

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS PROJECT
PODCAST SERIES:
CONTEXTUALIZING FEMINIST VOICES**

SITE: USA

**Transcript of Liz Cole
Interviewer: Özge Savaş**

Location: Ann Arbor, USA

Date: June 22, 2021

**University of Michigan
Institute for Research on Women and Gender
1136 Lane Hall Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1290
Tel: (734) 764-9537**

E-mail: um.gfp@umich.edu

Website: <http://www.umich.edu/~glblfem>

© Regents of the University of Michigan, 2017

Intro: This podcast series, *Contextualizing Feminist Voices*, is designed to provide background information for people using the Global Feminisms Project website. The podcasts aim to provide users with a well-informed perspective on interesting aspects of the interviews from a particular country. For each episode one of the project staff interviews an expert on that country site.

Ozge Savaş: Welcome to this episode of *Contextualizing Feminist Voices*. My name is Özge Savaş and in this episode I'm talking with my University of Michigan colleague, Professor Liz Cole, who will provide a perspective on the interviews from the United States. Because we have limited time, we will get right to the point. Liz, my first question is: what are one or two themes that come up in the interviews that users should pay close attention to, because those themes are particularly important in the United States women's movement, scholarship, or activism?

Liz Cole: Well, I think one theme that really came up across many of the interviews was the important role of identity in feminist movement. So, for the US site we chose activists whose work on women's issues intersects with other dimensions of inequality in the US, like race, poverty, sexuality, disability, just to give you some examples. For many of our participants, their own identities were relevant to these movements, and many of them talked about their own experiences, and the importance of belonging to different communities, as part of the context and the motivation for their work. For example, Rabab Abdulhadi, who helped found the Union of Palestinian Women's Organizations, talked about her connections to Palestinian women throughout the diaspora. She saw this connection as transcending national or even geographical boundaries. Part of her sense of herself as belonging to this community was these transnational connections.

Another example is Cathy Cohen, whose scholarship and activism addresses queer issues within communities of color, and she talked about how she thinks of queer sexuality, not just in terms of a straight-gay binary, but as sexuality that challenges hetero-normative assumptions. So, she gave an example: lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender people, are all marginalized by their sexuality. And that's part of this LGBTQ experience and identity. But she said, what if we think of this category of "queer" as broader than that? And she gave the example that in the US, low-income mothers who receive support from the state--which in the US is called Temporary Assistance for Needy Families--in the US, those women are similarly targeted when they're affected by coercive marriage-incentive policies. So, for this reason she sees them as being subordinated by their sexuality and sharing some political interests with gay men and lesbians, who also experience their sexuality and intimate partnerships as stigmatized and prescribed. So, she was taking this LGBTQ identity that was important to her, important to her activism, and thinking of it in a much broader way. Not only is this theme of identity really important to the US site; what I think is really interesting is that we saw across many of these interviews that sure, identity was important to their activism, but not in this kind of simplistic terms of these people are like me, or these people are not like me, that often gets described as identity politics, or even kind of caricatured in identity politics. Instead, many of our participants understood themselves as connected to a broad community that shared political interests, and it really

demonstrates their thoughtfulness about alliances across time and place, and an expansive imagination about how history and social structure link people in a shared fate.

OS: Thank you for highlighting these and your great insights, I'm sure our listeners will find these very useful. What would you say are one or two important things about feminist activism in the United States for people to keep in mind that are not covered in the written introductory information on the website?

LC: Well, one thing that I think is really important is that these interviews can tell us important things about how central working in coalition is to feminist activism in the US; and my colleague, Zakiya Luna, and I wrote a paper about this in *Feminist Studies*, and I want to tell you a little bit about the ways we saw this playing out in our interviews. Women who belong to multiple marginalized groups, like women of color, are in a position to form alliances and negotiate collaborations across these different groups, and it's really been a centrally important organizing tactic in the US, among feminist movements and particularly for women of color, LGBTQ women, women who experience multiple marginalized statuses.

So just to give you an example, one of our interviewees, Loretta Ross, worked for an organization called SisterSong, which was an umbrella organization for women of color and reproductive justice; and reproductive choice is a really important site in [the] US feminist movement, but much of the mobilization around this topic has been around protecting abortion rights. And what Loretta Ross and SisterSong said: how might considering the circumstances of diverse women, you know, diverse with respect to race, class, disability, complicate this idea of choice? Because certainly for those groups, access to abortion is important, but their reproductive concerns also include the right to have children, and as Loretta Ross put it, to parent the children that we have. She said, "if you look at the foster care system, the criminal justice system, the zero tolerance policies kicking our kids out of school. I mean reproductive rights means a whole lot more than to abort or not to abort, as far as we're concerned." So, by broadening this definition of reproductive choice to include diverse people, they were able to use this insight to help organize the March for Women's Lives in 2004. They said the aims of this march have to be broadened beyond abortion rights to include civil rights concerns, environmental justice concerns. And so, for the very first time they were able to bring important civil rights and environmental justice organizations on board as co-sponsors of the March for Lives. So, by sort of leveraging the fact that they belong to these multiply marginalized groups, they were able to build a bigger and broader coalition, and possibly to have a much bigger impact.

Some of our interviewees talked about the really intense kind of work they had to do to navigate differences and cultural assumptions when they worked with groups that traditionally have more power. So for example, Marta Ojeda, who was working with the Coalition for Justice in the *maquiladoras*, and she was working with a group that was across North America, but she was from Mexico and those groups brought her to this larger umbrella organization. She talked about working with US activists who just automatically assumed that the meetings would be conducted using Robert's Rules of Order, which is a very prescriptive guide to parliamentary procedure, and so when they started the meeting

the US activists were just saying, okay you get to talk, now you get to talk, you know, invoking all this complicated procedure that the Mexican activists didn't even know what they were talking about, and they had to interrupt the meeting and negotiate the terms for how the meeting was going to work. So, because of this power imbalance some groups were coming in with assumptions and kind of privileging their ways of conducting business.

But I do want to end by talking about how we also heard stories about how coalitions could be really successful and energizing. So we talked to two representatives from Sista-to-Sista, a collective of working class, young and young adult black and Latino women, and they talked about mobilizing against the US war in Iraq, in coalition with other groups, and they talked about how working with other groups not only gave them a chance to kind of leverage their human capital to increase their turnout, but it was also an opportunity for different communities of color to do political education. To learn more about each other, to learn how to work together, and they saw this as important because they viewed the mainstream media as propagating a lot of misinformation about different minority communities and that coalition was an opportunity to learn a different story, even as they worked together.

So working in coalition is an important theme in the US women's movement. It really became an important theme when the movement first had to confront the diversity that always exists within the category "woman." And then they had to find ways to acknowledge those differences with equity and fairness and in ways that could represent those different interests, and it's a challenge that the movement is still working on today, but I think these interviews can give us a lot of insight into how those alliances work in practice.

OS: Incredible. Thank you, Professor Cole, for joining us today.

LC: Thank you.

Outro: Thank you for listening to this episode of *Contextualizing Feminist Voices* created by the Global Feminisms Project. The entire podcast team hopes it will help you understand and enjoy the materials on the website. If you liked this episode, check out the other podcasts in this series, as well as materials about countries, teaching resources, and interviews.