

HILLARY CLINTON'S IMPERIAL FEMINISM

Does It Matter if a Woman Is President of the United States?

By Zillah Eisenstein

Biological essentialism is insufficient when speaking about gender and its power. Being a female exerciser of political power is not one and the same with having women's interests in mind: an end to sexual violence, the full determination of women's and girls' reproductive rights, the right to economic independence and to work for wages, and living wages at that.

There have been women political leaders who have not realigned patriarchal power in their governing, nor improved the lives of women they governed, such as Margaret Thatcher or Golda Meir. Yet, sometimes women in sites of power make a difference: like Michelle Bachelet's women's rights agenda in Chile, German Chancellor Angela Merkel's embrace of refugees, and the U.S. Supreme Court Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Elena Kagan, and Sonia Sotomayor with their support for reproductive rights.

Ever since Hillary Clinton thought of running for president, it has been repeatedly asked if her election would make a difference to and for women. Which women might she help, if any? In what ways would she address the problems that patriarchy and misogyny pose for women of all classes and races, both at home and abroad? In her policy statements and rhetoric, she speaks about cracking and opening ceilings while most women in the United States and around the world remain in the basements.

With the world mired in crises, and in an election colored by the hyper-misogyny of a patently unqualified Donald Trump, the particular significance of Clinton's candidacy as a woman has lost some of its resonance. In any case it is hard to think of her as breaking a barrier for women when she has been a part of the national political scene for a quarter century, as First Lady during the Bill Clinton presidency, U.S. senator representing New York, and President Barack Obama's secretary of state.

▷ *Hillary Clinton at the Washington Convention Center, Washington, DC, Sept. 17, 2016. Mark Wilson/Getty Images*



Although I agree with liberal feminists who think it is time for a woman president in the United States, I also think it is as crucial to keep a mobilized critique of Clinton's imperial feminism at the forefront. Imperial feminism is a feminism that operates on behalf of American empire building. It has a history of using the Western canon of "women's rights" to justify American wars, most recently in Afghanistan and Iraq. Imperial feminism imposes rather than negotiates, it dominates rather than liberates, it declares itself the exceptional arbiter of women's needs. It operates on behalf of the hierarchies of class across the globe, leaving most women out of the mix. Hillary Clinton has become the representation of and decoy for these politics.

Imperial feminism privileges inequality through gender bending that masquerades as gendered equality. Imperial feminism privileges empire building through war. It denies that women lack access or opportunity on the structural basis of their gender oppression. Its view is privatized and individualized with little commitment to the masses of women or non-binary gendered peoples.

Imperial feminism is not intersectional. It assumes a unitary stance of structural misogyny for empire even though discrimination towards women is critiqued. As long as the critical prism is not explicitly multiracial and multiclass, it remains white and privileged. As such, Clinton both articulates and obfuscates these politics.

Clinton's run for the White House was not an act of post-patriarchy or post-misogyny, nor a statement of gender equality in and of itself. Nor have the female leaders of about a quarter of the world's countries, across all continents, meant this either. The rise of these women as presidents and prime ministers might be a small reform step towards that possible and eventual goal of gender equity. But the nation-states themselves are what need democratic restructuring. The difference between reform and revolution in these instances is enormous. Instead of repeating more of the same, new democratic imaginings are needed.

I am thinking about progressive feminisms of all sorts, both in the United States and throughout the world, that are anti-racist and anti-militarist. Feminisms in these plural instances require an inclusive embrace of women of all colors in a non-hierarchical rainbow. Such a global view demands peace rather than war. But Clinton disguises militarism with a friendly white female face, read as feminist, as though this feminism were inclusive when it is not. When a woman is president, we—women—will be told that the glass ceiling has been broken. We will hear that we are now in a postfeminist era. But this particular "we" remains too rich, too white, too imperial, too capitalist, too everything that most women (and men) are not.

Most feminisms of the last three decades both inside and outside the United States—whether named geographically, ethnically, ideologically—have become more complicated, more complex, more intersectional, more inclusive, meaning anti-racist,

pro-sex, pro-choice, anti-violence, pro-trans, pro-environment, and anti-militarist. It is past time to speak up against policies that continue American exceptionalism, imperialism, colonialism, racism, and sexism. American exceptionalism—that the United States is the arbiter of democracy and universal values—devalues nations elsewhere.

A notable example of what I mean is Clinton's continual defense of Benjamin Netanyahu and Israel's "right" to defend itself. She gives "rights" to a patriarchal, racist, and colonial state, declaring herself a lifelong friend to Israel with an "unbreakable bond." Women of all kinds and identities across these borders are put at risk and in harm's way. Their varied and differing rights in this war are ignored, and Palestinian women suffer heartbreak, devastation, and death in outsized proportion.

Underlining how her gender would make little difference in Middle East policy-making, Clinton's position on Israel endorses the same policies that have failed for decades. She still wants to enforce a singular and exclusive U.S. notion of democracy; one that she claims is universal—American values are universal values, she insists. She embraces Israel in this endeavor, and this pro-Israel position seeps into her policies toward Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and others. She says Israel must defend itself and sees the present tragedy in Gaza as the fault of Hamas. She frames a renewed interventionism and calls it "smart power"—using our power "to spread freedom and democracy," if not in old forms of unilateralism and "boots on the ground." She may change tactics but not the strategy. The United States remains the arbiter of goodness and righteousness. To fight radical jihadists, she says, "I'm thinking a lot about containment, deterrence, and defeat."

American Exceptionalism

Hillary Clinton says that peace and security are dependent on the participation of women, especially in the labor force, in the formal economy. How do you fix the economy by simply allowing and encouraging women to enter it? This will not fix an economy that is structured with racial and sexual ghettos and unequal pay for women. Having women enter the labor force is an old strategy that intensifies the triple shift of daily labor for women, but is not tied to their freedom, or equality, or liberation. Jobs did not bring liberation to women in Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution, or to women in Venezuela during Hugo Chavez's reign, or even to the United States today. Supposedly the gross domestic product goes up if women enter the labor force—estimated to increase productivity 34 percent in Egypt, or 9 percent in Japan. But who really gains? Not the women in Egypt or Japan. The corporate class, privileging upper class men, gains instead.

Clinton uses her No Ceilings initiative to advance women and girls around the world. She thinks that "giving women the tools to fully participate in their economies,

societies, and governments” is the unfinished business of the twenty-first century. I would be more interested in a No Basements initiative. Feminists need to work from the bottom up where most women are found—hauling water, collecting wood, standing on assembly lines, providing food, working low-paid service jobs.

Clinton assumes the exceptional status of the United States because of its supposed just and democratic practices, especially towards women. Therefore, her imperial feminism sets its sights outside the United States. At the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, she famously said, “Human rights are women’s rights, and women’s rights are human rights.” In equating the two, she looks to universalize women’s needs, diminishing their particularity.

Before focusing on the lives of women and girls elsewhere, Clinton might rather direct her attention on the great deficits at home. She should commit to safeguarding abortion clinics, demand a living wage of at least \$15 an hour, improve daycare, reduce incarceration rates, and increase contraceptive coverage and paid maternity leave for women of all colors. After all her years in U.S. politics, she has little to show on these fronts.

Too many white feminists—in imperial and neoliberal form—similarly speak on behalf of women’s rights, but for places elsewhere. Critiques of women’s rights in Egypt, in Venezuela, in Nigeria, and elsewhere, in fact overlap with similar indecencies in the United States. Data shows that America is well behind many countries when it comes to daycare policy, family leave, rights to health care, and reproductive rights for women. The United States is hardly exceptional, but trails behind Sweden, Canada, and Ireland. The United States records increased poverty, increased incarceration, and increased health crises, especially for women of color.

The No Ceilings initiative says that there “has never been a better time to be born female.” Really? Tell that to the suffering women of Syria. Or Northern Nigeria. Or to the women in American prisons. Violence against women has reached epic proportions in every single country in the world, according to Lydia Alpizar, director of the Association for Women’s Rights in Development. In the United States, rape on college campuses is an epidemic violating one in five female students. Pregnant women are at their greatest risk in American prisons. Even women serving as peacekeepers—in the United Nations blue-helmet forces—are experiencing a serious rape problem. Clearly the assumptions of the No Ceilings initiative are too narrow and too exclusionary.

The findings by the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women CSW59/Beijing+20 report, twenty years after the 1995 Beijing Declaration to bring about equality, are an outrage. The growing disparities of wealth are a women’s issue for women of every color. When it comes to abortion access, equal pay, hunger, homelessness, a living

wage, and available daycare, millions of women in the United States are suffering. This suffering should repudiate the posture of American exceptionalism. American business mogul Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer of Facebook, asks women at the top to “lean in” and not pull back from demanding their due. Meanwhile most women are leaning in fully and working overtime with little to show for it.

Imperial feminism and liberal feminism do not provide the answers in this moment of national and global crises. They downsize the more radical-liberal promise of sexual and racial equality. Opportunity is the new mantra. Equality of opportunity has been erased and denied.

Feminisms must be about so much more than gender. They must embrace the multipronged, multiple, and complex identities of gender—racial, class, sexual, age, ability, and so on. Anti-imperial feminism insists on naming gender and the way it intersects at all these locations without ever becoming singular and/or exclusionary in focus.

Anti-imperial feminists need to mobilize and push for a multipronged agenda after the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Anti-imperial feminism imagines beyond separation and singularity to a limitless sense of variety and multiplicity of genders, and races, and sexualities themselves. These feminists must stand in broad coalition with others against neoliberal racist, patriarchal, imperial practices wherever they exist. In particular anti-imperial feminists must join in coalition with others who demand an end to human and ecological destruction—especially at this moment, in Gaza, Yemen, and Syria, and in American cities like Ferguson, Milwaukee, and Baltimore.

Multiple realities exist for women of all colors today—and misogyny still exists alongside upward mobility for some particular women. The framing of women as a sexual and gendered class remains a structural deficit. Women, especially women of color, are struggling against poverty and to earn a living wage. It is these mixed realities that make present forms of patriarchy more complex and multiple. A woman without an inclusive anti-racist, anti-imperial feminist agenda cannot either imagine or create the conditions for a wide and deep peace with justice. A woman American president might make a difference for a few but she cannot make enough of a difference for most people suffering around the world.

Rather—critique the racist, patriarchal capitalist and global market that turns 70 percent of women into migrants and refugees. Stand against the newest expressions of structural racism and misogyny across coalitions to save the planet and the rest of humanity. Begin to create the solidarity and trust that everyone needs to end the misery that too many suffer daily. Anti-imperial feminists can start by creating resistance and revolutionary alliances of refusal against imperial feminism. Having a woman president in the United States is far from enough.

I am among those who do not believe that the electoral arena can deliver the democracy we yearn for, but feel as though we must do as much as we can anyway on behalf of this dream—of a fully humane, free, anti-imperial, anti-racist, feminist, gender non-conforming world.

Let us think beyond imperial, neoliberal, and hyper-militarist feminisms. Let us think beyond a rights-defined feminism that favors existing structures of power and privilege by focusing on the legal underpinning of choice. Legal rights are not enough. They remain ensconced in unequal relations of power that often simply reproduce the right to remain unequal.

When Clinton asserts her women's rights agenda—one that treats women the same as men—which women is she thinking about? And which men are women supposed to be equal to? Women in power need to deal with the inequalities of class, and race, and gender, and sex, and nation before offering women their rights.

This is what a meaningful politics of gender looks like:

- In speaking about women's rights include the women of Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, etc.
- Constitute 50 percent of all political institutions with people of color and women of all colors.
- Formulate new policy to address and reduce sexual violence in everyday life.
- Transform the misogynistic practices in policing and the penal system that particularly harm women and girls of all colors.
- Establish federally paid daycare for anyone needing it.
- Clarify how transgender rights are crucial to the practice of an effective democracy.
- Establish LGBTQ equality as a guide for all gender and race rights.
- Establish paid family leave.
- Establish equal pay for all work and with a living \$15-a-day wage.
- Examine the possibility of equal work across gender divides—end racial and sexual ghettos in the labor force, end pink and blue-collar labor.
- End all forms of sexual violence—domestic, military, policing, war-rape—which means ending wars everywhere.
- Specify the conclusion of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the end of arms trade, especially to Saudi Arabia.
- Implement single-payer health care and free sexual health care—contraceptives, abortion, morning after pill, etc.
- Establish national compliance towards an end to global warming specifying an end to fracking and dependence on all fossil fuels.
- Abolish the prison system as we know it in the United States.

Beyond Gender Politics

I voted for Barack Obama rather than Hillary Clinton in the 2008 Democratic primary in New York State. I thought he would make more of a difference for more of us: people of color, white women, and the poor. He has made a difference but not enough, and especially not enough for the people who suffer his drone strikes, the detainees still in Guantánamo, and African Americans killed by militarized police forces. His presidency makes clear that no single person changes structures of power.

So does the gender of a president matter? It does as soon as you say or act as though a woman cannot be president or should not be. Of course, being female does not discount anyone from being a fabulous leader, Hillary Clinton included. But if a woman is running in a misogynist election in the first place, one needs to be careful what kind of victory one is claiming. Clinton, running as “the most qualified person, who happens to be a woman,” should have been able to eviscerate the likes of Donald Trump. Instead, continual false equivalences were drawn between them. She proved almost as unpopular with the American people as the misogynist billionaire. Some people hate Clinton in classic misogynist fashion, because she is a woman. Others dislike her because she is part of the old guard albeit in a new female skin. Others dislike her Clinton baggage. Her candidacy both elicited and transcended misogyny. No one could have imagined the level of misogynist rancor mobilized by Trump.

The 2016 American presidential race was the election from hell, between a misogynist racist bigot and an imperial feminist. When a woman is president, at least we can move beyond that demand. The way will be cleared for the women of the world to move past the singular focus of gender to push for an inclusive feminism that is anti-imperial.

We need to make a feminist coalition with better movements for peace and justice—the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and Black Lives Matter. No one person, no matter what their gender or race, can create the peace and justice we need. Lately it appears that women rule the world. Theresa May is the prime minister of the United Kingdom, Angela Merkel the chancellor of Germany, Christine Lagarde the head of the International Monetary Fund. Yet there is little gender equality for the women suffering sexual violence and war. Women and girls continue to make up a disproportionate percentage of displaced persons, refugees, and the homeless. Violence is devastating the lives of Nigerian girls kidnapped and enslaved by Boko Haram; and Yazidi girls and women are turned into sex slaves in Iraq and Syria.

I am reminded of the comment of my friend, Egyptian feminist Nawal El-Saadawi in response to a question after the Tahrir Square uprising in 2011. When asked at a New York City teach-in what people in the United States could do to support the revolution in Egypt, she replied: “Make your own revolution and change your government for us.”