

# Women, Activism and Social Change

*Edited by*  
**Maja Mikula**

书馆

Routledge Research in Gender and Society

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# Women, Activism and Social Change

Throughout history women have participated in and sometimes initiated rebellions to defend the welfare of their family, community, class, race or ethnic group.

*Women, Activism and Social Change* presents original and state-of-the-art research on women's activism in Asia, Europe, Australia and Latin America. It explores how women have advanced or responded to social change. Using an interdisciplinary approach, the authors examine women's activities and conditions in diverse social and political contexts, from revolutionary societies, to status quo societies, to societies in decline. With its primary focus on agency and social change, this book deconstructs patriarchal discourses and unearths aspects of female agency in an array of cultural, historical and geopolitical contexts. Chapters on movements in China, Japan, Australia, Croatia, Russia and a range of other countries both contribute to our understanding of change in those societies and seek to locate women at the centre of politically aware movements. Although not exclusively a book about feminist activism, this essential collection is motivated by the feminist desire to restore to history a range of women's experiences.

This book introduces new ways of thinking across boundaries, identities and complexities in a still essentially patriarchal world. It will be of great interest to students and researchers in the fields of gender studies, activism and comparative politics.

**Maja Mikula** is Senior Lecturer in Italian Studies at the Institute of International Studies, University of Technology Sydney, Australia.

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# Contributors

**Paul Allatson** is coordinator of the Spain and Latino Studies majors in the International Studies program at the University of Technology Sydney. He researches and publishes on Latino (US Hispanic) cultures and literatures. He is also interested in Anglophone and Hispanophone post-colonial, cultural, and queer theoretical traditions. He is the author of *Latino Dreams: Transcultural Traffic and the U.S. National Imaginary* (Rodopi Press, 2002), and of *Key Words in Latino Cultural and Literary Studies* (Blackwell, forthcoming). One of his current research projects is *Dialectics of Antipathy: Locating Cuban Exile in U.S. Latino Popular Culture*.

**Susette Cooke** has travelled extensively in Tibet over the past twenty years, researching historical and contemporary issues in Sino-Tibetan relations, politics and culture. She received a PhD in Chinese Studies from Sydney University in 1993 and is currently a research fellow at the Institute of International Studies, University of Technology Sydney.

**Louise Edwards** currently works at the Australian National University, teaching Asian Studies. Her publications include *Men and Women in Qing China* (E.J. Brill, 1994; University of Hawaii, 2001), *Censored by Confucius* (with Kam Louie) (M.E. Sharpe, 1996) and an edited volume (with Mina Roces), *Women in Asia* (Allen & Unwin, 2000). She has also published numerous articles on various aspects of gender and is currently completing a book on the women's suffrage movement in China.

**Catriona Elder** is a Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Sydney. Her areas of research include memory, rituals of remembrance and the nation. She is also working on a project about the limits of the idea of reconciliation in Australia.

**Devleena Ghosh** is a Senior Lecturer in Humanities at the University of Technology Sydney. Her interests are in the histories of migration, transnational commercial and cultural processes and popular culture and identity in Indian diasporas. She co-edited the Indian Ocean edition of the *UTS Review* in 2000.

**Rebecca Kay** is a Lecturer in Russian Culture, Politics and Society in the Department of Central and East European Studies, University of Glasgow. Her most recent research has been on the development of post-Soviet Russian attitudes towards gender through qualitative analysis of media, political and social discourses and women's responses to these. This study was based primarily on extensive qualitative interviews with Russian women. This research also involved a detailed investigation and analysis of the aims, activities and approaches of grassroots women's organizations in Russia in the 1990s, the challenges faced by these groups and the ways in which they overcame them. Her current research is on men, masculinity and identity in post-Soviet Russia.

**Stephanie Lawson** is Professor of International Relations and Director of European and International Studies in the School of Economic and Social Studies, University of East Anglia. Her present research interests, which deal with issues concerning culture, nationalism, and democracy, combine comparative and normative approaches to the study of world politics. She is the author of many book chapters and articles dealing with these issues in the Asia-Pacific region. Her recent publications include: *Tradition Versus Democracy in the South Pacific* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); 'Democracy and the Problem of Cultural Relativism: Normative Issues for International Politics', *Global Society*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1998, and 'Dogmas of Difference: Culture and Nationalism in Theories of International Politics', *Critical Review of International Political and Social Philosophy*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1998. She is also the editor of *The New Agenda in Global Security: Cooperating for Peace and Beyond* (St Leonards, NSW, Allen & Unwin, 1995) and, from 1994 to 1998, was the editor of the *Australian Journal of International Affairs*.

**Yixu Lu** is coordinator of the Germany major in the International Studies program at the University of Technology Sydney and subject coordinator for the German Language and Culture subjects. Her main research interest is modern German literature and history. She has conducted extensive research on German literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and on the rise of German nationalism in the nineteenth century. She has published a book entitled *Frauenherrschaft im Drama des frühen 19. Jahrhunderts* (Female regimes in dramas of the early nineteenth century) (Munich, 1993) and a number of essays on German writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including Heinrich von Kleist, Hans Henny Jahnn and Heinrich Heine. Her research concentrates on the following four areas: the representation of women in nineteenth-century German literature; the adaptations of the myth of Medea in German literature from the late eighteenth century; the work of Heinrich von Kleist (1777–1811); and the rise of German nationalism in the nineteenth century.

**Maja Mikula** is Senior Lecturer and coordinator of the Italy major and the Italian Language and Culture subjects in the International Studies program at the University of Technology Sydney. Her research interests are in the areas of gender, national identity, the new media and popular culture. Her current book-length project, *Mystery Fiction: Narrative Craft and Social Change in Contemporary Italy*, deals with Italian mystery fiction (detective novel, pulp, noir, fantasy, historical mystery fiction) as a mirror of social change.

**Keiko Morita** is coordinator of the Japan major in the International Studies programme and subject coordinator for the Japanese Language and Culture subjects at the University of Technology Sydney. Keiko researches the relationship between women and wars in modern societies. She is also interested in colonial histories in East Asian countries. Her current research projects include: the role of the Patriotic Ladies' Association: mobilization and participation towards militarism.

**Elzbieta H. Oleksy** is the Dean of the Faculty of International and Political Studies and the Chair of the Department of American Studies and Mass Media at the University of Łódź (Poland). She has published extensively in the areas of women's studies, gender studies, film, literature and American studies.

**Mina Roces** currently teaches history at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. She is the author of *Women, Power and Kinship Politics: Female Power in Post-War Philippines* (Westport, CT, and Manila: Praeger and Anvil Publishing, 1998, 2000), and *Kinship Politics in Post-War Philippines: The Lopez Family, 1946–2000* (Ann Arbor, MI, and Manila: The University of Michigan Press and De La Salle University Press, 2001). She co-edited an anthology bringing together a survey of women's history in Asia over the past thirty years with Louise Edwards (*Women in Asia: Tradition, Modernity and Globalisation*, London: Routledge, 2004). Her research interests include post-war Philippines, gender and power in twentieth-century Philippines and Filipino migrants in Australia.



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# Introduction

*Maja Mikula*

This book is the first edited collection of papers resulting from a six-year cooperative research project organized by the Institute for International Studies, University of Technology Sydney, on 'Social activists and social change in international perspective'. The project takes a radical approach by looking at social change from the perspective of its arguably most cogent, but nevertheless controversial, agents: women, intellectuals; artists; exiles and their returns; queer agencies; and indigenous activists.

With its primary focus on 'agency' and 'social change', the aim of the book is to deconstruct patriarchal discourses and to unearth different aspects of female agency in an array of cultural, historical and geopolitical contexts. Patriarchy is not understood here as a homogeneous system of male authority, but rather as a set of contextualized manifestations of gendered domination, which can only be adequately examined by looking at their interrelationship with class, race, ethnicity and sexuality. By the same token, women's agency is regarded as one of difference rather than equality – both in terms of the difference between women and men, and between different female subjectivities in different contexts. To explain these different subjectivities, we look at the 'symptoms' of patriarchy in a variety of texts – from state legislation to popular literature – and at the diverse strategies of resistance or compliance, by means of agency as well as representation.

Although this is not exclusively a book about feminist activism, it is motivated by the essentially feminist desire to restore to history a range of women's experiences. In unearthing feminist genealogies, feminist historians commonly focus on those aspects of women's agency that can be interpreted as resonating with feminist goals. Driven by this demand for 'political correctness', they become complicit with patriarchal historiography in foreclosing the possibility of constructing a more inclusive female, rather than feminist genealogy.

But, women's political agency does not always translate easily into feminist commitment. Throughout history, women have organized in order to defend the welfare of their family, community, class, race or ethnic group. Women engage in struggles and resistance within communities, either as

individuals, or within organized groups, feminist or otherwise. In some cases, their agency may even appear to go against the grain of commonly recognized feminist objectives, to serve and reinforce one of a range of competing identitarian projects, such as those related to family, sexuality, class, racial group, nation or profession. Furthermore, female revolt may take many guises: by denying their bodies, that is, refusing to eat, or declining to procreate according to the dictates of the state, women can challenge oppressive regimes; by re-writing dominant narratives – historical, mythical or literary/fictional – they can threaten the very foundations of patriarchal projects.

The structure of the book follows a trajectory of women's resistance from the politics of agency (Chapters 1 to 8) to the politics of representation (Chapter 9 to 12). In Chapter 1, Stephanie Lawson examines patriarchy in post-independence (post-1965) Singapore and the factors that make resistance problematic in that specific socio-political and cultural context. Patriarchy in Singapore – reinforced through an array of politically and socially conservative practices – is commonly legitimated by cultural and naturalistic assumptions focusing on the idea of the family as the core building block of society. Lawson identifies the absence of some of the usual indicators of strict patriarchy as one of the most significant obstacles for resistance. Singapore in fact boasts not only extensive participation of women in the labour force, but high levels of participation in tertiary education and the professions as well. Women's participation in these sectors of society is seen as arising partly out of the Singapore government's commitment to an ideology of pragmatism underscoring economic growth. Lawson interprets this ideology, along with the socio-political practices associated with it, as contradictory to some of the conventional tenets of patriarchal authority. She also demonstrates how the Singaporean government, by strictly circumscribing the space in which social movements and civil society can operate, keeps a tight rein on the degree to which women's associations can express their discontent with the state of affairs.

Another matter under scrutiny in Lawson's chapter concerns Singapore's neo-Confucian project, which has worked to delegitimize 'Western values', including those promoted by feminism and the women's movement. Under these circumstances, argues Lawson, imitation of 'Western ways' may also be seen as a betrayal of one's own 'cultural community' and as undermining the reassertion of an authentic non-Western identity in the postcolonial period.

In Chapter 2, Louise Edwards disputes a historiographical commonplace, which has worked to downplay the significance of the Chinese women's suffrage movement. Within the historical tradition dominated by People's Republic of China (PRC) historians, argues Edwards, the successes of the suffrage movement have been unfailingly interpreted as the result of Chinese Communist Party leadership and initiative. The role of

prominent communist activists in the organizing of the suffrage movement's programs has been regarded by historians as paramount. The movement itself has been represented as little more than a futile escapade by bourgeois women.

This rhetorical strategy hardly comes as a surprise. The women's suffrage campaigns elsewhere have been represented as conservative programs dominated by elite or middle-class women for elite or middle-class political interests. For example, Chapter 5 of this book also notes a similar construction of the suffrage movement in Tito's Yugoslavia. Ironically, while this assigning of elite-class status effectively strips the Chinese suffragists of their revolutionary vigour, the elite or middle-class origins of the overwhelming majority of all politically active Chinese during this period is often conveniently overlooked. Edwards challenges this historical tradition to reassert the importance of the suffrage movement, as one of the most remarkable segments of women's action for radical change in republican China.

In Chapter 3, Keiko Morita's study of the Japanese Patriotic Ladies' Association (1901–42) – a massive upper-class women's organization with close links to the Imperial family, which counted over six million members at its height – also problematizes the role of elite women in political revolt and social change. It takes issue with another historiographical stereotype – that of portraying women as the passive victims of war. Through a careful reading of the Association's recently reprinted records, Morita traces the gradual transformation of the Association's activities from charity and war relief to promotion of the nationalist agenda. Challenging the tradition in Japanese historiography, which – interested primarily in women's rights issues – ignores or dismisses women's agency in semi-governmental organizations such as the Patriotic Ladies' Association, Morita restores to history the crucial role the Association played in sustaining Japan's nationalist agenda materially and morally.

In Chapter 4, Catriona Elder looks at the issue of women in war from a different angle, to highlight the uneasy relationship between radical feminist concerns with wartime rape as the ultimate manifestation of male domination and the masculinist performance of national-day rituals. She focuses on the protests staged by the Women Against Rape in War (WAR) coalitions in Australia in the 1980s. These protests, albeit peaceful, dignified and sporadic, were contested from the beginning and eventually phased out of the celebrations of Anzac Day (25 April), the day mythologized in the national narrative as the 'birth of the Australian nation'. By juxtaposing the feminist notion of 'universal sisterhood' and the masculinist ideals of the nation, Elder reveals the fundamental incompatibility between the two brands of identity politics.

Elder's critique of the exclusivity of identity discourses goes, however, beyond this universal–national binary, to point at the possibilities and limitations of 'universalist' feminism. In locating rape in war in inter-state

conflict and those who perpetrated it outside the nation, WAR feminists in effect perpetuated the colonial project of erasing the war rape experiences of Indigenous peoples and the complicity of non-Indigenous women in these acts. Elder's analysis points to an ongoing need for feminists (or, for that matter, any other identity category) to interrogate the limits of the concepts underlying their agency and to accept the highly contested and permanently unstable nature of identity politics.

Chapter 5 follows a similar theoretical trajectory, in arguing that the homogeneous 'identity politics' cannot account for women's choices and in emphasizing the strategic and political character of gender-based identification. Maja Mikula's study offers a review of women's activism in Croatia and former Yugoslavia since WWII, in the context of the former Yugoslav nation-building rhetoric of 'brotherhood and unity' among the constituent national groups and the ethno-nationalism prevalent in the sovereign state of Croatia in the 1990s. It follows the development of Yugoslav and Croatian neo-feminism, from its early 'theory-building stage' in the 1970s, through its 'humanitarian stage' of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and finally to the most recent period, characterized by an apparent lack of a unifying ruling discourse of collective identification.

Mikula's account shows that, in times of national consolidation, the feminists promoting the establishment of rape crisis centres that did not distinguish between the ethnicity of the rape victim met with public hostility not only by nationalists, but also within their own ranks. Her reading of the rupturing and renegotiation of Yugoslav feminist networks in the face of the escalation of ethno-nationalism and the ensuing war of secession resonates with Elder's problematization of the supposed homogeneity of identitarian politics.

The geopolitical focus of Chapter 6 remains in the post-communist world, suspicious of the Western universalizing rhetoric and disillusioned with the supposed egalitarianism of the defunct communist regime. Rebecca Kay's territory is Post-Soviet Russia, plagued with economic hardship and socio-political instability. Her study of a number of grassroots women's organizations established there since the early 1990s, with the primary aim of helping women to overcome the hardships they face, reveals a need for strategic pragmatism in periods of turbulent social change. Kay brings to light the ambiguous positioning of these alliances, in relation to both the development of essentialist attitudes and opinions on gender within Russia and to 'Western' feminist theory and practice.

The organizations studied by Kay have brought together women sharing a particular background and set of circumstances, related to career, lifestyle, experience or geographical locality. Their agency, albeit based on particularistic and pragmatic premises and thus fragmenting identity politics beyond the more inclusive identity categories such as nationalism or feminism, works to encourage and reinforce a drive for democratic participation, civic responsibility and resistance to gendered

oppression, empowering the women involved as important agents of social change.

In Chapter 7, Susette Cooke raises the issue of women's agency at the intersection of religion, culture, nationalism and state policy. Her account of the experiences in prison of a group of Tibetan nuns gaoled for Tibetan nationalist protests during the 1990s underscores both the patriarchal nature of religion and its potential as a site for resistance. The nuns incarcerated in Drapchi Prison in the 1990s, like other Tibetan nationalist dissenters, resisted the Chinese state policies, which would have them forego their own, deeply felt, national and cultural identity.

Cooke argues that the nuns gained a considerable socio-political visibility – more momentous than their role in traditional Tibetan society would have accorded them – precisely because the Chinese state's societal and political transformations rendered them more of a threat to the political order and ideology than was the case previously. By juxtaposing two nationalist discourses – Chinese and Tibetan – this chapter reveals their conflicting constructions of national identity, the role of religion within the state, the nature of the polity and the relation of the individual to the state.

Chapter 8 presents a different take on religious women's empowerment, by demonstrating that women in such a quintessentially patriarchal organization as the Catholic Church can be instrumental in challenging patriarchy in society on the whole, while the institutional male domination itself remains essentially intact. In this chapter, Mina Roces explores the political activism of militant nuns in the Philippines under martial law (1972–86). Roces' study explains the nuns' power and legitimacy as political activists in terms of their ambivalent social standing and their credibility as moral guardians untainted by personal ambition for power. It traces the changing nature of the nuns' engagement, from a gender-neutral resistance to political oppression and finally to more explicit forms of feminist activism.

The nuns' political activities took many forms, from human rights activism and underground publishing, to organizing public protests and labour strikes. Although originally driven by a desire to protect the victims of martial law, these women assumed a moral power that has since been harnessed for women's issues. When the nuns began to actively challenge cultural constructions of the feminine, argues Roces, they in fact became the first overt feminists in Philippine history.

From Chapter 9 onwards, the focus of the book moves from the politics of agency to the politics of representation. On one hand, the chapters that follow reveal how cultural texts discipline women, neutralize or subvert their rebellions, silence or distort their voices, or erase them from history altogether; on the other, they explore the textual battlefield as a potential terrain for women's self-expression, genealogy-building and gender-conscious political agency.



In Chapter 9, Devleena Ghosh's analysis of a series of novels written by the Bengali writer of popular fiction, Shankar, demonstrates the resilience of traditional views of women's inferior role in the social hierarchy and their swift co-option into the rhetoric of development, modernization and individualism of postcolonial India. In Shankar's work, argues Ghosh, the nurturing female and the work-oriented male represent normal relationships of family life. In his novels, female characters are modernized and educated, but they retain their traditional roles within conventional gender relationships. Ghosh reveals the double-bind situation of women in these novels, both as their main audience and as willing consumers and objects of consumption within them.

Within this framework, the act of reading is interpreted as constitutive of a collective fantasy whereby the prescribed behaviour can only bring happiness, while straying from the clearly defined gender roles spells disaster. Shankar's novels – with their adherence to the pre-independence story of the nation, with women and the feminine at the core of the nationalist narrative – are seen by Ghosh as emblematic of the suspension of Western modernity in a postcolonial nation's imaginary.

In Chapter 10, Elżbieta Oleksy explores the patriarchal character of Polish nationalism and its deployment of the figure of the Polish mother as the master narrative of Polish womanhood. This chapter traces the representational continuity of the Mother figure, from early Polish Romanticism to the present day – a development challenged briefly by the alternative vision of womanhood emblemized by the socialist realist Superwoman figure. Two films made in the 1970s and 1980s – Andrzej Wajda's *Man of Marble* and Barbara Sass-Zdort's *Without Love* – are interpreted as transgressive texts violating the dominant paradigm. By depicting their respective female protagonists as successful actors in the public arena, these films open up new possibilities of thinking about gender and gender roles.

In Chapter 11, Yixu Lu's study of the novel *Medea. Voices* by Christa Wolf, the most renowned author of the former German Democratic Republic, discusses the novelist's reinvention of the Medea of pre-literary myth and Euripides' tragedy as a non-violent woman, at once critical of and estranged from her male-dominated social environment. The heroine of Wolf's novel is not responsible for the deaths of her brother and children, nor is she blinded by passion for her husband Jason. Rather than being the quintessential monstrous mother, vulnerable to misogynist interpretations, she is constructed as a perpetual outsider, emblemizing estrangement as the *conditio sine qua non* of human condition.

Lu demonstrates that Medea's alienation from both Corinth and her native Colchis reflects Wolf's own weariness with both the past East German regime and the emotional climate of a reunited Germany. Lu's interpretation thus transcends gender concerns, to bring to light Wolf's complex response to the momentous social change in her country's recent history.