

**Summer Research Fellowship Report  
Center for the Study of Religion and Culture  
Vanderbilt University**

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**Abstract**

My project examines the politics of transnational feminist discursive strategies from 1992-2005, paying particular attention to the external constraints influencing activists' strategic decisions, the evolution of those decisions over time, and also the resultant insights for global feminist theorizing. I focused this summer on collecting data related to the discursive strategies of women's rights as human rights, and anti-fundamentalism. After first developing an appropriate sampling strategy, I began collection of materials such as organizational newsletters, action alerts, press releases, position and briefing papers, annual reports, and scholarly articles. cursory analysis of scholar-activist publications, in particular, demonstrates that the human rights framework, while still dominant, is increasingly problematic. Alternately, the anti-fundamentalist framework has been widely used only more recently, but may present (perhaps temporary) practical political advantages over a human rights approach to achieving transnational feminist goals.

I am pleased to report that the Center for the Study of Religion and Culture summer fellowship has enabled me to make substantial progress in my dissertation research. As I outlined in my original funding proposal, my project concerns the discursive strategies of transnational feminist movements since the early 1990s. During this time period, scholar and grassroots activists successfully convinced the international community that all issues are women's issues, and they did so by engaging in a very intentional, strategic "discursive politics", a tactic described by Katzenstein (1998: 17) as "the effort to reinterpret, reformulate, rethink, and rewrite the norms and practices of society and state." Feminists and women's groups, especially transnational feminist networks, flooded international leaders with the latest information and statistics on the global status of women. They worked toward developing shared frames among themselves - for example, "women's rights as human rights," gender mainstreaming, economic development, and most recently anti-fundamentalism – that could then be deployed to external political targets. That is, they literally transformed the "terms and nature of the debate" (Keck and Sikkink 1998: 3). They did all this with the hope that the power reflected in their unified discursive and political strategy would not only transform the thinking of international institutions and leaders, but also heighten the potential for further activist collaboration across borders, cultures, and issues. It is this process of deploying strategic discourses that is the central focus of my dissertation. I pay particular attention to the external constraints influencing activists' strategic decisions (e.g., which frameworks to use and why), the evolution of those decisions over time, and also the resultant insights for global feminist theorizing.

I spent the early part of the summer developing and writing up an appropriate sampling strategy for my research. It would be virtually impossible to identify the existing "population" of transnational feminist networks, particularly across a period of fourteen

years; thus, there is no real sampling frame, and no means of extracting a “representative” sample of the population. Instead, I have chosen to select a small group (8-10) of networks to achieve maximum variation in key independent variables, and to rely somewhat on publications of scholars and the media for outside perspectives. Rather than attempt to achieve true generalizability by selecting a large number of cases, I opted to restrict the number of networks in my study to maximize the richness and detail of the collected data.

At this point, I would estimate that I have completed approximately ten percent of my data collection. Because of the time-intensive, detailed nature of my data collection efforts, I still have months of work ahead of me. Therefore, I cannot yet make any broad statements about findings or results. However, I can report that a cursory analysis indicates that there is considerable contestation of the human rights framework, particularly among scholar-activists. Though I began the summer with the assumption that the anti-fundamentalism frame had receded substantially since the height of its popularity between 2002 and 2004, a closer look at a diverse set of materials indicates that this may not be the case. For instance, various reports of the 2005 World Social Forum and the coinciding Feminist Dialogues meeting mention fundamentalism specifically as a common enemy to the achievement of gender equality. Furthermore, I could locate only one meaningful criticism of anti-fundamentalism as a discursive strategy, in contrast to the growing number of human rights critiques.

In closing, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the Center for the Study of Religion and Culture for its generous support. Without such funding, I would never have been able to complete so much work over the past four months. I am truly appreciative of this fellowship.