

***TRANSNATIONAL ACTIVISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA:
ADOPTING A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON
TRANSNATIONAL COLLECTIVE ACTION***

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Abstract

As part of the emerging of the global social justice movement, women's movements and feminists are faced with a double challenge, confronting in-built patriarchy and social exclusion within global institutions, national and sub national institutions, but also within large sections of the so-called "*altermondialiste*" movement. Building on Catherine Eschle's work (2005), I examine of exclusionary dynamics might be in the work of transnational activist organizations rooted in Southeast Asia involved in knowledge creation towards collective action. Such exclusionary processes might be happening unintentionally but can be observed on three levels: first, at the theory level, at least within the mainstream literature on transnational activism, second at the level of case studies analyses of transnational coalitions and networks within Southeast Asia, and third at the level of the movements and coalition themselves. As much as transnational activism has become a relative fad, bringing together segments of the international relations literature together with those interested in contentious politics (for example, Tarrow, 2005; Bandy and Smith, 2004; Della Porta and als., 2006), a feminist epistemology has yet to emerge. Examining the formation of three regional activist organisations involved in research and advocacy against mainstream economic globalization, I wish to show how women and women's issues while being the subjects of advocacy remain excluded agents of critical reflections and feminism alien to theoretical engagement within the *altermondialiste malestream*. Such blind spot has as much to do with the challenges and difficulties of undertaking such task as much as with a certain *a priori* about the comparative nature of transnational actors, be it a network, an international non-government organization or a global movement.

Introduction

As part of the emerging of the global social justice movement, women's movements and feminists are faced with a double challenge, confronting in-built patriarchy and social exclusion within global institutions, national and subnational institutions, but also within large sections of the so-called "*altermondialiste*" movement. Building on Catherine Eschle's questioning, I wish to discuss how it might be to examine whether "exclusionary hierarchies within the movement are being exposed, and received understandings of what constitutes the movement are being challenged." (2005: 1743, see also her other works 2004 and 2001). Such exclusionary processes might be happening at three levels: first, at the theoretical level, at least within the mainstream literature on transnational relations, second at the level of case studies analyses of transnational coalitions and networks within Southeast Asia, and third at the level of the movements and coalition themselves.

Underlying such inquiry is an intuition that as much as transnational activism has become a relative fad, bringing together segments of the international relations literature together with those interested in contentious politics (for example, Tarrow, 2005; Bandy and Smith, 2004; Della Porta and al., 2006), a feminist epistemology has yet to emerge. Such blind spot has as much to do with the challenges and difficulties of undertaking such task as much as with a certain *a priori* about the comparative nature of transnational actors, be it a network, an international non-government organization or a global social movement. This is all the more important given that Southeast Asia remains relatively under analyzed within the realm of transnational collective

action literature. As noted by Piper and Uhlin, East and Southeast Asia “constitutes an understudied geographical area in the transnational social movement / civil society literature (as opposed to Europe, North America and Latin America).” (2004: 1).ⁱ

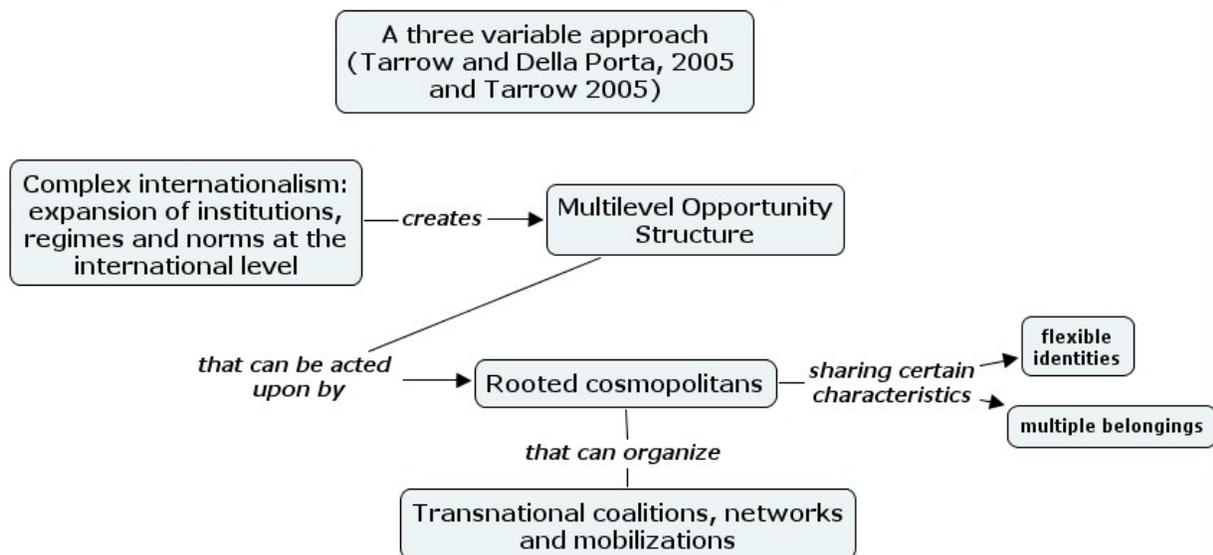
In the following pages, I discuss how one can understand the emergence of knowledge-based and knowledge-producing organization as one form of transnational activism that seeks to respond to socio-economic and political processes associated with globalization, using a feminist perspective. Examining briefly the formation of three regional activist organisations involved in research and advocacy against mainstream economic globalization, I wish to show how women and women’s issues while being the object of advocacy remain excluded agents of critical reflections and feminism alien to theoretical engagement within *altermondialiste malestream*. Here, my underlying assumption is that feminist theorizing of transnational activism offers uncharted possibilities for imagining social transformation that can challenge patriarchy be it from within the activist networks and movements or the global and national institutions targeted.

I. Transnational Activism:

In its bare form, transnational activism has been defined as social movements and other civil society organisations and individuals operating across state borders (Piper and Uhlin 2004: 4-5).ⁱⁱ This definition was further refined by two social movement specialists, Della Porta and Tarrow who referred to *transnational collective action* as “the coordinated international campaigns on the part of networks of activists against international actors, other states, or international institutions.” (Della Porta and Tarrow, 2005: 7)

Some analysts of transnational activism go even further arguing that we have now entered an era of transnational coalitions moving away from state-centric movements. For now, I would suggest as recent studies argued that the current wave of protest and opposition to the WTO can be explained using recent studies argued (Della Porta and Tarrow 2005; Tarrow 2005; and Risse-Kappen 1995 and 2002) by three variables: 1) the current complex internationalization (growing density of international institutions, regimes and contacts among states officials and non-state actors and multiplication of linkages between local, national and international issues, (Tarrow 2005, 8); 2) the multi-level political opportunities created by the interaction between complex internationalization and domestic structures (i.e. “institutional features of the state, of society, and of state-society relations” (Risse-Kappen 1995, 20), and 3) the emergence of a stratum of activists best described as *rooted cosmopolitans* (“a fluid, cosmopolitan, but rooted layer of activists and advocates.” [Tarrow 2005, 34]).

Figure 1 Proposed Explanatory Framework



II. The “Emergence” of Transnational Activism

It is nearly impossible to identify a single event or an historic birthmark for the emergence and accelerated growth of the current form of transnational activism. Although transnational social movements have been around for a long time,ⁱⁱⁱ the Zapatista uprising in January 1994 and their call for transcontinental (and even, intergalactic!) resistance to global neoliberalism have been particularly significant (Schulz 1998). Few years later, the “Battle of Seattle” has also been perceived as a catalytic and symbolic moment of this rising wave of transnational mobilization. Québec and Genoa followed in 2001. September 11 and its aftermath momentarily dampened the mobilization efforts. However, the success of the peace mobilizations early 2003 showed its resilience. In fact, the February 15, 2003 peace rallies around the globe represented the “single largest international demonstration in history” (Tarrow and Della Porta, 2005: 227). According to Tarrow and Della Porta, three types of changes help explaining this growing wave of transnational collective action: international change, cognitive change and relational change.

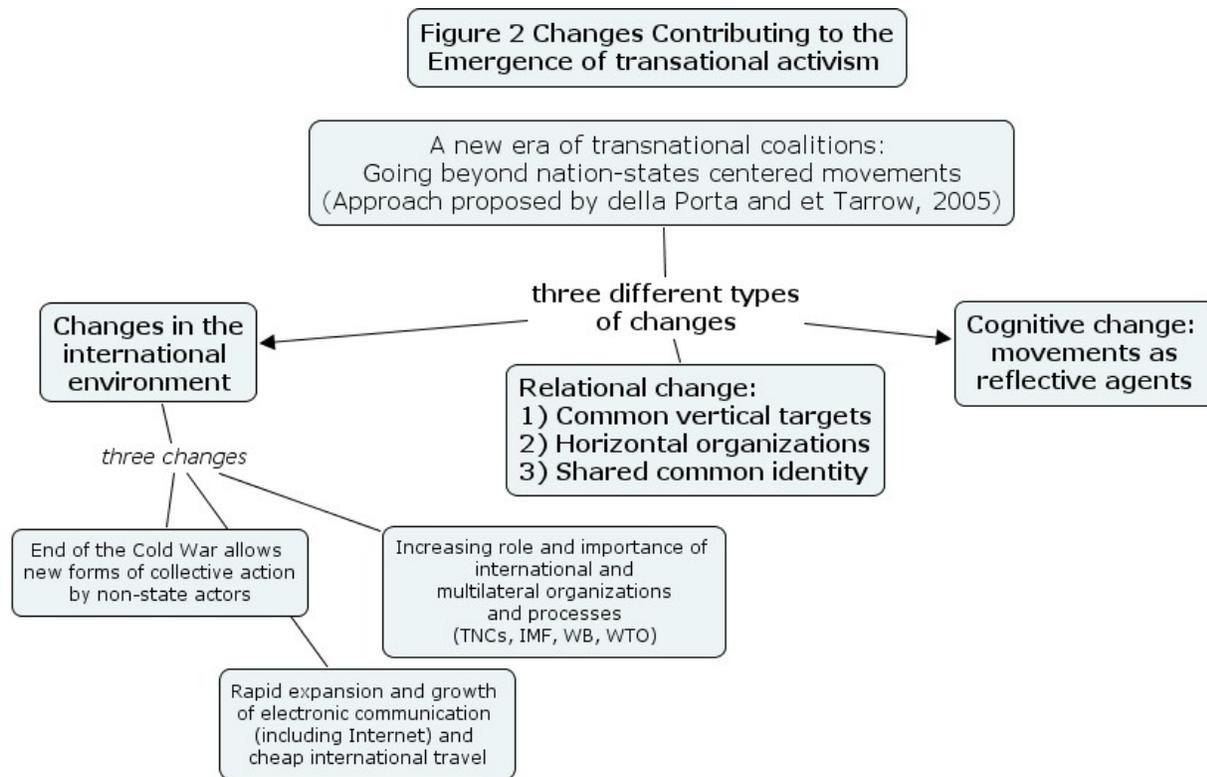
1) *Changes in the international environment*: There are three elements of change in the global environment that need consideration: a) the end of the Cold War with the breakdown of the socialist block and the implosion of the USSR “encouraged the development of forms of non state action” that were previously difficult; b) the rapid expansion of “electronic communication and the spread of inexpensive international travel” have allowed movements and organizations that were previously isolated movements “to communicate and collaborate with one another across borders;” c) the increasing role of international and multilateral actors as illustrated in particular “by the growing power of transnational corporations and international institutions events, like the global summits of the World Bank, the Group of Eight, and especially the World Trade organizations.” (Della Porta and Tarrow, 2005: 7-8)

While being important factors, these changes are not “sufficient” to explain the transnationalization of social protest, two other types of change are essential to consider:

2) *Cognitive change*: Social movements and activists are “reflective” actors. As a result, “their international experiences have been critically analyzed” and “[T]actics and frames that appear to succeed in more than one venue have been institutionalized.” (Della Porta and Tarrow, 2005: 8)

3) *Relational change*: The growing possibility of identifying “common ‘vertical’ targets” such as international institutions has also contributed to the ‘horizontal’ formation of transnational coalitions through “the relational mechanisms that are bringing together national actors in transnational coalitions” and “resulting in the growth of common identity and therefore reduces national particularism.” (Della Porta and Tarrow, 2005: 9-10)

Transnational activists very seldom work at the transnational level exclusively. Transnational activists are able to create linkages and form coalitions among various types of actors operating on different levels (local, national, regional, international) and respond to various political contexts, each offering a different range of political opportunities. As a result, transnational networks of activists, sometime quite informal, organize “particular campaigns or series of campaign, using a variety of forms of protest, adopting and adapting repertoires of protest from the traditions of different movements.” (Della Porta and Tarrow, 2005: 10). Specific and localized concerns are weaved together around the theme of resistance to neoliberal globalization and the need for global social justice (see Bello 2001).



III. Transnational Activism in Southeast Asia

In Southeast Asia, as in many other regions of the world, there has been a growing tendency to organize and work transnationally. The Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia and increasingly Indonesia host various forms of transnational activist organizations. While there is relative agreement on this, understanding its significance as well as its impact on political processes, remains open for interpretation (Hewinson, 2001). Today, Bangkok, Manila and Jakarta act as “nodes of transnational activism”, places that “provide not only the practical infrastructure required by transnational NGO networks, but also a political climate that is not too hostile toward civil society activism.” (Piper and Uhlin, 2004: 14, see also Johan Lindquist’s chapter, 109-128).

As further explained by Piper and Uhlin:

[C]onsidering fairly recent and ongoing changes towards democratization in this region, it is not surprising also to find rising civil society activism in general and increasing number of NGOs in particular. Transnational linkages within the region are part and parcel of these development – although numerically maybe not yet as developed as in other parts of the world. (2004: 19)

In particular, issues related to human rights, election monitoring, environmental issues and regional integration as well as economic globalization have been prominent themes of transnational organizing (Timmermann, 2001; Jemadu, 2004; Caouette, 2006). In terms of women’s movements, health issues, both legal and illegal labour migration (including domestic work, sex and entertainment) and trafficking have been central themes leading to the formation of cross-borders networks. Within this spectrum of civil society organizations activist networks involved in policy advocacy and alternative knowledge production have become an important component of transnational activism in Southeast Asia.

IV. Critical and Alternative Knowledge Production

There is a perceived relevance and *engouement* among activists, NGOs, and Northern funding agencies for alternative source of knowledge on the region. Below, I present a brief review of three transnational organizations (Focus, Asia-Pacific Research Network, and Third World Network) involved in critical and alternative knowledge has become central in the advocacy effort of transnational activists in Southeast Asia (Caouette 2006). Not only each of the organizations examined expanded significantly during the past twenty years, they all sought to link knowledge production, advocacy with social mobilization. Critical knowledge defined as knowledge that can be transformed into action and that can be shared among academics linked to social movements was seen as an imperative to challenge many authoritarian states in the region. As Southeast Asia became increasingly integrated in the global economy and each state linked and affected by global processes, transnational activism relying on alternative source of knowledge became a defining feature of civil society processes, especially so, following the 1997 Financial Crisis. However, as it is revealed women’s issues and perspectives gets subsumed into the discourse, becoming an object of analysis, that is victims of economic globalization of project or a category of investigation, namely as workers in export processing zone, migrant workers, members of the informal sectors, and so forth. One can hardly identify feminist analyses and epistemology in the way they approach globalization which in many ways reflects the dominant discourse on globalisation, acting as a mirror response.

1) Third World Network (TWN):

Third World Network (TWN) describes itself as “an independent non-profit international network of organizations and individuals involved in issues relating to development, the Third World and North South issues”. (TWN 2005) Its international secretariat is based in Penang, Malaysia where it was first established in 1984. TWN has also offices in Delhi, Montevideo, Geneva, and Accra and affiliates in several countries, India, the Philippines, Thailand, Brazil, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Peru, Ethiopia, Uruguay, Mexico, Ghana, South Africa and Senegal. (Ibid)

The history of TWN goes back to the late 1970s. At the time Dr. Martin Khor working Research Director with the Consumers’ Association of Penang (CAP) organized in 1984 with other groups interested in development issues a conference that would lead to the creation of TWN with the goal to “link the local problems of communities in the South to the global policy-making arenas. (Commonwealth Foundation, nd). The formation of TWN took place well before the latest wave of transnational social movement activism referred to as the anti-globalization movement. As two program officers from Inter Pares, a Canada-based social justice organisation and one of the original supporters of TWN: noted: “the creation of TWN emerged from the process of taking a broader view at consumerism linking issues of public health, environment to North-South relations.” (Interview with Seabrooke and Gillespie, 2005) This orientation towards international advocacy was not a coincidence; it was partly a reaction to blocked channels of political expression at the national level. Malaysia’s political system, despite its democratic façade has had a limited tolerance for direct political challenges and has been able to control and effectively prevent the formation of important local and national NGOs. (Loh, 2005 and 2004; Trocki, 1996; Verma, 2002; Weiss, 2004).

This shift from local to national and to international issues is not uncommon among transnational networks. However, what distinguishes TWN from the other organizations here examined, is TWN’s explicit commitment to work when possible with government officials to affect public policies. Through the years, TWN network has been regularly involved with multilateral processes such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Association of South Asian Nations (ASEAN). (Khor nd) Beyond participation in official and parallel summits, TWN produces a wide range of publications (two magazines, its monthly *Third World* Resurgence and its bi-monthly *Third World Economics*, books and monograph and occasional briefing papers, many circulated through Internet). Its website has become its primary portal for the dissemination of its materials and analysis.

Increasingly, TWN has played an important role in supporting and advising trade negotiators from the South around WTO issues, especially through its Africa branch, located in Ghana. In fact, its arena of struggles has become increasingly focussed on international economic processes. Apart from WTO, TWN has been quite active on issues of Biosafety Convention, the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

While it has successfully become a key transnational policy advocacy network, TWN headquarter in Malaysia has been perceived as remotely involved in domestic advocacy and sometimes disconnected from more grassroots work. The shift from local and national to

transnational issues appears to have been in part a response to limited domestic political space, the growing and rapid integration of Malaysia into the world economy bringing home, as well as the capacity of its members to provide alternative analysis and policy discourse on issues of the day for many Third World activists and even government officials. At the same time, TWN analysis does not adopt explicitly a feminist standpoint or a feminist analysis in its writings despite a rich focus on health issues and pharmaceutical companies and several publications dealing with women's issues. Such standpoint would link economic globalization not only with issues of exclusion and disempowerment but also with issues of decision-making processes and the underlying patriarchal structure that allow globalization to persist. Moreover, there is little self-reflexivity in TWN's writings in terms of its own internal decision-making processes.

2) Focus on the Global South (Focus)

Conceived between 1993 and 1994 by its first two co-directors, Kamal Malhotra and Walden Bello, Focus on the Global South (hereafter referred as Focus) was officially established in Bangkok, Thailand in January 1995 (Malhotra and Bello, 1999). The two represent in many archetypes of transnational activists. Bello, a Filipino political economist had lived in the US for years where he was very active in the anti-Marcos dictatorship struggle and the international Third World solidarity movement and had worked with a Northern NGO, the Institute for Food and Development Policy - Food First. Malhotra from India had been involved for years with an international NGO, Community Aid Abroad (CAA - Oxfam Australia) and many other local NGOs. As noted in its first external evaluation, Bello and Malhotra agreed on a common set of ideas:

1. Both were dissatisfied with the existing North-South division paradigm;
2. They were also sceptical about mainstream economic analysis, and the economics-culture-politics methodology. (...)
3. They saw the need for linking micro-macro perspectives in analyzing current situations. (...)
4. They both saw the gap between activists who mobilize while holding incomplete or simplistic analysis and researchers / academics who have abilities to make good analysis but lack the opportunities for action. (...);
5. They saw the importance of East and Southeast Asia as a locale in light of its dynamic economic, social and political dimension in global development. (Kaewhiep, 1999: 45-46)

Moving away from a traditional North-South perspective, Focus sought to propose a different conception: "North and South are increasingly redefined as concepts to distinguish between those who are economically able to participate in and benefit from globalised markets and those who are excluded and marginalized from them. (*Ibid*). The reputation, track records and networks of its two co-directors helped the organization take off the ground with a set of funding agencies committing to supporting it. Thailand's relative political stability and the possibility of being associated with the Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute (CUSRI) were two key factors why FOCUS head office was established in Bangkok. (*Ibid*) Beginning with a small staff (there were only six in 1996), Focus team expanded rapidly: in 1999, it had already close to 20 staff and about 25 by 2005. It also opened two national offices one in India and one in the Philippines.

Two types of factors can explain such success story in building and consolidating Focus. The first are endogenous and have to do with Focus' capacities to "to build networks and strengthen linkages between and among civil society organisations at the global, national and local level." (Sta. Filomena, 1999: 6) Through the years, Focus staff have been involved not only in the production of research and policy analysis but have also played central role in organizing civil society networks within the region around a range of issues (food security, APEC, ASEAN, ASEM) and have also be closely involved in many global processes, such as the World Social Forum, anti-WTO coalitions (for example, *Our World is not for Sale* campaign) and the peace movement.^{iv} The second type of factors are exogenous. One was the Asian financial crisis that began in Thailand before spreading to the region that made Focus analyses and staff highly in demand. As one of the external evaluator noted: "[T]he Asian financial crisis and the role of the international financial institutions have undoubtedly become the burning issues of the day. The controversies revolving around WTO and APEC, in different periods, have likewise occupied center stage." (Sta. Filomena 1999, 24) Within few years, Focus became a key reference for civil society organisations in Southeast Asia but within the broader anti-globalization movement.^v

From its early days, Focus sought to combine analyses on the workings and the impact of regional and global economic processes with studies of local resistance and initiatives with its two main programs: policy-oriented research and analysis on critical regional and global socio-economic issues (the Global Paradigms Program), and documentation, analysis and dissemination of "innovative civil society, grassroots, community-based efforts in democratic, poverty reducing and sustainable development" (the Micro-Macro Paradigm Program) (Kaewhtep 1999, 46). While identifying the limitations of the traditional North-South divide, Focus has not yet pushed further its inquiry of inequality and discrepancy of power relations into the household itself and such processes might be enhanced by economic globalization. Despite that it recognizes in its publications, the different impact of globalization on women. In recent years, the issue of peace and the opposition to US foreign policy has become a key area of research and advocacy for FOCUS. In the wake US-led invasion of Iraq, Focus played a central role in convening a large peace conference in Jakarta that resulted in the "Jakarta Peace Consensus" and brought together representatives and organisations from the large peace movement that had emerged prior to the invasion ("The Jakarta Peace Consensus" n.d.). As it did for the Asian Crisis and the anti-WTO movement, Focus capacities and skills for networking as well as its capacity to produce analyses and policy documents has placed the organisation at the centre of several transnational coalitions on the issue of peace and anti-militarism.

Similarly as well to TWN, gender hierarchies and the differentiated impact of globalization on women remains broadly underspecified, broadly encompassed within the discourse around those excluded and marginalized by economic globalization in Southeast Asia and yet somehow silenced on the participation and resistance of women. Eschle noted the same while reviewing what she considered as the 'authoritative movement texts writing: "there is occasional but usually limited, recognition of the participation of women. [...] However, gender is not commented on or presented as relevant to motivations or styles of activism." (2005: 1747)

3) Asia Pacific Research Network (APRN)

The third organization here examined is the Asia Pacific Research Network (APRN). Established in 1999 was the product of a two year process of consultation and exchanges of materials among organizations from the Asia Pacific involved in research and documentation efforts. (Asia Pacific Research Network 1999, 1) Spearheaded by a Manila-based research and data-banking centre, IBON (especially Antonio Tujan, its director), APRN initial objectives were:

1. Develop the capacity of selected Asian NGOs in the conduct of research;
2. Develop at least one NGO in each target Asian country that can become a research-information provider by introducing data banking and research as a general service;
3. Develop common strategies in research information work through sharing of experiences and raise the general level capacities in research;
4. Develop capacity and common research platform to support social movements in their respective countries in the emerging issues related to the WTO Millennium round, the IMF and the APEC. (*Ibid*, 3)

Its first Annual Conference organised around the theme of trade liberalization brought together 85 individuals from 50 organizations located in 11 different countries including 10 of the 17 founding organizations of the network. Following the Conference, a workshop on research methodologies allowed identifying specific activities for the network.^{vi} A third event led by IBON, a training-workshop on documentation and data banking was considered particularly useful as participating organizations suggested afterwards that such training be organized on a regular basis.

Afterwards, APRN grew steadily. Through a grant from a Northern funding agency, it established a small secretariat located in IBON office in Manila, responsible for communications among network members, developing and maintaining a website and a listserv and coordinating the publication of the APRN Journal (APRN 2000b, 1). Late 1999, APRN was involved in helping to organize the People's Assembly, a parallel summit held during the WTO Third Ministerial meeting in Seattle.

Early 2000, it conducted a series of workshops in Malaysia that were attended by members and non-members of the network. These activities focussed on information, documentation, research training on women and globalization, food security and the agreement on agriculture (AoA) of the WTO. At the end of 2000, APRN held its Second Annual Conference in Jakarta on the theme of "Poverty and Financing Development" and Attended by about 70 local participants from Indonesia and another 60 foreign participants coming from 20 different countries^{vii}

In the following years, APRN continued to organize annual conferences that were co-hosted by at least one APRN member. Its 3rd Annual Conference took place in Sidney, Australia in September 2001 on the theme "Corporate Power or People's Power: TNCs and Globalization." (APRN 2001b,1) and brought together over 130 participants. The 4th Annual Conference was held in Guangzhou mainland China in November 2002 and focussed on the WTO, in particular the impact of China's membership. (APRN 2002a,1).^{viii} The next year, in November 2003, APRN held its 5th Annual Conference in Beirut on the theme of the "war on terrorism in relation to globalization" given the "aggressive US policy." (APRN 2003b, 3)

Organized for the first time in the Middle East, the Annual Conference was co-organized by APRN and the local host organization, the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND).

Its 6th Annual Conference was held in Dhaka, Bangladesh from November 25 to 27, 2004 and hosted by UBINIG, a long-standing member of APRN. The theme of the conference was agriculture and food sovereignty. For this conference, organizers “decided to develop the APRN conference from a purely research and academic conference to a more open and public gathering of research institutions and people’s organizations.” (APRN 2004b, 1) It was agreed to “transform the APRN conference into a People’s Convention on Food Sovereignty.” Such convention would then be promoted during the World Food Summit +10 scheduled for 2006. (*Ibid.*, 1) The conference attended by over 500 participants from more than 30 countries resulted in the adoption of the People’s Convention on Food Sovereignty as well as People’s Statement (APRN 2004c; see also APRN/PFSNAP 2004; and APRN 2004c).

Since its establishment, APRN has gradually expanded its range of activities. During the Sydney General Council meeting in 2002, APRN members agreed that APRN would “finally embark on coordinated researches as originally envisioned at the start of the network in Manila three years ago.” (APRN 2002b) It meant that rather instead of financing individual researches carried by APRN member, research would be conducted jointly.” (*Ibid.*, 1) The two initial coordinated research projects were: 1) “Effective Strategies for Confronting TNCs” coordinated by GATT-Watchdog of New Zealand, and 2) “Women and Labour” coordinated by the Center for Women’s Resources (CWR) of the Philippines (APRN 2002b, APRN 2002b, 3; see also, APRN, 2003b).

In the past years, APRN members also participated in the formation of *The Reality of Aid Asia*, therefore providing an Asian contribution to the *Reality of Aid* network aimed at monitoring and documenting international development assistance programs and projects. Some APRN members have also been involved in the *Peoples’ Movement Encounter* at the Hyderabad Asian Social. (*Ibid.*, 7). APRN has also continued to be involved in global and regional activities, including a policy workshop on regional cooperation and human rights in Asia, held in the Philippines in June 2004, and the co-organizing of international conference “Bandung in the 21st Century: Continuing the struggle for Independence, Peace against Imperialist War and Globalization,” held in April 14-16, 2005, in Bandung, Indonesia.

Prior to the WTO 6th Ministerial Meeting, APRN organized with the assistance of the Asia Monitor Resource Center (AMRC) and the Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM), a “Policy-Research Conference on Trade” in July 2005 to strengthen the advocacy of civil society organisations (CSOs) and social movements. During the WTO Ministerial, APRN members participated not only in providing analysis but also in officially marching under the same banner.

After seven years of existence, APRN, supported by grants from Northern NGOs and funding agencies has been able to locate itself as a key research and advocacy network in Southeast Asia primarily, but also with members in the broader Asia-Pacific region (Interview with Tony Tujan 2005). It has moved from 17 to 35 member based in 20 different countries. While contributing to

the development of research capacity of NGOs, it has also become more involved in advocacy efforts.

Similarly to the previous two organizations, the presence of key individuals skilled at organizing networks, animating processes and seeking financial assistance coupled with the growing density of international and regional processes (economic integration, financial liberalization, including the 1997 crisis) and a relatively open political space in several Asian countries that allows for the organizing of parallel and critical conferences, have interacted and account for the rapid expansion of APRN. Nonetheless, like for Focus and TWN, APRN's discourse remains well within the "*malestream*" activist discourse on globalization as noted by Eschle:

The common sense understanding of globalization clearly places economic processes center stage. In particular, most analyses focus on the role of corporation and international financial institutions such as the WTO, which push for a neoliberal agenda of 'free trade', the reduction of state barriers to and intervention in trade processes, and the continuing integration of domestic markets. (...) Indeed, an emphasis on the determining impact of the global economy has become so widespread that it now dominates approaches to globalization in academia, activist circles, and the media and is characteristic of both neoliberal advocacy of globalization and critical opposition. (Eschle 2005: 1750)

Conclusion:

In this paper, I have tried to show how we have entered a new cycle of mobilization characterized by transnational collective action. This form of collective action connects activist networks, NGOs and social movements across borders. However, within dominant analyses and discourses feeding large segments of the antiglobalization movement, one can see how women's perspectives and feminist standpoints are often bypassed or not considered. While this is true in general of the mainstream *altermondialisme*, it is also the case to different extents within three key networks involved in alternative discourse production in Southeast Asia.

In Southeast Asia, transnational activism has been a defining feature of civil society processes, especially following the 1997 Financial Crisis. This form of activism can be seen both as a complement to local and national activism as well as an activist modality on its own. Concrete impact and policy influence of such form of activism takes different forms and is often difficult to trace in a linear way. At one level, transnational advocacy efforts produces shared identities and a common understanding of issues. It also generates common campaigns and proposals that can be put forward during regional and international gatherings and implemented both at the regional and national levels. In some cases, transnational activism influences the dominant discourse and forces its tenants to defend and justify their positions. In other instances, reformist policy-makers interested in developing alternative proposals to the more orthodox neoliberal agenda are seeking the expertise and knowledge generated by transnational networks. Transnational activism can expose the tensions and divisions that exist between states and economic blocs.

By connecting community organizations and local NGOs' struggles to a broader set of issues and struggles, transnational activists are able to amplify and enrich both the work being

conducted at the very local level and the advocacy and policy work conducted regionally and globally. In seeking to develop a richer understanding of its significance on the medium and long term as well as its contribution to women's issues, one is confronted with two types of gaps within the existing literature on Southeast Asian transnational activism. The first is how to assess whether transnational activism in Southeast Asia has been able to influence regional and global economic policies and contribute to the strengthening of democratic deliberative processes and fostering alternative practices that can improve people's livelihoods.^{ix} The second major gap is the lack of feminist perspective on Southeast Asian transnational activism. Much of the literature remains rooted in theoretical models such as Tarrow (2005) or even Piper and Uhlin's discussion of the issue of power and democracy that fails to problematize women's issues and / or develop a feminist understanding of transnational activism. Approaching transnational activism from a feminist perspective might be essential if one wishes to unpack the dominant activist antiglobalization discourse. Much of the alternative discourse produced to feed and impulse transnational activism remain rooted in classical economic approach to globalization that is both rooted in classical Marxist discourse on IR and non-gendered perspective on contentious politics. Researchers such as Eschle argues that this might be changing as the World Social Forum might be showing writing that "feminism has found increasing purchase at the forum but is still not fully integrated. It remains heavily dependent on the presence of actual feminists, and this presence remains conditional and contested." (2005: 176)

Feminist International Relations: A Possible Window?

Within political science, it is fair to argue that the field of International Relations has been probably one of the late comers in terms of assimilating insights from feminism. Identified as part of the post-positivist approaches, feminist theorizing in international theories questions assumptions around objectivity and neutrality of categories. Scholars, such as Anne Tickner, have successfully revealed how classical realism is rooted within a masculine vision of reality. Moreover such vision reifies values that posit statu quo by claiming that it constitutes the only vision possible^x: Others such as Cynthia Enloe (1989) has revealed systemic bias within the International Relations literature often failing to integrate women's perspective.

If one can agree that the study of transnational activism has brought together a certain tradition of the international relations literature broadly referred as transnational relations, it has failed or has to yet consider the insights that feminist IR could bring, especially in disentangling the gendered dynamics and biases that are present and built within the emerging transnational activist discourse and practices. Thus, as did the pioneers in feminist IR approaches questioning foundational dogmas of realist and liberal approaches (Harding 1987; Young 2004; Peterson 2004), a feminist reading of transnational activism in Southeast Asia might contribute to open unexplored avenues of knowledge creation but also address directly the dilemmas and challenges of activism that seeks to link the local to the global.

Endnotes:

¹ However, as the two authors note there are a number of exceptions, such as Aviel (2000), Gurowitz (2000), Lizée (2000), Piper (2001), Piper and Uhlin (2002), Price (1998), and Uhlin (2001 & 2002) as well as the more recent works by Lyons (2005a,b)

¹ The same authors define activism as “political activities that are: (1) based on a conflict of interests and thus are of a contentious nature; (2) challenging or supporting certain power structures; (3) involving non-state actors; and (4) taking place (at least partly) outside formal political arenas.” (p.4).

¹ A useful historical treatment of this question can be found in Hopkins (2002).

¹ As two evaluators pointed out : « [W]e have the impression that Focus has started its action with a strong focus on the production of ideas and analysis but that today it is more and more involved in global strategy and activism. (Banpasirichote, Singh, and Van der Borgh 2002: 2)

¹ In its 2003-2005 Work Plan, the organization recognized such particular position: “Focus has also traveled considerably from its starting point. It is today widely considered a ‘key player’ in the global movement for a different and better world. Its analyses of global developments are extensively consulted, as are its suggestions for structural changes. (Focus on the Global South circa 2003, 3).

¹ These included “common and/or coordinated research projects”, “training in research and related technologies”, and “publications.” (APRN 1999, 4) Common research areas were: government transparency; the impact of globalization on workers’ rights and labor migration, the impact of globalization on food security; and, finally the impact of the GATT-agreement on agriculture.

¹ Participants came from a range of organisations: research institutes, NGO, government, academia, popular organizations and the media. APRN organised jointly the conference with a local organization, the International NGO Forum on Indonesian Development (INFID), an APRN member. By then, APRN had expanded its membership to 23 organisations based in 12 countries of the Asia Pacific. (APRN 2000a, 1)

¹ The Conference was organized with the assistance of two organizations, the Asia Monitor Resource Centre (AMRC) and the Ghangzhou All China Federation of Trade Union (ACFTU). In the end and despite some visa difficulties, a total of 90 participants joined the conference, including 40 foreign participants, of which 27 were APRN members.

¹ Recent works of Jonathan Fox (2002) and Fox and Brown (1998) can provide a useful starting point; see as well Clark (2003). Academics such Kevin Hewinson also questioned their analyses, in particular those of TWN and Focus on the Global South seeing those as populist and somehow simplistic. (2001 : 233)

¹ As Battistella explains : “... en tant que théorie *malestream*, en tant que théorie *problem-solving*.... (à compléter)

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