

Rethinking Individual Self-determination and Women's Emancipation. Global South Feminism(s) and the Contestation of Liberal Feminist Thought

While liberal feminists question the liberal script and criticize that the promise of individual self-determination and emancipation of women has not been fulfilled, different feminist currents from the Global South criticize quite fundamentally the idea of individual self-determination as well as the concept of emancipation. This short-term project aims to explore the conceptual differences between liberal feminism and the various feminist currents in Latin America and Africa, but also to highlight the possible convergences.

Liberal feminists strongly refer to one of the core principles of the liberal script; that is the right for individual self-determination. Throughout history [1], women have fought for women's liberation from structures of domination and their right for individual self-determination. Over decades liberal feminists have decisively criticized that the promises of the liberal script – justice, equality, economic prosperity, just to mention a few – have not been kept. They point to patriarchal biases, such as the public-private distinction, enshrined in liberal political thought; a distinction that pervades all societal domains (political, social, cultural), keeps women trapped in domesticity, both materially and symbolically, and marginalizes them in the public sphere (Okin 1979, Friedan 1963). Thus, liberal feminists challenge the liberal script from within, yet, without questioning its core principles.

In fact, liberal feminist thought revolves around the concept of emancipation understood as women's liberation from patriarchal relations in the domestic sphere. This, however, has always been challenged by black feminists as well as post- and decolonial feminists in different world regions. For instance, in contrast to liberal feminists, black feminists such as bell hooks (1994, 2015) or Patricia Hill Collins (1989, 1996, 2000) do not conceptualize the domestic sphere of the family as a site of oppression but rather as a site of resistance and black liberation. As a consequence, the meaning attached to emancipation differs as it fundamentally questions the focus on individual self-determination. This can also be observed in Global South feminism(s) such as Ubuntu feminism in Africa that refer to the private sphere and the principles of care and communitarianism as ultimately liberating (cf. Oyěwùmí 1997). Indeed, various strands of feminism from the Global South contest the concepts of emancipation and self-determination in the individualistic way proposed by (Western) liberal feminism.

The objective of this short-term project is twofold: Firstly, the aim is to understand the ways in which the core principle of the liberal script—that is the right to individual self-determination—is contested by different strands of feminism. What are the conceptual differences between the internal contestation by liberal feminism on the one hand and external contestations by Global South feminism(s) [2] on the other hand? Secondly, the research interest lies in exploring the ways in which feminism(s) from the Global South interact with and challenge the core of liberal Western feminism. What are alternatives to the notions of individual self-determination and women's emancipation?

[1] i.e. during the French Revolution in the 18th century; the first wave of feminism in the 19th century, and the second and third wave of feminism throughout the 20th century.

[2] Our research project will focus on the regions of Latin America and Africa, although we recognize that this leaves out valuable contributions and insights from a variety of feminism(s) in Asia.