

# Network News

Feminism fundamentally involves the work of identifying and amending gaps. Feminist theory takes on the task of identifying gaps in hegemonic discourse and gaps that result in processes of knowledge production. Specifically, feminist theorists identify moments in which women's voices and experiences are ignored and highlight the ways in which epistemological assumptions obscure how knowledge is produced in patriarchal institutions and through gendered processes. Similarly, much of the work of feminist organizations is devoted to the task of bridging gaps that characterize women's lives. The following organizations are devoted to the work of amending gaps—gaps between women working in the informal and formal economies, gaps between women in areas characterized by war and women in conflict free zones, and gaps between incarcerated and free women. The work of these organizations signals the multiple ways in which feminism must continue to be attentive to the variety of gaps that shape women's lives.

Do you discuss the work of these or other organizations focused on the needs

of women in your classes? Have you incorporated participation with feminist organizations and networks into your curriculum? Do you use materials produced by feminist organizations in your classroom? Do you have an idea about how to amend feminist gaps? If so, please consider submitting a Teaching Note to tell us about it. See the Call for Teaching Notes following this column for more information.

## Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WEIGO)

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WEIGO) is a global research-policy network that seeks to improve the status of working poor women in the informal economy. According to WEIGO's website, the informal economy describes a large share of the global workforce characterized by part-time, unstable, and unprotected employment. Informal work includes work accomplished by employees of informal enterprises, unpaid family workers, and many self-employed women. Visible examples of occupation

groups comprising the informal economy include street vendors in New York City, rickshaw pullers in Kolkata, and roadside barbers in Durban. Less visible is the informal work accomplished by furniture makers, weavers, and recyclers. WEIGO estimates that one-third to one-half of all non-agricultural work in the developing world is accomplished by informal employment. If agricultural jobs are taken into account, the percentage of jobs in the informal economy increases. Women are particularly susceptible to the risks associated with informal employment. Sixty percent of women's labor in the developing world exists in the informal economy. Through research highlighting the size, composition, characteristics, and contributions of the informal economy, WEIGO provides information that illustrates the problems experienced by women working in the informal sector. In addition, WEIGO assists in collective organizing by informal workers and promotes policy dialogues that include representatives of informal worker organizations. For more information about women's work in the informal economy or to learn more about WEIGO, go to <http://www.wiego.org>. The website includes links to academic centers working on research and developing programming related to the informal economy.

## Women for Women International

Women for Women International helps women in war-torn regions rebuild their lives by providing financial and emotional support; job skills training; rights awareness; leadership education; and access to business skills, capital, and markets. The program is built on the premise that women experiencing war and violence need support to prepare for their lives

post-conflict. As Zainab Salbi, the president and CEO of Women for Women International, explains in the introduction to her book *The Other Side of War*, "War is not a computer-generated missile striking a digital map. War is the color of earth as it explodes in our faces, the sound of child pleading, the smell of smoke and fear. Women survivors of war are not the single image portrayed on the television screen, but the glue that holds families and countries together. Perhaps by understanding women, and the other side of war . . . we will have more humility in our discussions of wars . . . perhaps it is time to listen to women's side of history."

Women for Women International attempts to understand the experience of women in war-torn regions and to empower women experiencing violence by giving them voice through letter writing. The organization matches U.S. women with women in regions currently experiencing war and conflict. U.S. women provide financial and social support to their match. Sponsors commit to contribute \$27 monthly to participate in the program. A portion of these funds is given directly to women participating in the program, and a portion is used to create rights awareness education and job skills training. In addition, matches exchange letters to provide women experiencing war with support, encouragement, and a means of expressing the costs of living in areas characterized by violent conflict. Throughout the year-long letter exchange program, women receive emotional support and encouragement from their sponsors, a network of women to connect with in their communities, programming on leadership and rights awareness, job skills training suited to the local economy, access to capital and small business development, and a

variety of other programs geared towards the specific needs of a given region, including literacy training in Kosovo, HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention training in Nigeria, savings and investment counseling in Rwanda, and infant care classes in Afghanistan. Women for Women's website <[www.womenforwomen.org](http://www.womenforwomen.org)> features a video about the organization and additional information about its work.

## Women's Prison Book Project

The Minnesota based Women's Prison Book Project provides free books to women and transgender-identified persons on a range of topics including law, education, history, and women's health. In addition to nonfiction selections, the program provides inmates with a variety of fiction. According to the organization's website, of the two million people incarcerated in the United States, over 150,000 are women. Eighty percent are in prisons or jails for nonviolent offenses, including drug-related violations, shoplifting, prostitution, and fraud. Half of all incarcerated women are women of color, and two-thirds have at least one child under the age of eighteen. The Women's Prison Book Project tries to provide texts to women that address their specific needs. In particular, women request materials related to family life and children, women's health,

and partner abuse. The project is also committed to providing GLBT women with information addressing relevant issues, texts that are often difficult to access via other channels. The Women's Prison Book Project understands the dissemination of books as an activist strategy that benefits women both inside and outside of prison. For incarcerated women, books provide much-needed information and escape. For women living outside of prisons and jails, collecting and distributing books provides an opportunity to learn about life inside U.S. jails and prisons.

The project receives approximately six hundred book requests per month from incarcerated women and is in constant need of donations. The Women's Prison Book Project accepts new or used donated paperback books from publishers, bookstores, and individuals. Currently, the project is particularly interested in receiving books addressing drug and alcohol recovery, abuse, and health, along with English and Spanish language dictionaries, fiction and nonfiction by people of color, queer fiction and nonfiction, arts and crafts manuals, and mystery novels. Organizations are also encouraged to hold book drives to support the project's mission. For more information, go to their website at <<http://prisonactivist.org/wpbbp>>.