Academic Libraries Advancing Transnational Feminism

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Abstract:

This paper discusses a successful example of how academic libraries can support the global women's rights movement and impact social change. The recent collaboration between the Margery Somers Foster Center of the Rutgers' University Libraries and the Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL) and the Women's and Gender Studies Department, both of the School of Arts and Sciences, resulted in the creation of the "CWGL Poster Collection," an open-access portal providing access to approximately 300 posters, with corresponding metadata, published by women's rights organizations worldwide and housed at CWGL. and housed at CWGL. The posters chronicle twenty years of transnational women's activism and advocacy, while also documenting the visual culture of the global women's movement. The "CWGL Poster Collection" resides digitally in RUcore, Rutgers Community Repository, where its content will be preserved for future generations.

Keywords: Academic Libraries, Women's Activism, Women's Rights.

1 Introduction

The CWGL Poster Collection is the digitization project of the posters collected by the Center for Women's Global Leadership. The posters chronicle twenty years of transnational women's activism and advocacy and capture the individual activism of each organization in different national, historical and cultural contexts. Resources such as the CWGL Poster Collection offer scholars new methodological possibilities and alternative research practices, exposing issues and global flows of ideologies, people, and social movements through visual culture and aesthetics. Furthermore, the analysis and theorizing enabled by this collection help situate U.S. feminisms in a comparative framework, enabling new possibilities for comparative and interdisciplinary studies of feminist activism and scholarship. It is an instrumental resource for scholars and activists interested in the history of women's activism.

This paper illustrates the collaborative effort between the Margery Somers Foster Center of the Rutgers University Libraries (RUL), the Center for Women's Global Leadership, and the

Women's and Gender Studies Department to utilize the CWGL Poster Collection to disseminate women's and human rights activism to broader audiences of academics and librarians, with the overarching goal of catalysing social change via the women's rights movement. The digitized posters reside in RUcore, the Rutgers Community repository, where they will be permanently preserved and made accessible though a custom portal with tools developed to facilitate and encourage their continued use. The RUcore demonstrates RUL's commitment to the scholarly communication movement and institutional repository services in an effort to showcase, preserve and provide access to intellectual assets of the university (RUcore). As universities transform themselves, projects such as the CWGL Poster Collection build meaningful connections on and off campus, situating the libraries in a more strategic position within the academy and within diverse communities of activists beyond campus borders.

2 Poster Collections at U.S. Institutions

Academic libraries in the United States have always been an essential partner in research and teaching in the university community, integrating collections and services into educational enterprise. In the early 1970s, activist groups and academic programs focused on the experience of women emerged in many institutions and influenced the production of knowledge and the representation of women in various spheres of society. In response to the overwhelming interest of their constituents, libraries addressed this new social movement by developing a collection on women in all formats, including posters and other ephemera (Denda, 2002).

Patricia J. Rettig (2001) considers posters as a "neglected resource in academic libraries" due to difficulty in organization and challenges in terms of access and preservation. In the past decade, advances in technology and digitization have enabled poster images to be published on websites and made easily accessible. Examples of poster collections developed by U.S. institutions, presented either on the website or in a sophisticated database or institutional repositories, seem to fit into two categories:

1. SUBSETS OF LARGER COLLECTIONS: Poster collections such as the *World War I: Gender and the War* at Yale University are subsets of a larger collection, in this case the *World War I Archives*, with non-conventional resources in different formats (Yale University). The *Media/Materials Clearinghouse*, a leading international resource for health communications material, includes posters in their collection along with other types of material such as badges, clothing, manuals, etc. (Media/Materials Clearinghouse). Another innovative repository in this category is the newly created *Interference Archives* in New York City that grew out of personal collections (Interference Archive). The posters in the collection represent a subset of a larger cultural ephemera collection produced by and for social movements worldwide. Rather than an online presence, the Interference Archives create face-to-face exhibitions and events, celebrating mobilization for social transformation.

2. THEMATIC & EVENT FOCUS: The collections in this category focus on a specific theme or event. Examples include the *AIDS Posters* at the UCLA Louise M. Darling Biomedical Library, a collection consisting of posters issued by a variety of international organizations to educate people about AIDS (Davison, 2007). Another example is the *Old Dominion University Poster Collection* documenting the university's history by showcasing posters used in recruitment efforts, program offerings and academic units (Old Dominion University). As an example of a collection focusing on an event, the *International Poster Collection* at the Colorado State University Libraries preserves the graphic art of the posters showcased in past

Colorado International Invitation Poster Exhibitions, one of the few such exhibitions of its kind in the world (Rettig, 2001).

Some poster collections in this category focus specifically on women's and gender issues. Examples include the *Dively Committee Poster Collection* at Williams College and the *Olakh Collection of Grassroots Feminist Political Posters in India*, from the University of Wisconsin Digital Collections. The *Dively Collection* encourages awareness of issues relating to sexuality, gender difference, and feminism (Dively Collection). The *Olakh Collection* showcases vibrant women's activism in India against discrimination, violence and justice (Olakh Collection).

The CWGL Poster Collection is another example in this category, but with a broader geographic scope. The collection includes posters on women's activism from every region of the world covering economic and social rights, as well as civil and political issues.

3 The Making of the CWGL Poster Collection

Feminist activist Charlotte Bunch founded the Center for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University in 1989. Over the years, the Center has been "a significant force in international policy arenas, bringing women's experiences and feminist analyses to issues such as development, peace, health, the environment, gender equality and human rights." The Center is instrumental in advocating women's leadership in the area of human rights through many initiatives such as leadership institutes, international mobilization campaigns, including the "16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence," strategic planning activities, United Nations monitoring and advocacy, publications and development of a resource center (Center for Women's Global Leadership).

The CWGL Poster Collection includes posters produced by women's and human rights activist organizations around the world, with the bulk published between 1990 and 2005. They embody tireless work and the aspirations of women's rights activists for the realization of a more just and equal world. In the pre-Internet era, visual artifacts, such as print posters, played an important role in illustrating women's solidarity around the world on a variety of issues, including concerns and perspectives on gender equality, human rights, campaigns against gender-based violence, elimination of poverty and racism, child welfare, reproductive rights, gender identity, and employee rights, uncovering political forces and local sensibilities. They are published by non-commercial means of production and are not identified through standard acquisitions procedures by academic libraries or retrieved through commercial tools such as catalogs, indexes, or databases. In many ways, the posters emanate from outside the dominant culture and offer alternative accounts and histories.

The 292 posters in the CWGL Poster Collection are in eighteen languages published by 166 organizations based in twenty-four countries. The six countries with the greatest number of posters are the United States (59), Great Britain (23), Mexico (14), Nigeria (11), Canada (10), and Pakistan (9). Twenty-nine posters in the collection lack geographical information of the publisher, thus it has "unknown" for the country field. Examples of the grassroots organizations represented are Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, Fiji; BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights, Nigeria; and Working Women Organization in Pakistan. Established feminist international non-governmental organizations, such as AWID: Association for Women's Rights in Development and IWTC: International Women's Tribune Centre, are also represented. The posters published by various United Nations entities, including UNESCO, UNDP, UNICEF, and UNIFEM (UN Women) are also in the collection, as well as posters

from Oxfam and Amnesty International, which are confederations of networked organizations in many countries that build and mobilize grassroots power to effect change.

Examples of posters in the CWGL Poster Collection:

BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights. Nigeria. *Women's Human Rights* (1999)
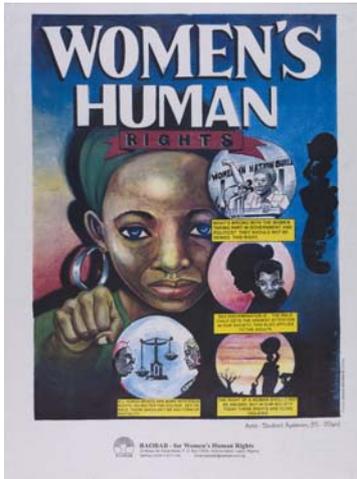
Center for Women's Global Leadership and International World Tribune Centre. United States. *Women's Rights are Human Rights* (1990)
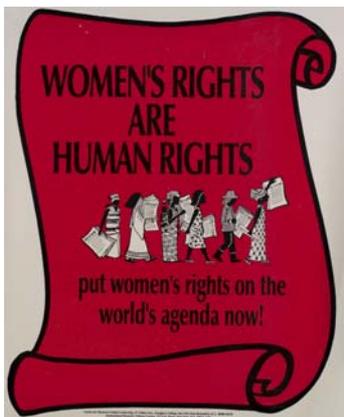
Fiji Women's Crisis Centre. Fiji. *Child Sexual Abuse - There is No Excuse (1990)*

A comprehensive and robust record consisting of descriptive, administrative, technical, and rights metadata based on standards further enhances each poster image. These elements provide organization, access and discovery capabilities, and long-term preservation. When the project was launched, there was no consensus in literature regarding due diligence in digitization. Some authors considered the effort "futile" (Dickson, 2010), and the debates on this topic still continue. Since all the posters are contemporary and under copyright, we decided to seek permission from the poster producers in order to make the poster images fully accessible on the Internet. The three key features of the process were as follows:

1. REQUEST PERMISSION:
   - Request the poster copyright holders' information.
   - Contact copyright holders and seek permission through email and postal mail.
2. MANAGE DOCUMENTATION:
   - Create a spreadsheet to record the poster metadata.
   - Develop a code for distinguishing copyright holders' responses.
   - Develop Rights Event metadata to document copyright permissions.
   - Ingest into RUcore.
3. DISPLAY RESULTS:
   - Develop applications to handle displays for permission "granted" and "not granted."
   - Create a search portal embedded in the Center for Women's Global Leadership website.

The project developed an innovative workflow and provisions to restrict access to the poster image unless or until permission has been granted. We developed the rights metadata model that classified and chronicled the due diligence and outcome as well as the technique for appropriately restricting access to images when necessary. The search portal embedded in the website of the Center for Women's Global Leadership has search options for title, data, subject, producer, language and country. From the search result list, users can identify posters that have full image views. When permission was granted from producers, a full image of poster was made available. If permission was not granted, only the thumbnail was available (Denda, Marker, Sun, 2011).

In addition to the Head of the Margery Somers Foster Center who served as the project manager, the project team included: one reference librarian, two metadata librarians and one software programmer from the libraries; the Communication and Information Director and one research assistant from the Center for Women's Global Leadership; and six undergraduate students, hired by the Women's and Gender Studies Department, who initiated the digitization of posters. Contacting the 166 organizations and securing permissions was very challenging. After two attempts one year apart, we secured permissions for 89 posters (34 percent), and for these the downloadable images are fully available. Although anecdotal in nature, the lack of response might simply reflect changes in contact information due to mergers and/or staffing change and not necessarily disinclination to address our request. It might also reflect the volatile nature of activist organizations where unstable funding and other reasons might have pushed them to extinction, leaving behind only their posters as traces of their activist history.

Today's growing digital environment is certainly becoming integral to higher education. Although the Internet vastly facilitates transnational feminist research collaborations and allows unparalleled access to many resources such as the CWGL Poster Collection, information and communication technologies such as RUcore necessitate a massive technological infrastructure. The Internet is frequently portrayed as an agent for democratization. This is true in many respects, yet the impact of digital technology also brings unintended consequences such as the digital divide, the haves and have-nots, and surrounding us with various modes of surveillance, blurring the boundaries between public and private while ultimately forcing us to think more deeply about the impact of technology in our world and in women's lives (Eubanks, 2011). As scholars in women's and gender studies forge a transnational research network encompassing a rich diversity of worlds of women, they are creating enhanced understandings of the conditions under which women are living, working, and transforming their societies and themselves.

4 Global Feminisms and the Libraries

Although considering feminist activism from an international perspective has been part of the feminist movement for generations (Hewitt, 2013), in the 1960s and the early 1970s U.S. scholars had somehow focused on the United States almost exclusively. In recent decades however, American feminist scholars started to shift their direction in scholarship to shed the readings of the history of the "other" through the Western lens (Ong, 1988; Mohanty, 1991). In the last twenty-five years, many special issues of feminist journals such as *Women's Studies International Forum, Women's Studies Quarterly,* and *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* were devoted to topics including how to incorporate global perspectives into women's studies courses in the United States, how to develop less Western-centric understandings of feminisms, how to include the perspectives of feminists from other nations, and how to understand that feminisms in different nations have local contents and strategies. Debates on how to challenge the monolithic understanding of feminism were also central at the 1995 United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing (Stewart, Lal, McGuire, 2011).

These aforementioned efforts have transformed the field of feminism, including the content of feminist publishing. In the editorial of a recent issue of *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Mary Hawkesworth (2011), journal editor, notes that between June 2005 and August 2010, the journal received submissions from authors in eighty countries. Of all the articles published in the journal, 52 percent were written by scholars from nations other than the United States. The research content of 140 articles (66 percent) focuses on geographic sites outside the United States. These debates challenge the boundaries of knowledge

concerning women and men's lives in diverse regions of the world. In this context, the CWGL Poster Collection is one example of strengthening the role of Rutgers Libraries as essential partners in the research and teaching of global feminisms. Rather than a traditional collection development of published content by mainstream publishers, this was a strategic collection development and collaboration aimed at uncovering hidden collections aligned with the interests of the women's and gender studies community at Rutgers. It was a bold step forward that resulted in a unique resource with transformative possibilities for new scholarship and teaching.

The CWGL Poster Collection has attracted the attention of scholars and librarians. The collection inspired the panel presentation "Digitizing Activism: Visual Culture of Transnational Feminism" at Rutgers University, and the streamed video of this presentation is now available in RUcore as a related resource of the poster collection (Bunch, 2012). Also, the posters have been incorporated in women's studies courses to discuss strategies of transnational women's movements (Denda, 2013), and the poster images have been used to illustrate scholarly and library publications (Hawkesworth, 2012; Hemler, 2013; MDR, 2012), as well as included in established web resources on women (Discovering American Women's History Online, 2012). The project received the "2012 Significant Award in Women and Gender Studies Librarianship" from the American Library Association, Association of College and Research Libraries, Women and Gender Studies Section. As the poster images circulate in new feminist classrooms, library communities, and other circles around the world, the activism encoded in the posters also circulates, expanding the reach of the message to different audiences and thus advancing activism into new territories.

5 Towards a Visual Feminist Pedagogy

In addition to interest in international and global women's issues influenced by an expansion of communications and social media, women's and gender studies scholars are increasingly interested in digitally mediated visual culture (Goldfarb, 2002). As feminist scholars all over the world focus on international perspectives of women's movements, and U.S. scholars demonstrate interest in strategies to incorporate global and transnational perspectives into women's studies courses, the CWGL Poster Collection constitutes a unique collection that captures extraordinary forces that influence means of knowledge and specific cultural productions mediated by technology.

The posters embody a constellation of visual representations and political strategies of women's groups from different parts of the world. The aesthetics utilized in posters provide rich opportunities to exploring the meanings of visual images and the sites in which the meanings of images are made, the site of production, and the intended audience along with strategies of representation (Rose, 2001). These posters also reveal women's groups as politicized social groups with a history parallel to that of the dominant culture. They serve as an excellent source to reframe and expand our understanding on how gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality and religion differ according to locale and moment in our globalized world. Ultimately, we wish they inspire new ways of thinking, seeing, teaching, and learning.

6 Conclusion

This paper highlights the RUL's engagement with the international community of feminist activists and scholars through the CWGL Poster Collection project. This unique collection not only pays tribute to the multiplicity of women's activisms around the world, but also presents particular cultural and local political perspectives constituting a unique resource for feminist classrooms and interdisciplinary investigations. With the global expansion of communications technology and media, as well as the flourishing of visual culture altering dissemination of information and cultural production, resources such as the CWGL Poster

Collection capture extraordinary forces and meanings of societal transformation. As the role of the visual and media in the context of feminist pedagogy evolves, resources with culturally and geographically specific content allow for students to understand different modes of knowledge production, raising new questions and inquiries.

As institutions of higher education move forward and scholars push the boundaries of their disciplinary fields, providing access to new and hidden resources is an area of ongoing responsibility for the libraries. With the CWGL Poster Collection, RUL engages with the Center for Women's Global Leadership, the Women's and Gender Studies Department, and transnational women's activism, moving the libraries forward in the development of innovative strategies that further the academic mission. As the digital poster images circulate through multiple institutions and audiences around the world, they advance heralds of a more sophisticated consciousness about women's rights, human rights and other concerns expressed by individual posters and women's groups. The CWGL Poster Collection situates visual culture within broader activist contexts and networks of circulation while bringing feminist communities and cybercommunities of scholars, students and activists together in a dynamic space of contemporary aesthetics and politics. It also encourages a new vision for academic libraries as sites for developing a shared sense of purpose and place that is at the heart of the academic life.

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