Commentary on Serene Khader’s “Transnational Feminisms and Individualism”

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Khader’s paper addresses important questions about the role of values in transnational and postcolonial feminism. She rightly notes that discussions about normativity often lead to an impasse in which any defense of moral universalism is seen as a commitment to Western values and an endorsement of imperialism. Because feminism is and must be committed to some kind of values (and is in this sense universalist), we need to examine the specific values that transnational feminists identify as vehicles for imperialism and determine whether feminism requires commitment to these values (p. 1). One of these values is individualism, which is the central concern of today’s paper.

Individualism figures importantly in liberal feminism (and in liberalism more generally), as well as in “neo-liberalism” (a term used specifically to describe and criticize the resurgence of free-market economics in the 20th century). The idea that women are rational, autonomous and morally valuable persons has been important in feminist arguments for women’s rights and equality. As critics of liberalism have noted, however, an emphasis on individualism can also work to entrench women’s subordination and inequality, and to obscure structural injustices (including those of race, class, and gender). In focusing on individuals as self-determining agents or “choosers,” the conditions under which choices are made (and in which agents are socialized) recede from view. As Khader notes in her earlier work, agents acting on “adaptive preferences” may be regarded as free individuals, making choices that nonetheless reinforce their
own oppression. In many Western feminist discussions, the autonomy and rationality of white, western feminists is assumed, while non-western, non-white, and sometimes non-Christian women is called into question by their national, cultural, or religious affiliations. Group-based identities are seen as being in tension with individualism, and in a sense, with the status of women as free and equal. (Perhaps one of the more stark examples of this is Susan Okin’s essay, “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?” which pits a feminist concern for women’s rights and equality against a concern for “multiculturalism” understood as group rights for minority cultures.)

Taking for granted ethnocentric Western notions of social progress, and co-opting the language of feminism, an increasing number of development programs focus specifically on “investing in” women. As Khader notes, these programs purport to empower women through, for instance, increasing their earnings, bolstering their vocational skills, or providing them resources to improve their children’s health or access to education, and some cite statistics to show that targeting girls is an efficient and effective strategy. For instance, the website of the Nike-sponsored “Girl Effect Accelerator” program explains,

The Girl Effect exists to help everyone, and everyone includes boys. Better lives for girls means better lives for everyone in their communities – their brothers, fathers, future husbands and sons. When you improve a Girl’s life through education, health, safety and opportunity, these changes have a positive ripple effect. As an educated mother, an active, productive citizen and a prepared employee, she is the most influential force in her community to break the cycle of poverty. It has been shown that an educated Girl will reinvest 90 percent of her future income in her family, compared with 35 percent for a boy. (http://girleffectaccelerator.com/, accessed September 27, 2016)

As Khader notes, many transnational feminists are critical of the ways that development theorists target women as subjects of global capitalism and neo-liberal development. She cites Kalpana Wilson’s recent essay on gender, development, and neo-liberal feminism as one example of a transnational feminist critique. Wilson focuses in particular on the ways that development
programs (such as Nike’s “The Girl Effect”) work to “produce the idealized neoliberal subject who can negotiate unfettered and unregulated markets with ease, while simultaneously assuming full responsibility for social reproduction” (Wilson, 819). Calling this the “gendered neoliberal governmentality critique,” Khader explains that this feminist critique tends to be offered as a critique of individualism—in other words, development programs “turn women into individuals” where individuals are understood as ideal agents of capitalism. She finds this characterization problematic, however, and offers a number of reasons for why transnational feminists need a more accurate and nuanced understanding of just what the problem of “individualism” is in this context.

While I cannot recount all of her arguments here, Khader notes that it is confusing and unhelpful for feminists to lump under “individualism” a problem that actually concerns the “feminization of responsibility.” The fact that women are saddled with an unfair share of responsibility caring for others hardly seems to be an objection to individualism. As she notes, policies that assume that women will put their family or kin group’s interest above their own could be said to be “de-individualizing.” Suggesting that self-sacrificing behavior is “individualist” may reinforce the myth that women simply choose to take on added burdens and that such responsibilities are therefore unproblematic. There seem to be two distinct problems here, and the gendered neoliberal governmentality critique fails to distinguish them. Khader is more precise in identifying the problem, explaining: “Neoliberalism shifts responsibility for public goods onto individual women” (p. 8).

In the latter half of the paper, Khader makes a similar argument about the importance of recognizing the value of relational goods, such as goods associated with kinship networks. She examines transnational feminist critiques of individualism and notes that again, two different
understandings of individualism are being lumped together, only one of which is clearly problematic. Individualism about entitlement (which she describes here as the idea that “human beings deserve equal treatment”) is not adequately distinguished from “individualism as a form of social life.” The problem with neoliberal individualism is that it promotes the idea that individuals must be concerned primarily with their own advancement and not with supporting their kin networks. On this view, the needs for affiliation and care—relational goods—cannot themselves hold value. And yet feminists need not—and Khader ultimately argues should not—give up the idea that relational goods can hold value, nor should we compromise on the idea that individuals are entitled to some kind of equal treatment or value as persons. Thus we need to make these important distinctions. While feminists have good reason to object to individualism as a form of social life, we cannot reject “individualism as entitlement.” Individualism about entitlement is the position that “the basic moral entitlements of each human being matter equally” (8), and it concerns the “locus of value.” She explains that feminists “cannot do without the view that the individual person is a locus of moral worth and one whose violation is not permissible to preserve other loci of value.” This does not, however, entail that the individual is the only locus of value (p. 8).

Although I think Khader is correct to suggest that feminism requires some normative commitment to treating all human persons as entitled to value, I am not sure that this is best described as being a commitment to “individualism.” On p. 4-5, Khader briefly mentions one typology that political philosophers—including feminists—use to map out claims about individualism. They describe three types of individualism: (1) descriptive individualism; (2) methodological individualism; and (3) normative individualism. Descriptive individualism involves the claim that persons are “separate in some kind of deep sense,” and isn’t really her
concern here. Methodological individualism tends to be associated with the view that groups are best understood as the product of individual decisions; methodological individualism proceeds by paying attention to the actions and choices of individuals that constitute groups. This is also not the sort of “individualism” that Khader defends. The third type, normative individualism, comes closest to what Khader means by “individualism about entitlement” (though she explains that she does not offer a full endorsement of normative individualism since this would require a more “comprehensive and specific normative position” than the one required by feminism). Typically, normative individualism is understood as the view that “only states of individual human lives can possess intrinsic value” (Gray, 306) or as the view that “in the last instance moral norms and values can only be justified by reference to the individuals concerned, as its basis” (von der Pfordten, 449). In my own work, I have found that “normative individualism” seems to be the most common type of individualism for feminists to defend. While noting the effects of social groups and structures of power, feminist liberals are reluctant to give up the idea that “individuals are what ultimately matter—their freedom, dignity, and welfare.” That is how Elizabeth Anderson explains normative individualism (2009), and she argues that it is essential for feminism. While I suspect that Khader’s view is quite different from this one—since relational goods also have value and individuals are not all that “ultimately” matters—I am not entirely sure how “individualism about entitlement” compares to the normative individualism endorsed by many feminist liberals.

On a related note, I worry about the possibility that normative individualism serves to justify and perpetuate other more troubling forms of individualism. Taking individuals to be the locus of moral concern can center attention too narrowly on individuals, rather than on the effects and the value of social, political, and cultural communities. As Khader notes, many
problems arise out of the fact that various kinds of individualism are taken for granted (and are essentially invisible) in a neoliberal capitalist context. Thus, it is especially important for feminist transnational theorists to be careful about endorsing them. It is also essential to get clear on just what the problems are—and Khader has done an outstanding job of identifying and explaining the interaction and the conflicts between various transnational feminist criticisms of individualism. She has also argued for the importance of normative commitments, which strike me as essential for feminism, regardless of whether they fall under any definition of individualism. I very much look forward to reading the rest of Serene’s book.

Works Cited


