Politics outside politics: How women really advance democracy

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Politics Outside Politics - How Women Really Deepen Democracy

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Defining Democracy – what the men have said

- Power (kratos) to the people (demos)

- “Democracy is a state where the people is sovereign and guided by laws of its own making, and where the people do by themselves everything it is possible to do, and through delegates, everything that is not.” - Robespierre, 5th February 1794
What the men have said:

- “Democracy is a universally recognised ideal as well as a goal, which is based on common values shared by peoples throughout the world community irrespective of cultural, political, social and economic differences. It is thus a basic right of citizenship to be exercised under conditions of freedom, equality, transparency and responsibility, with due respect for the plurality of views, and in the interest of the polity.”

- Inter-Parliamentary Union, Alexandria Declaration, 1997
And the first feminist definition:

“Democracy is an infinitely including spirit. We have an instinct for democracy because we have an instinct for wholeness; we get wholeness only through reciprocal relations, through infinitely expanding reciprocal relations. Democracy is really neither extending nor including merely, but creating wholes.”

Mary Parker Follett, The New State, Chapter XIX, 1909 (University Park, PA, PSU Press, 1998)
More than votes, more than governments

“The vote in itself does not give us democracy -- we have yet to learn democracy's method. We still think too much of the solidarity of the vote; what we need is solidarity of purpose, solidarity of will. …. it is only through group organization that the individual learns …. to be an effective political member.”
How might women define democracy?

- A principle for organizing human relations, based on the values of
  - Justice, i.e. equity and equality – in relationships, access to resources, voice, vote, representation
  - Peace and non-violence
  - Sustainability and non-violence towards the earth
  - Respecting and promoting the full body of human rights
  - Transparency
  - Accountability
So for women, democracy

- Would be the guiding principle for governance and decision-making in all institutions – the household, community, religion, the state, the market

- This goes much beyond the widespread understanding of democracy as a system of government, and of political governance

- It is a very political understanding of democracy, and entails political action in many locations

- It is what transforms formal citizenship into substantive citizenship
Therefore, we must distinguish between

- Democratization through women’s participation in *formal/institutional* politics (electoral participation, holding political office, membership of political parties) and

- Democratization through women’s participation in *other transformative political processes* (movements, struggles, change organizations) – this is "deep democracy"

- My contention: women have deepened and advanced democracy more effectively through the latter than the former; but their participation in these processes is rarely recognized or analyzed as political participation
The Story of STEPS & the Women’s Jamaat of Tamilnadu

- STEPS is a women’s organization founded in 1991 to work on the empowerment of all poor women, and particularly Muslim women that aims to bring about a change in the dominant perception – including among Muslim women themselves – about their rights.

- It believes that patriarchal interpretations of the Qu’ran and Shari’a have created discrimination against women that is not sanctioned in Islam.

- The process of interrogating both Qu’ran and Shari’a led the women to organize their own Jamaat – or community council, called the “Women’s Jamaat”
The Women’s Jamaat has

- 6000 card-holding members and branches in 10 districts of Tamil Nadu state; nearly 5000 of whom are members of micro-credit groups

- Confronted and overcome threats, violence, excommunication, and slander campaigns by the official Jamaat, sundry mullahs, and their own families and communities

- Educated women about their rights under Shari’a and Indian Constitution

- Constituted legal aid cells to address cases of violence against women

- Supported and championed single, abandoned, divorced, widowed women
The Women’s Jamaat has

- Worked with men to sensitize them on issues of violence against women and women’s bodily integrity

- Networked with legislature and judiciary at local, state and national level, and with media, civil society, academic, and other organizations

- Arbitrated disputes (including cases relating to property, divorce, custody, maintenance) – today more families approach them for arbitration than the formal Jamaat

- Constructed a women’s mosque and trained themselves to call the Azaan

- Created a uniquely *indigenous feminism* that is vibrant, flexible, and constantly adapting to new challenges
The Women’s Jamaat redefines democracy as a process that

- Seeks and claims equality and rights within the highly undemocratic and hierarchical institutions of family, community, and religion;

- Has made transparent and visible the abuses of power that have always been hidden

- Confronts the fundamentalist agenda of the majority Hindu community

- Most of all, promoted a democratic counter-culture within its membership that is percolating into their households and the larger community
The WJ process

- Forces political parties, local self-government bodies, and state legislature to engage with them on their terms
- Alters the mainstream discourse and stereotype of the oppressed, submissive Muslim woman
- Reframing and claiming citizenship for Muslim women in a profoundly democratic way
A framework for tracking women’s politics outside politics:

- Is there an agenda for transformation and a democratic vision?
- Is there a process of building political consciousness?
- Is there an organized base? Is the organizational structure attempting to simulate democratic values and practices?
- Is the process seeking both formal and substantive change?