

# **“I wish to become the leader of women and give them equal rights in society”<sup>1</sup>: How Young Australians and Asians Understand Feminism and the Women’s Movement**

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It is widely known that “feminism” is an “f... word” in Anglophone western countries, refused by many women and despised by many men. Some commentators argue that the word “feminism” has even less currency in Asian nations, where histories of colonialism cast feminism as an imperialist import from the west. My research findings, based on a study of young South Australians and young Asians living in Beijing, Hanoi, New Delhi, Mumbai, Chiang Mai, Bangkok, Seoul and Yogyakarta, challenge this claim. In general, there is stronger support for feminism and the women’s movement in most of the Asian samples. Various explanations for this are canvassed. First, where feminist reform has stalled in the Anglophone west, women’s movements in countries like South Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan are still achieving legislative change and the introduction of women’s studies courses, although this is met with both support and resistance among young people. Secondly, there is widespread endorsement of “state feminisms” in countries like China, Viet Nam and Indonesia, often built on historical connections between the women’s movement and the national liberation movement. Third, in some countries, such as India at least until recently, the women’s movement’s role is constructed as the “upliftment” or “empowerment” of the poor and disadvantaged. Excused from being the objects of change, middle class Indians might find feminism less personally discomfiting than the “personal is political” rhetoric of western feminism.

## **INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH**

The findings I discuss in this paper derive from the confluence of two streams in my research. In my book *Living Feminism*, (1997) I focused on the ways in which the lives of so-called ordinary Australian women had, or had not, been transformed by the women’s liberation movement. As I was finishing *Living*

*Feminism*, Anne Summers (1993) published her controversial "Letter to the next generation," accusing young women of failing to take up the torch of feminist activism. Summers positioned the next generation as ungrateful daughters who took all their mothers' sacrifices for granted, either because of selfishness or ignorance. Not surprisingly, Summers provoked outrage from a number of young feminist scholars. They accused older feminists of being part of the problem rather than the solution, of being institutionalised femocrats who had sold out women's activism. They saw the women's movement as out-of-touch, homogenous, puritanical, requiring all feminists to endorse the same goals (e.g. Nicholson 1993). This inter-generational debate intrigued me, as did the question of what feminism means to a young generation of Australians.

A longer-standing research interest than my engagement with inter-generational differences has been my analysis of the difference of ethnicity and nationality. In my book *Re-orienting Western Feminisms* (1998), I draw on the research and perspectives of scholars from beyond the Anglophone white western women's movement to interrogate the underlying assumptions of western feminism. In a sense, *Re-orienting Western Feminisms* was hoist on its own petard. I challenged the notion of simple dualisms: "backward" versus "civilised," or even "authentic" versus "artificial." However, at the same time I reproduced those dualisms as the very location from which I began my interrogation of western feminism. My analysis sometimes seemed to claim that western feminists focused on rights and individualism while Asian feminists understood their location within a community of connections and obligations. I sometimes appeared to argue that western feminists are preoccupied by sexual expression and freedom while third world activists struggle for clean drinking water and against the violence of imperialism. Traces of this dualist approach appear also in this paper, despite the fact that I compare four case studies of feminism/women's movement activism. As a sociologist, I believe that comparisons, by their very nature, start with dualisms. Adapting Gayatri Spivak's (1994) notion of "strategic essentialism," we might claim that strategic dualisms are necessary starting places for analysis, although hopefully far removed from the provisional resting places of any inquiry.

At the turn into the twentieth century, some western academic feminist commentators claim that western feminism is languishing. In the United States, Barbara Epstein (2001, 2,5) argues that a mass, revolutionary movement has dwindled to a few white, well-paid, well-educated, ageing activists running organizations like NOW (National Organization of Women) or women's studies departments to the advantage of their own kind. Lynne Segal (1999, 1) in Britain wonders whether feminism "has become little more than a blip in the march of economic neo-liberalism." Belinda Probert (2002, 7) argues that "Progress towards gender equality appears to have stalled in Australia."

Western despondency can be contrasted to the vibrancy of women's movements in a number of Asian countries. In India, grassroots women's activism has been enhanced by the law that 30 percent of local government or village (*panchayat*) seats are to be held by women, amounting to 7.5 million seats across India. The "Total Literacy Program" initiated in 1988–89 encouraged a wider mobilisation of women, for example in anti-arack (alcohol) groups and women's credit co-operatives (Poonarcha 1999, 200).

On International Women's Day 2002, equal opportunity legislation came into force in Taiwan (pers. comm. Chen–Yen Ku). There has been a ferment of legislative change in the Republic of Korea, including outlawing violence against women and promoting equal opportunities (Chai 1997, 176; Kuninobu 2000, 2091). A statutory Equal Opportunities Commission was established in 1996 in Hong Kong, and a Women's Commission was established in January 2001 (Ng and Ng 2002, 7). Women leaders and women's groups have been prominent in protesting the Indonesian government's response to the economic crisis (Sen 1999, 14–15; Suryochondro 2000, 232, 236). Reviewing a multinational project to develop women's studies in a number of Asian countries, two Korean writers suggest that: "Women's studies as an instrument of educational and social transformation has emerged in Asia since the mid-1970s and has been one of the fastest developing academic fields in Asia" (Kim and Kang 2001, 113).

This activism within and beyond the government in these Asian countries makes a stark contrast with the doomsayers of Anglophone western feminism. What might explain these different responses to feminism? Is the story as simple as this dualist construction suggests?

## METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

This paper draws on data from a research project funded by a large Australian Research Council grant. The results presented here were collected between 2000 and 2002, school and university students completing questionnaires in a class set aside for this purpose, with a researcher on hand to answer questions. Questionnaires were completed by young people in one or two cities in Australia (Adelaide), India (New Delhi and Mumbai), Indonesia (Yogyakarta), Thailand (Bangkok and Chiang Mai), China (Beijing), Viet Nam (Hanoi) and the Republic of Korea (Seoul). The bulk of the results were collected in South Australia and come from a social science university class, eleven schools and one youth service. The schools range from single sex exclusive private schools to public schools in working class suburbs. The students were either in their penultimate or final year (year 11 or year 12) of school, mostly aged between 16 and 18 years old. The clients of the youth service left high school before completing their HSC. There are about 230 young women and 130 young men in the South Australian sample. Although the samples are not random, representativeness has been sought through the range of schools in-

cluded in the research.

In the Asian cities, by contrast, the samples are small and confined to middle class urban students. Surveys of each of a final year high school class and a first year university class were completed, the school and university classes secured by the researchers in each survey location. There are about 260 young women and 200 young men in the total Asian sample, about 60 young people from each participating city. Except for some of the Indian samples, where English was used, the questionnaire was translated into the relevant Asian language by the local researchers and the results translated back into English.

The questionnaire provided tick boxes to indicate agreement with statements such as "the women's movement has been good for women of my country," as well as space for comments, should the respondent wish to make any. The comments were coded and all responses entered using SPSS software to allow manipulation of the data. Each respondent was assigned a unique code, which indicates the country, city, respondent type (high school student, university student for example), and the unique number of the questionnaire.

While some local researchers changed the questions when they felt they were inappropriate to the particular Asian culture, generally local researchers identified no problems in the translation process, although it became clear that the concepts did not have the same meaning in every context. The translation of the term "feminism" was the most problematic. This term has exercised Chinese women's studies writers and activists for some years (for example see Wang 2000, 737), while it also produced some confusion in Yogyakarta, as I will discuss below.

## OVERVIEW OF THE RESULTS: ATTITUDES TO FEMINISM AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

In western countries, one widely understood caricature of feminists is as man-hating, lesbian, boiler-suited, fat and ugly (Walter 1998, 36; Kaplan 1997, 16, 17). Ambivalence toward derogatory images of feminism is reflected in the qualification, "I'm not a feminist, but ...," a way of speaking feminism without making an identification with it (Griffin cited in Skeggs 1997, 142). According to a number of commentators, many women and men from beyond the west also reject the term feminism. In China a woman who is labelled a feminist is conceived of as a sort of "monster," a "mannish woman" (Ding 1991, 111). To Hira Jhamtani (1991, 99) of Indonesia, women's liberation prescribes the masculinisation of the female. The adjectives used to describe feminists by members of Singapore's women's association, AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research), included "militant, lesbian, bra-burning, anti-men ... sexually promiscuous ... people who are really not women, really aggressive, women who don't shave their legs" (Lyons 2000,

6). In Indian newspapers and women's magazines printed in English, for example *Savvy*, *Elle* and *Cosmopolitan*, feminism is described as "irrational," "unnatural," "excessive," "berserk," "rabble rousing," "dogmatic," "West oriented," "not rooted in [the] reality of India," "not open-minded," "anti-family" and "pro-divorce" (Chaudhuri 2000, 273, 275). However, the claim that feminism is a foreign imperialist import from the United States is an insufficient explanation for its negative connotations, given that "Potatoes, chillies, Marxism, capitalism and even the concept of the modern nation came to Asia from the West and there is no stigma attached to any of these imports" (Singh and Owen 2001, 91). Moreover, my survey results question this widespread antipathy towards feminism.

The surprising overall impression from Charts 1–3 is the much higher approval rating for feminism among almost every Asian sample when compared with the young South Australians. A majority of young South Australian women believe that feminism is personally relevant and slightly less than half say that feminists shared their values. Only one third call themselves feminists. By contrast, almost eighty percent of the young Asian women find feminism personally relevant and agree that feminists share their values. Sixty percent call themselves feminists. The differences between South Australian and Asian men are, if anything, even greater. Only 20 percent of young South Australian men find feminism personally relevant. Three times as many young Asians do, almost 60 percent. Twice as many young Asian men as young South Australian men believe feminists share their values. Even more surprisingly, given some of the criticisms of the term "feminist" in the literature, one third of young Asian men call themselves feminist, twice the proportion of young South Australian men.

Similar results are revealed in attitudes to the women's movement (charts 4 and 5), although here the young South Australian women are as enthusiastic as most of the young Asian women. Young Asian men are generally strong supporters of the women's movement, not only in relation to advancing the cause of women but also in terms of achieving good things for men, although there are exceptions, for example China.

How do we explain these unexpected results? There are two possible reasons why the results might be treated with caution. Firstly, it has been argued that in countries with a shallow social sciences tradition, an intrusive state and where conciliation is preferred to outright disagreement, respondents might be more likely to tell the researcher what they think she wants to hear. China is a case in point, although young Chinese men seemed willing to show lack of support for feminism. Secondly, the Asian samples may have quite a different understanding of feminism and the women's movement, perhaps endorsing a more "acceptable" face of feminism. After dealing with the first proposition, the rest of this paper explores the second claim.

Given the lack of virulent comments from the Asian samples, no doubt some of the Asian respondents were attempting to please the western feminist

researcher by showing support for her interests. The only hint of irritation came from several Korean respondents, to which I return below. By contrast, a number of the young men in the Adelaide sample expressed growing hostility as they completed the questionnaire. In response to the second question on the women's movement, two denied the relevance of feminism to their lives with "I couldn't give two shits about feminism" and "I don't particularly care: I only care about school and 'Aliens and Predator'" (co-educational public school, 10041111; co-educational public school, 10041141). Several women were also hostile, one claiming: "I hate feminist bitches" and another that "lesbian communists (feminists) do not deserve to be a part of society" (girls public school, 100101438; Catholic girls school, 10091226).

One way to both avoid offending the researcher and "lying" was to tick the "no opinion/don't know" box. However, this option was chosen most often by young South Australian men, followed by young Korean men (see charts 6 and 7). While this response does appear to be connected with hostility to the women's movement rather than support for feminism, it is lower among the Asian samples. However, apart from gender, low socio-economic status is the main predictor of a "no opinion/don't know" response as my experience in various South Australian classrooms revealed. There are a good number of working class respondents in the South Australian sample and comparatively few in the Asian samples. I suggest that it is class background, rather than national difference, that produces the discrepancy in "no opinion/don't know" responses. Furthermore, while the don't know discrepancy between the South Australian and Asian samples would be sufficient to explain the fairly narrow difference in responses to "the women's movement has achieved good things for women of my country," it is insufficient to explain the differences in support for the statement "Feminism today is relevant to me personally."

In the South Australian and some of the Asian samples, several respondents confused the terms "feminine" and "feminism." The Indonesian word for feminism is translated as either *feminisme* or *feminis* while femininity is *feminin*. The unfamiliar word "feminism" was sometimes confused with the more familiar word "femininity." As one respondent said, "every woman must be feminine in order to increase women's self-worth and self-confidence. It is also a way of attracting males" (female, school student, 180221939).

Apart from such misapprehensions, the meaning of feminism and, to a lesser extent, women's movement is quite different in each country surveyed, both linguistically and historically. The Indonesian terms for women's movement are *pergerakan wanita* or *gerakan wanita*, literal translations of the same terms as in English (Suryono Gentut, the local researcher for Indonesia, pers. comm. 24 Apr 2002). In both China and India, the term for feminist has a western ring to it while the term for women's movement is more widely understood and does not have any western connotations. The researcher in

Beijing translated feminism as *nǚquán zhìyì*, promoting women's rights. Women's movement was translated as *fùnǚ yùndòng*, women's movement (Dou Wei, local researcher, email communication 14 May 2002). In India, there is no direct translation of "feminism" into Hindi and the phrase, *nari adhikar-vad*, which comes closest to the English term "feminism" has a western connotation. The phrase, *nari uththan andolan*, literally translates to "women's emancipation movement" and is the term most commonly used for the women's movement (Alok Jha, local researcher, pers. comm. 1 May 2002).

The rest of this paper is devoted to exploring the different meanings of feminism and the women's movement as explanations for the varying endorsement of women's movement activism across the surveyed countries. However, an overview of some of the differences can be seen in responses to a question that asked whether various descriptors applied to feminists. The descriptors included work for equal pay and don't like most men (charts 8 and 9). Answers to this question reveal a widespread understanding that feminists work for equal pay. Discounting the results for Hanoi due to an error in the design of the translated questionnaire, the "man-hating" stereotype of feminists is endorsed most enthusiastically by the young South Australian males, although the young Indian women also construct a gender war. Besides the young Indian women, only the Chinese and South Korean males come close to the response by the South Australian males.

I have selected four case studies for further analysis. First, I examine the South Australian respondents, where an equality rhetoric is used to endorse feminism while a "has-been" or over-radical rhetoric rejects feminism as either no longer necessary or excessive. I will then examine three of the Asian samples. The young Korean men are the least supportive of feminism (although not the women's movement), in some cases recording the greatest gender gap in comparison with women's support. The Korean case is an example of gender relations undergoing present and contested reconstruction. The strongest consistent support for the women's movement across both genders comes from Indonesia, an example of a women's movement aligned with a national development rhetoric and program. On some items, Indian men are more supportive of the women's movement than Indian women. This case will be discussed as a women's movement whose objects of action are the unenlightened peasantry rather than the middle class respondents to my survey. But let me start with a familiar example, the women's movement as conceived by young South Australians.

## CASE STUDY 1: SOUTH AUSTRALIA

The young South Australians who endorsed feminism or the women's movement almost always had in mind a liberal variant of the movement, using terms like "women's rights," "equal rights" with "everyone else," "equal op-

portunities,” opposition to discrimination and unequal treatment:

women have been ill treated in the past and even today do not have total equality. I think everybody should be treated with respect and people should treat others how they would like to be treated. As I understand it this is what feminism is about (Protestant school female, 100121423).

By contrast, those who opposed feminism usually had in mind stereotypes of “radical feminism,” a monolithic women’s movement that had gone “too far” so far that “in the end, men will be losing their rights to them [women].” Several respondents echoed Kathy Bail’s (1996) DIY feminism shaped to fit each women’s interests and engagements or resisted the notion of a crusading “fully down for the feminist cause” movement, as it is imagined and criticised by the young US feminist, Rebecca Walker (1995, xxxi). Respondents said, “is there some kind of Bible?” (public school female, 10061161) or “feminism is how I feel about myself, not how I am seen by others” (Protestant school female, 10063180).

Some young South Australians drew an explicit distinction between their support for equal rights but their opposition to feminists’ focus only on women, feminists’ belief that women were superior, feminists putting down or hating men, or wanting more than equal rights:

I’m all for equality, abortion rights etc. So I must share some values.

However I don’t agree with attitudes that almost discriminate against men. I guess I don’t agree with the “hard core” ideas (or did this go out after the 70’s?) (Protestant school female, 100111350)

A major reason, it appears, for the wide discrepancy between endorsing the women’s movement’s achievements for women while also refusing to be a feminist is that the women’s movement is safely consigned to the past, to the “dark ages” when women were downtrodden and needed liberating. The most commonly cited achievement of the women’s movement is suffrage, achieved in 1894 in South Australia, first among the Australian colonies. In general, women were depicted as having “come a long way” so that the need for the women’s movement is a thing of the past:

I have no concept of what modern Feminists do. It appears irrelevant to me. (but I believe the pioneer Feminists shaped modern perceptions and roles of women – which is relevant to me) (Protestant school female, 100111351).

There were some virulent critics of a movement that has “screwed the men” who “have it rough,” are “suffering unfairly” and are “strongly disadvantaged” (three females and a male). For those who “believe[d] women belong in the house” (Catholic school male, 10081227), the women’s movement has profoundly unsettled gender relations: it has “corrupted a perfectly good system” (male) and “destroyed the moral fibre of Australian society” (Catholic school male, 10081226).

Only among the young Korean men was anything near this hostility expressed: and it was mild by comparison with these angry young South Australians. Let me turn then to the South Korean example.



## CASE STUDY 2: REPUBLIC OF KOREA

As noted above, there has been a ferment of change in the status of women in the Republic of Korea. Korean women have a long and proud history of political activism, being involved in the anti-imperialist struggles against Japan, then in labour union activism to improve conditions in factories in the free trade zones from the 1970s, and finally in the transition to a democratic state in 1988 (Nam 2002, 79–82, 87; Sohn 1999, 38). The democratic government has introduced legislation for equal employment and gender equality, sought the inclusion of women in decision-making roles, and introduced training programs on gender issues for government officers (Kim 2001, 148). Legislation includes the Women's Development Act (1995), the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Protection of Victims Act (1997), and the Prohibition of Gender Discrimination and Relief Act (1999) (Kim 2001, 157). There is mandatory paid maternity leave and childcare leave for both parents (Chai 1997, 176). Violence against women in the 1990s is understood to include date rape, marital rape, battering, incest, sexual harassment, trafficking in women, and pornography (Chai 1997, 180). Despite all this legislation, substantive discrimination still exists (Kim 2001, 157), with women still concentrated in irregular part-time and temporary work (Nam 2002, 91). The 30 percent quota for women in the National Assembly, high-level political party positions, public offices, and local councils has not been achieved (Nam 2002, 90–91).

These dramatic changes in the official status of women in Korea were having their impact, I suspect, in the women's studies university class that formed part of my sample in Seoul. Although the female students responded positively to the possibilities of feminism, the other half of the class, the men, were more resistant to feminism than the male high school students surveyed in Seoul. Or rather, such resistance is suggested in their higher negative responses to my survey questions. Furthermore, the most negative comments in relation to feminism came from the Korean sample, although both young men and women voiced criticisms. Several young men described feminism as "ridiculous" (male university student, 130162652) and a "biased" "woman-centred perspective" (male university student, 130162651):

I'm a man. I never see that women are oppressed. I think feminists are too selfish. Women are not the only ones who have a hard time; men have a hard time too (male university student, 130162651).

By contrast, although there were some young women who criticised radical feminism—a feminism that was "too serious" (female university student, 130162665)—some young women spoke of "oppression" (female university student, 130162661) and the discrimination they experienced in Korean society, using terms like "stereotyping," sexist comments and "sexual acts." Here is an echo of the caricatures of feminists found among South Australians and

other westerners, the image of “feminists who have loud voices and get divorced,” as one young Korean man said (male university student, 130162652). The changes in women’s status are provoking both support and resistance among young Koreans.

None of the women in the Korean sample believed that men and women had equal opportunities in Korea, and less than thirty percent of the men claimed this. Respondents identified discrimination in both public and private arenas, including women’s lower wages and lower status jobs, discrimination in the media and in politics. There was much discussion of attitudes, for example that “Korea is a macho society” where women are treated as though they are inherently weak. Several opined that the situation had improved in “modern” society, but a number of respondents contrasted discourse, “words,” and a practice lagging far behind:

generally people think and speak that men and women are equal . . . but men have the superior position in the real world; sexual violence, harassment, discriminated working condition etc (female high school student, 130161612).

The South Korean sample is at the other end of the scale from the Indonesian sample, to which I now turn.

### CASE STUDY 3: INDONESIA

Geraldine Heng argues that it is the intervention of the state and those who wield the discourse of nationalism that most characterises the development of Third World feminisms (Lyons 2000, 1). Heng claims that states, particularly authoritarian ones, play an overdetermined role in the activities of Third World feminist organisations, not only through coercion and co-option, but also when women’s organisations endorse the “discourse of social transformation” proposed by the state (in Lyons 2000, 20). Such movements often seek the co-operation of men to achieve their aims. In countries looking to industrialise their economies or achieve liberation from a colonial yoke, or both, the women’s movement was often part of the national liberation struggle and, following new nationhood, was included in the machinery of development. This is as true for the All China Women’s Federation and the Vietnamese Women’s Union in communist states as it is for the Indonesian women’s movement in a right-wing authoritarian state.

In Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim country, the women’s movement has a long history associated with national liberation. In 1965, 1.5 million people were members of GERWANI, a left-feminist organisation. Many were tortured or executed by angry mobs and military tribunals (Sears 1996, 39) when the communist government was ousted (Heng 1997, 44). Under President Suharto’s New Order, women were incorporated into the goal of development through a range of state-sponsored organisations, consisting largely of the wives of upper level male civil servants and other high status

male workers. These were the main channels through which women could act politically (Sunindyo 1996, 124; Suryakusuma 1996, 101). The Family Welfare Movement or PKK was initiated by the upper strata of women, with a focus on improving the lives of lower strata women, including women in villages and urban neighbourhoods (Suryochondro 2000, 233).

Suharto's biography describes "the correct position and role" for women as "mother in a household and simultaneously as a motor of development" (in Tiwon 1996, 59). The goal of Indonesian development has been described as "the development of all Indonesians and Indonesian society as a whole, to attain a just and prosperous society which includes men and women as equal partners" (Rahman 2000, 262). Since the 1970s, Indonesian women have been harnessed into development with obligations to participate in paid work while also maintaining the household. Even more recently, in 1993, a new government document identified joint family roles and responsibilities, insisting on the equality of men and women in public roles "as citizens and as human resources for development." The document proclaimed the responsibility of both parents to nurture children, adolescents and youth and build a prosperous and happy family life (Sen 1998, 47).

There was strong support for both feminism and the women's movement among the young Indonesians. Generally, feminists worked for "personal growth," improved respect for others, "solve problems regardless of gender" (female school student, 180221938) and achieve positive things without negative impacts (male university student, 180222951). Several identified a feminism that was particularly appropriate to Indonesian norms:

women are born feminists and feminists create a balance in life. Women must be assertive but at the same time they must be gentle (female university student, 180222965; female university student, 180222946).

There was near 100 percent approval for the women's movement's achievements for women, and almost as strong support for its achievements for men (charts 4 and 5). Indeed, the respondents drew on a familiar and well-rehearsed discourse by which to discuss gender differences, as suggested by the homogeneity of their responses to my questionnaire. Rather than a western feminist preoccupation with equality, gender differences were emphasised "men and women are different, feminism must respect the difference between them, otherwise it will only cause trouble" (female school student, 180221938).

As an example, the more radical demands of the early feminist Raden Adjeng Kartini (1879–1904) have been tamed into a construction of Kartini as a national heroine celebrated on Hari Ibu Kartini, Mother Kartini Day. Young girls dress in "traditional" Javanese dress in honour and imitation of Kartini. This dress—an innovation of the 1950s and 1960s—of batik cloth wrapped to form a narrow skirt, high-heeled shoes and hair done with a battery of pins, restricts girls' movement and contrasts with the "shapeless long *Kebayas* or blouse-tunics, low-heeled sandals, and [no] ... hair ornaments"

worn by Kartini herself (Sears 1996, 37). Indeed, several of my respondents commented on the “pioneering” women’s movement’s role in the struggle for national independence:

Indonesian women have achieved good things for Indonesian women since the time of Kartini and subsequently during the struggle for independence against the Dutch occupation forces and during the 56 years of independence (female school student, 180221914).

Following the official rhetoric, several respondents linked the improvement of women with the development of the nation, for example feminists “help Indonesia develop/progress.” Some commented on the need for men and women to work together, or noted that the women’s movement raises men’s awareness of women’s issues.

To western feminist ears, this may all sound impossibly conciliatory and utopian. Indeed, Indonesian feminists are critical of the state-sponsored women’s movement, noting women’s wages are only 80 percent of men’s, sexual harassment at work, women’s under-representation in higher education and their tiny representation among politicians (Tjandraningsih 2000, 263–265; Suryochondro 2000, 233). On the other hand, these discourses of respect and obligation have certainly not prevented women from playing a significant role in the recent political struggles. For example, the Indonesian National Women’s Coalition for Justice and Democracy was established the day before Suharto resigned. It became the driving force that brought together 500 women from 26 provinces in the Women’s Congress of December 1998 (Sen 1999, 14). As a result of the Congress, women’s movement activists sought to heed and encompass a range of women’s voices and needs, including Gerwani, and thus the legitimization of communism, “farmers, labourers, lesbians and prostitutes” and women beyond the island of Java (Sen 1999, 15). Despite resistance from some Islamic groups, Indonesia is now led by a woman, Megawati Sukarno Putri.

#### CASE STUDY 4: INDIA

In India, the relationship between the women’s movement and the state is more ambivalent. The movement emerging in the 1970s called itself “the autonomous women’s movement” to distance itself from the nationalist and leftwing movements, and to signal its purpose to wrest a “specifically gender-based politics from the already constituted politics of class and caste, and, more generally, from the politics of social reform” (Ram 2000, 63). Even so, just as some feminist activists seek the involvement of men, describing them as “caring brothers and affectionate fathers” (Jha *et al.* 1998, 127) and evince a “mixed and confused reaction to [western] feminist emphasis ... on men as the principal oppressors” (Jha *et al.* 1998, 114), several of my respondents spoke of how “both men and women are marching together” under the feminist banner (female school student, 150191787).

The Indian women's movement was initially led by middle or upper class women with the objective of "uplifting" or "empowering" disadvantaged women: rural women, uneducated women, poor women. Thus John (1996, 127) suggests that feminism began its career in India with a particular kind of split subject. The investigating subject was middle class, professional and urban, and gave itself the task of speaking "on behalf of the vast majority of the nation's women," the "others" who were elsewhere (John 1996, 127). This explains the strong emphasis on village level activism. Thus, while 30 percent of *panchayat* (local government) seats are reserved for women, an attempt to introduce reserved seats in the national parliament was defeated several years ago. Young men and women in my sample took up the position of saviours of less fortunate women, a man commenting: "I will give [women] equal rights" (male school student, 110141514) and a woman: "I wish to become the leader of the women and can give them equal rights in society" (female university student, 110142549). Several of the urban Indians in my sample contrast themselves with backward villages where unequal gender treatment persists, drawing a distinction between "educated" and "uneducated" men and women. The women's movement emancipated women "from the age old unjust tradition" (male university student, 150182756).

Linked to this rural-urban opposition, five respondents made comments endorsing gender equality of opportunity as a sign of development and modernisation, for example "without a parity between men and women a nation cannot move forward" (male school student, 150191779). Similarly Ganguly-Scrase's (2002, 73-74) respondents linked women's entry into the workforce with national advancement. Respondents often drew on the state's rhetoric of development and modernization or the Left Front government's ideology concerning the importance of women's inclusion in paid labour to explain the enlightened outlook and cultural changes that had improved the position of women (Ganguly-Scrase 2002, 81).

The impact of feminism might be seen as largely elsewhere from the lives of the young men and women responding to my questionnaire. They can easily weave the women's movement into a greater discourse of national improvement and criticise the failure of the movement to achieve the upliftment of the masses.

However, in the university class in Mumbai where I gave feedback on the survey results, the male and female students engaged in a strenuous debate concerning women's versus men's advantage or disadvantage. The young men and women disagreed volubly on the degree of equality in Indian society, the value of reserved seats for women in *panchayats*, universities and on buses, the young men generally claiming women's positive discrimination and the young women retorting with statistics concerning female disadvantage (feedback in Mumbai, 9 September 2001). Indeed, in the 1990s middle class women have become the objects as well as the subjects of Indian feminism, as feminists debate the impact of cultural and economic change, of a

widening abyss in incomes and the production of a fundamentalist Hindu backlash against secularism, capitalism and feminism. There have been riots, self-immolations by elite students protesting reservation quotas for scheduled castes in government jobs, demolition of a mosque and pogroms against Muslims (John 1996, 137; Chaudhuri 2000, 264). Some of the academics and women's movement activists with whom I spoke in India felt that support for the women's movement was in rapid decline. As one young respondent noted, "somehow I feel that the majority of the male population is just not comfortable with women's liberation because somehow they [are] being deprived of their ultimate status" (female university student, 150182758).

## CONCLUSION

While I admit the dangers in drawing cross-cultural comparisons based on tiny samples of middle class urban respondents in one or two Asian cities, some provocative findings are suggested by my research. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the young South Australians draw on the individualist and equality rhetoric that is part of the wider western political discourse to embrace feminism. They reject the difference of women and disagree with feminism as a politics that asserts that specific harms are done to women. Although femocracy has also marked Australian feminism, both Indian and Indonesian respondents recognise a more strongly state-imbricated version of the women's movement that articulates with notions of development. Some of the Indian respondents derive additional comfort by distancing themselves from the object of feminism, the goal of which is "upliftment" of the rural masses, although feminism is being brought home to many middle-class Indians in recent times. In South Korea, feminism is too close for comfort for some of the young men, whose anger and anguish echoes the cries of South Australian men who have also suffered the gender wars.

Maila Stivens suggests that many Asians are experiencing "gender instability" (Kim and Kang 2001, 117). My survey results confirm this, revealing young Asians who are grappling with a "globalising" world as well as changing nationalist and feminist discourses, making of them hybrid identities, working between local and global discourses in their understanding of gender relations, much more so than the young South Australians indicate in their responses to feminism and the women's movement.

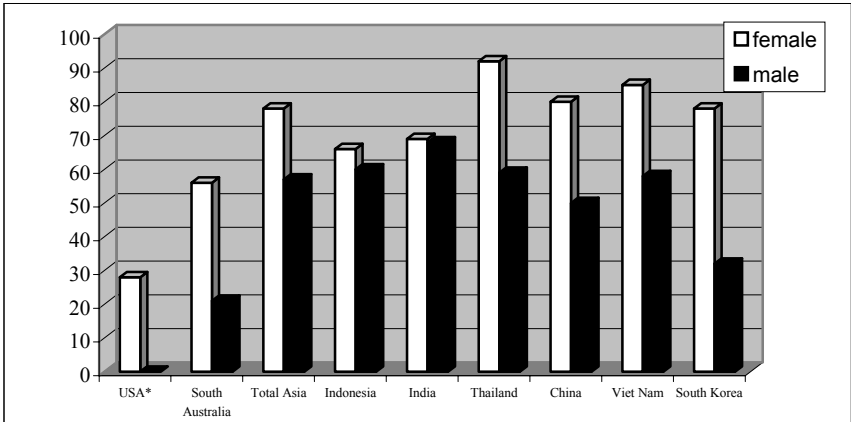
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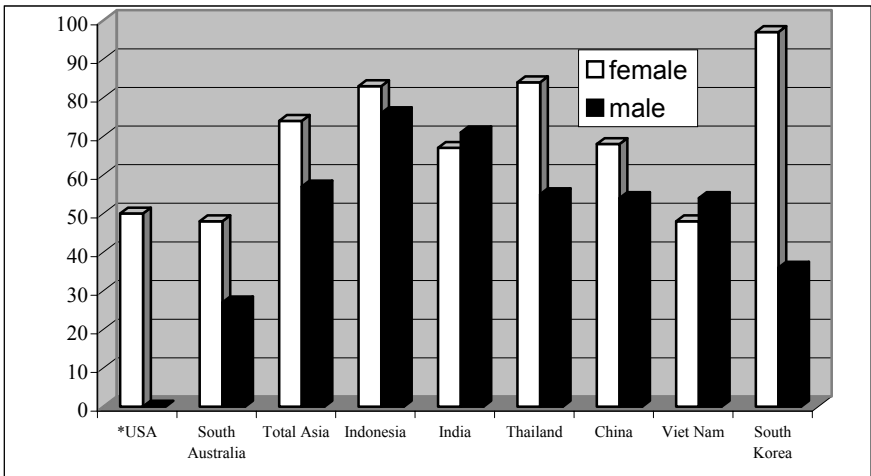
## APPENDIX 1

Chart 1: Feminism today is relevant to me personally: Percentage who agree strongly or agree more than disagree



*Source:* USA sample from Time/Cnnpoll 1995, no data for males; 48 percent agreed feminism was “today relevant to most women” (Bellafante 1998).

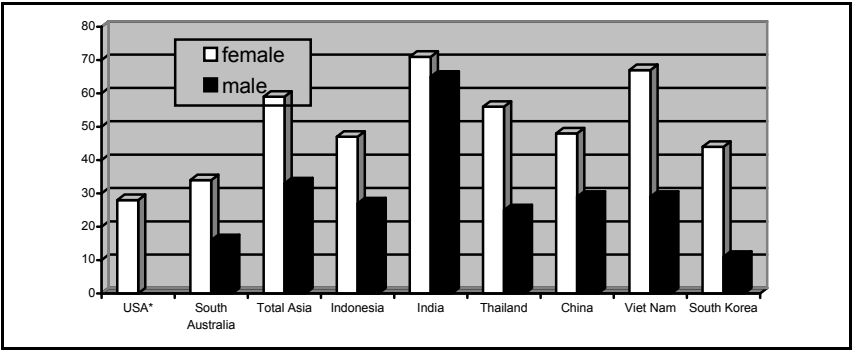
Chart 2: Feminists share my values: Percentage who agree strongly or agree more than disagree



*Source:* USA: respondent women aged 18 to 34 (Bellafante 1998).

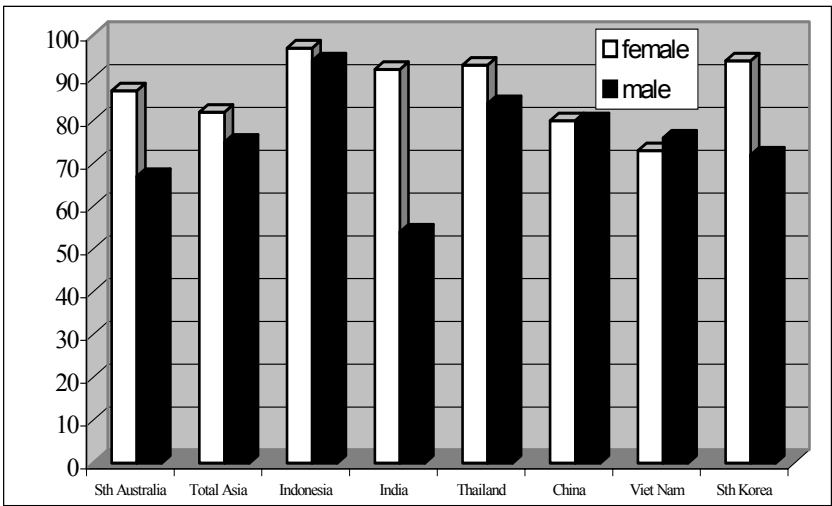


Chart 3: I would call myself a feminist



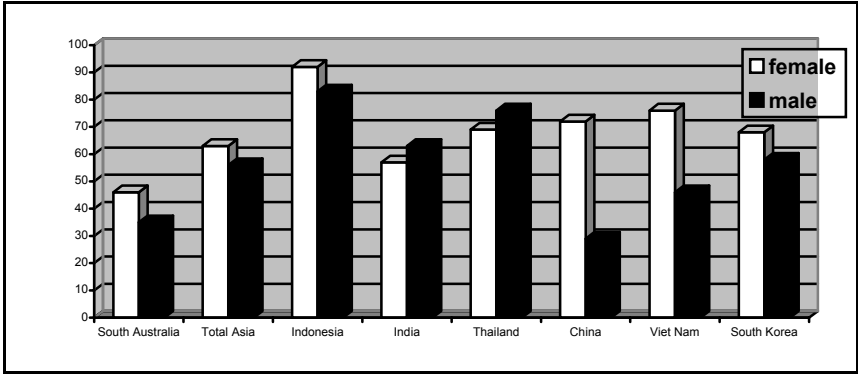
Source: USA is whole sample (Bellafante 1998).

Chart 4: “The women’s movement has achieved good things for women [of my country]”: percentage who agree strongly or agree more than disagree



Source: As it was unclear whether reference was to Australia or India for some Mumbai respondents, Mumbai excluded in India sample.

Chart 5: "The women's movement has achieved good things for men [of my country]": percentage who agree strongly or agree more than disagree



Note: As it was unclear whether reference was to Australia or India for some Mumbai respondents, Mumbai excluded in India sample.

Chart 6: Feminism today is relevant to me personally: Percentage no opinion/don't know

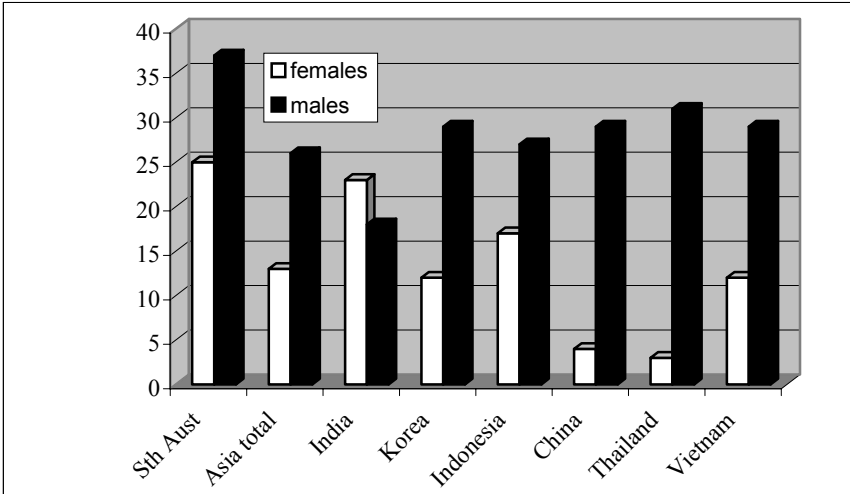
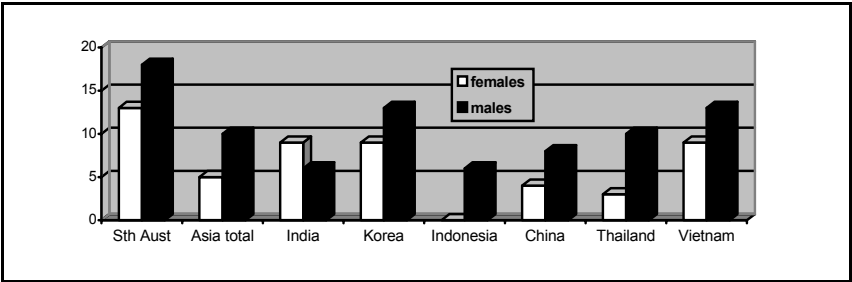


Chart 7: The women’s movement has achieved good things for women of my country: Percentage no opinion/don’t know



Note: Mumbai excluded from Indian sample as question unclear

Chart 8: The following describe feminists: Percentage who answered “yes” to “work for equal pay”

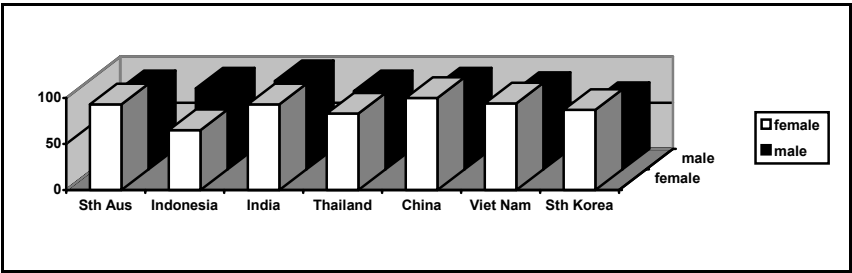
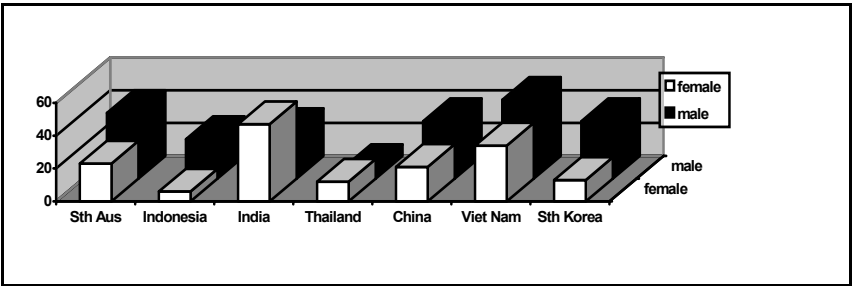


Chart 9: The following describe feminists: Percentage who answered “yes” to “don’t like most men”



## NOTES

1. A female respondent from Mumbai, 110142549.

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