here dug into radical political and geographical critiques of neocolonial state arrangements, failed states, and opportunities for building multistate organizational linkages. The international women's movement has achieved gains through myriad methods of advocating, lobbying, building and nurturing partnerships, and strong-arming state actors when backed by the strength of organized coalitions between women's groups and their allies. These authors appreciate that no state champions the rights of vulnerable people without pressure, and practically understand that women will stand up for women's rights. Women working across borders with women will champion protections for vulnerable populations, and will continue to locate their power as activists in an international movement. From this conceptual standpoint, the state is a decentered actor, and the women are agents working from above, within, and between begrudgingly mutable states.

In some ways, despite the successes of women's organizing charted throughout, the book ends with the sense that the women's movement remains marginal, but in the very best sense of that concept. I was left with the impression that, if DAWN women are marginal, it is because they strategically choose the margins. While the women's movement has in many ways achieved the inclusion of female voices in the mainstream where they were formerly excluded, inclusion into oppressive and restrictive organizing spaces is clearly not the end

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goal for authors here. While pushing for inclusion, representation and recognition, many women seem *to choose* to either sit behind the state in multinational bodies shouting words of encouragement and advice; to stand in front of resistant actors dragging them forward into fierce new worlds; or to stand with one foot in the grassroots and the other in institutional roles as critics and participants in state-level change. The feminist methodology in practice here is to focus on process, and the radical bent is to imagine a world more ferociously livable than anything we have as yet within our grasp. Feminists will always be under fire for being impractical, for dreaming too big, for never being satisfied, and for caring too much. This book is headily guilty on all these accounts and more, making it a thrilling and invigorating read, and refreshing in its devil-may-care approach to the constraints presented by the status quo. It is refreshing to hear a chorus of voices organizing under the banner of feminism and unafraid to critique the fundamental features of our broken social contracts. At this time, we are in grave need of ferocity, and it takes courage to research, to organize, and to publish in the name of uncompromising commitment to radical change. We should do it more often.

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