PANEL REVIEW BY JILLIAN BECK

Ambiguous Rights

GENDER, POLITICS, AND THEORY

THE PANEL, "Ambiguous Rights: Gender, Politics, and Theory," explored the wide variety of challenges that arise when attempting to apply modern feminist theories in the context of today's society. Moderated by Cynthia Merrill, a CSW Research Scholar, this panel included presentations by Bogdan Popa from the Department of Political Science at Indiana University; Liza Taylor from the Department of Political Science at UCLA; Kaitlin Boyle from the Department of Sociology at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte; and Sebnem Kenis from the Department of International Relations at Koc University, Istanbul.

CRITICAL AND SUPPORTIVE OF MARRIAGE?

Bogdan Popa began the session with his presentation, "Re-reading John Stuart Mill's 'On Marriage:' Is Mill a Critic or a Supporter of Difference Feminism?" The presentation focused on analyzing the nineteenth-century British philosopher John Stuart Mill's correspondence with Harriet Taylor (*right*) regarding the institution of marriage.

Popa was very interested in the contradictions within Mill's theories and beliefs as well as in the way he lived his life. Mill was categorized as a liberal, even radical, feminist because of his controversial views on marriage; going as far as calling financially dependent women in loveless marriages prostitutes and likening marriage to slavery.

Popa pointed out how Mill was both critical and supportive of difference feminism, that is, feminism which stresses the differences between men and women. On the one hand, Popa emphasized the fact that Mill valued women as equals, criticized gender essentialism, and denaturalized gender difference.

According to Popa, while Mill openly criticized how marriage perpetuates sexist norms and openly praised motherhood as a virtuous institution for women, he failed to address any hegemonic gender norms popularly associated with motherhood.

Popa stressed the obvious contradiction between Mill's radical opinions on marriage and his blind praise of motherhood. It seems that, even in the nineteenth century, bringing liberal feminism from theory to the real world was not a seamless transition to say the least.

DOES LIBERAL FEMINISM LIMIT MULTICULTURALISM?

Liza Taylor presented her paper, "Reclaiming Susan Okin for Feminist Democratic Theory: Revealing the Limitations of a Liberal Approach to Multiculturalism." Taylor began by discussing a popular argument put forth by the feminist, bell hooks, regarding whether or not liberal feminism marginalizes poor and non-white women. According to Taylor, some feminists believe that it is impossible for new theories of feminism to emerge due to the exclusion or dismissal of non-Western cultures by white liberal feminists.

Taylor praised the feminist deconstruction movement which occurred simultaneously with African-American women's feminist movement. She argued that by critiquing the "essence" of women and gender, deconstructionism was able to expand the realm of participation in feminism thus democratizing participation. Taylor then touched upon the popular criticisms of deconstructionism, most notably, that it obscures mainstream political arguments and hinders progress for feminism.

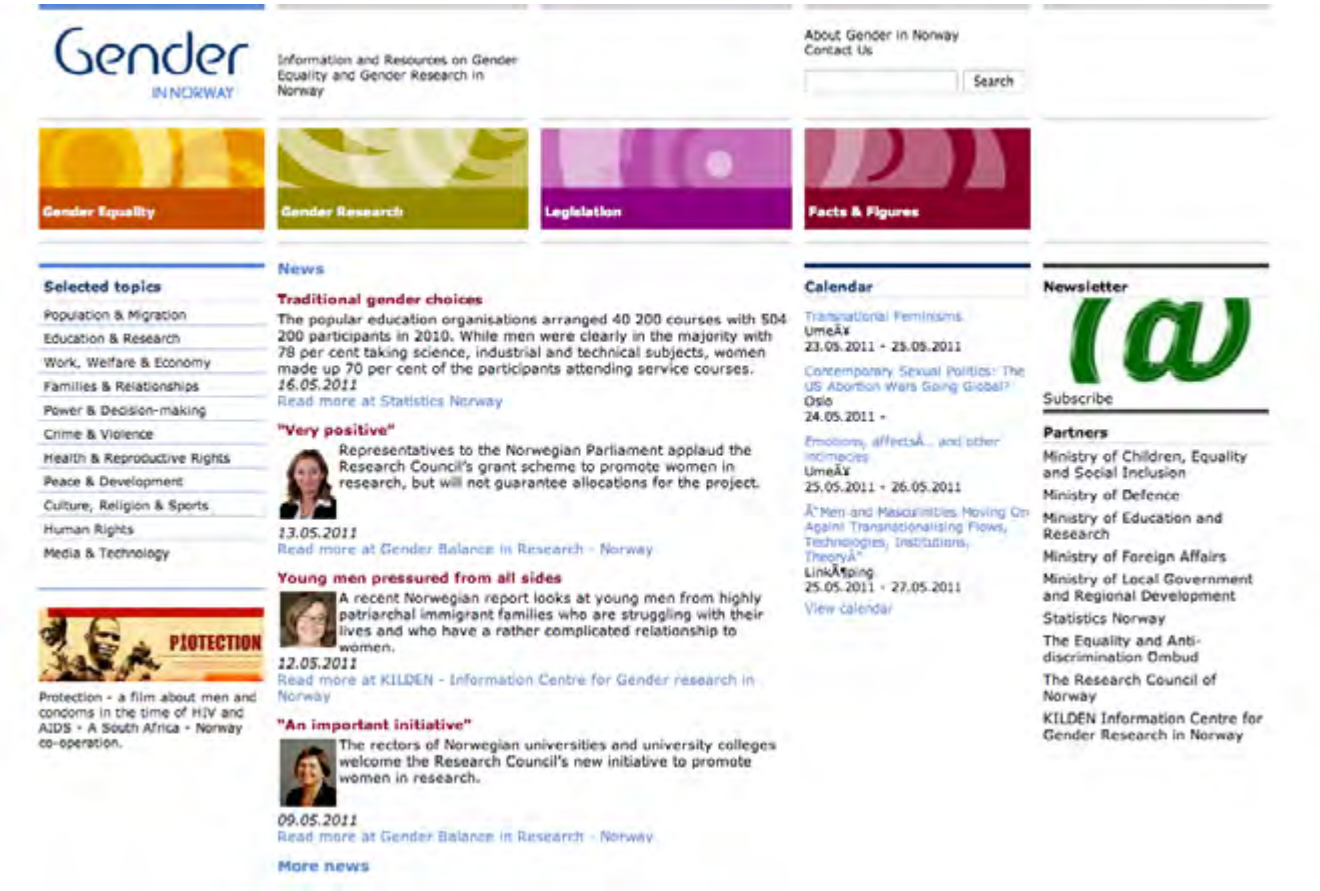
In response to the popular debate on this subject in the 1990s, Susan Moller Okin published a controversial article in 1999. Taylor focuses her paper on Okin's article entitled "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" and the harsh criticism Okin received for her arguments. Critics accused Okin of taking on a traditional white liberal feminist stance and at the same time calling other non-Western cultures backward. Conversely, Taylor saw Okin's argument not as an instance of "othering" but as a new approach to expanding participation in feminism.

Okin eventually wrote another article for clarification, revealing that her intended argument was that non-Western women should not let their cultures define them, but redefine their cultures in relation to their feminist views. Taylor drew attention to how Okin's underlying purpose was not to criticize other cultures but to underline the difficulties women from non-Western cultures face when trying to fit feminist theories within the context of their cultures. Taylor pointed out how Okin's original goal was to advocate listening to a wider variety of voices, therefore moving towards a more democratic approach to feminism. Rather than being passive, Taylor admired how Okin called on modern feminists from other cultures to be proactive. Taylor emphasized how hostile debates, such as those surrounding Okin's writings, allow for contemporary feminist theory to become increasingly democratized by increasing participation in feminism by marginalized cultures.

CHALLENGING GENDER ROLES WITH POLICY

In the presentation "Nordic Gender Equality Models: Taking Sameness for Granted through the Worker-Career Model," Kaitlin Boyle discussed how Nordic countries are leading the world in policies that challenge normative hegemonic gender roles. Boyle discussed her experience studying gender equality in Oslo, Norway. Boyle began by presenting the primary educational and career barriers that women face. According to Boyle, women find it difficult to pursue professional degrees due to their responsibilities as wives and mothers and face horizontal and vertical discrimination in the workplace.

Boyle then brought to light the progressive policies Nordic countries are enacting as a means to increase gender equality since encouragement has not been enough to make



Website of Gender in Norway

lasting change. Boyle's studies led her to conclude that the Nordic values of individualism and peace may be a reason that these particular countries lead the world in gender equality policies. Beginning in the late 1900s, Sweden and Norway enacted policies with the goal to end sexist assumptions in the workplace and households. Universal Day Care, provided by the government, was one of the policies Boyle highlighted in her presentation, discussing how it alleviates some barriers women face, enables them to enter the workforce, and, in effect, enhances them as individuals. Boyle noted that since the establishment of universal day care, the gap between men and women in the workforce has narrowed. As early as 1974, parental maternity leave became gender neutral and by 1993 a parental leave was created designated for fathers only. Through her research, Boyle concluded that both men and women are set to gain more freedom and society would improve as a whole as a result of gender equality policies.

Boyle argued that these Nordic policies allow for the creation of flexible masculinity with it becoming increasingly popular for men to take on the roles of stay-at-home parents. On a positive note, Boyle expressed that Norway still maintains a high fertility rate while also having the highest work rate for women in Nordic countries. Boyle did acknowledge potential drawbacks or limitations of the gender equality policies. Although the number of men and women in the workforce are leveling out, the wage gap between men and women has not narrowed significantly. Also, women tend to still be drawn to pink-collar jobs, despite the accessibility to other less traditionally feminine careers. Lastly, Boyle made it clear that although these policies have made a lot of ground, the idea of "sameness" results in a lack of intersectionality.

CHALLENGES OF ADDRESSING LGBT RIGHTS IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

Sebnem Kenis finished up the panelist presentations with her presentation, "The Islamic Women's Rights Activism in Turkey: Prospects and Limitations for a Pluralistic Construction

of Citizenship." The basis of Kenis's paper is that the pluralistic construction of citizenship in Turkey makes it complicated for Islamic women's rights activists to address the issue of LGBT rights. According to Kenis, so-called feminists in Turkey do not label themselves feminists but rather women's rights activists. Kenis then pointed out the very real struggle to expand citizenship rights, in Turkey and other Islamic countries, to marginalized groups, including women. As a result of her studies, Kenis revealed that Islamic women are sensitive to most marginalized groups but find it difficult to empathize and fight for LGBT Muslims.

In Turkey, leaders announced that "homosexuality is a biological disorder." Due to this proclamation, many Islamic women's rights activists attempted to address the issue of LGBT rights in Turkey. Kenis brought to light four specific women's activists in Turkey who published their opinions on the topic. According to Kenis, this issue is very confusing for Islamic women's rights advocates and is usually ignored. Three of the four women saw homosexuality as completely incompatible with Islam because of various reasons such as Islamic jurisprudence, hedonism, the Islamic understanding of family, and that homosexuality was a type of deviation or perversion. All three went even further by not only refusing the expansion of rights to LGBT Muslims but stressing the need for preventative action against homosexuality.
Kenis emphasized the reaction of the fourth woman. Instead of dismissing the idea of expanding rights to LGBT Muslims in an Islamic society, she pointed out that if they ignored LGBT and prevented their freedom they would, as a result, prevent universal freedom from being reached in Turkey for other marginalized groups. Kenis also concluded that this particular woman was able to embrace the pluralistic Islamic society and all of the differing interpretations of Islam that come along with it. All in all, Kenis finished with the idea that it is becoming almost impossible to separate equality and difference in a pluralistic Islamic society, especially in Turkey. According to Kenis, in the fight for expansion of citizenship rights for marginalized groups, pluralism and Islamic culture will be a substantial roadblock.

Jillian Beck is an undergraduate at UCLA and a volunteer at CSW.

Photo credit: "LGBT Muslims: Yes, We Exist" is from the website of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans And Intersex Associationinternational Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans And Intersex Association