

# New Directions in Feminism and Human Rights

*Edited by*  
**Dana Collins,  
Sylvanna M. Falcón,  
Sharmila Lodhia and  
Molly Talcott**

ROUTLEDGE



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# New Directions in Feminism and Human Rights

On the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, feminists are at a critical juncture to re-envision and re-engage in a politics of human rights. Feminist conversations among scholar-activists can enrich new directions in feminism and human rights. The writings that comprise this collection advance both research and critical conversation by exploring the transformative potential of feminist human rights praxis. The editors' method has been to move beyond a wholesale dismissal of human rights so that the book may begin new dialogue on transnational, gender and antiracist social justice approaches.

This book pushes beyond academic critique by exploring the potential of human rights activism 'from below'. These groundbreaking chapters provide evidence of the persistent challenges and the attendant possibilities in feminist human rights, which underscore the creative displays of grassroots resistance by women globally and which affirm transnational feminist solidarity.

This book was published as a special issue of the *International Feminist Journal of Politics*.

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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## *Foreword*

### *Looking Back, Moving Forward*

#### HUMAN RIGHTS AT A CROSSROADS?

MALLIKA DUTT

Ours is a moment of great calamity and uncertainty but also one of unprecedented possibility. As I write this foreword, billions of gallons of oil continue to devastate the US Gulf Coast, the global economy continues to lurch from crisis to crisis, and state violence and terrorism continue to feed off one another to create seemingly unending conflict – and these are but a few of the challenges facing our world.

If the world can be remade anew and equality, justice and dignity for all are not utopian ideals but attainable and indispensable human rights, the moment to act is now and the need for women's leadership is dire. However, many scholars and activists have come to believe that human rights are an inadequate framework to help us build alternative worlds or futures (Brown 2004). While I continue to believe that human rights remains an essential tool in identifying and implementing the ethical and moral framework by which all people may be afforded justice and self-determination, I also think it is time for the women's movement to reconsider and reimagine the potential efficacy of human rights as a change paradigm in these troubled times.

The articulation of women's rights as human rights in the early 1990s was an exciting time for the global women's movement, and our use of this framework as a strategy to position ourselves in the global public policy arena began in earnest at the United Nations (UN) World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993 (Bunch and Reilly 1994). The human rights framework, which had global normative acceptance, a global infrastructure and accountability mechanisms associated with it, was a practical entry point from which to begin mainstreaming feminism and articulating a different paradigm – starting with the recognition of women's fundamental humanity. This strategy seemed all the more necessary because human rights at that time completely ignored the existence of women. From UN world conferences in Vienna to Cairo, from Copenhagen to Beijing, the international mechanisms that existed for those conferences gave women an opportunity and an infrastruc-

ture to come together strategically from various parts of the world and participate in a truly global forum (Meillon 2001: 2). Women used the planning processes of these conferences to strategically build deeper alliances and be opportunistic about demanding much needed attention for half the world's population.

Violence against women emerged as the most strategic issue to mobilize around because of its ubiquitous presence in the lives of women in every corner of the globe. Despite differing class, racial/ethnic and cultural manifestations like female infanticide, sexual and emotional abuse, dowry-related murder, honor killings, domestic violence or rape during times of war and conflict, violence against women was a clear pandemic. The issue of violence against women also fit within the dominant human rights paradigm of civil and political rights with its focus on violations and redress.

Despite the tactical parallels, the fight to gain recognition for violence against women as a human rights issue was still an uphill battle. What happened to women in private spaces did not fall under the domain of typical human rights violations, but the global women's movement transformed violence against women into a public issue and brought non-state actors into play. As a result, a UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women was appointed; gender became integrated into various United Nations mechanisms; and the rights based framework in the development paradigm emerged (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights n.d.; Kerr 2004: 24). Our successes from Vienna to Beijing ensured that human rights were no longer about helping poor women to be better mothers and caretakers, but to radically transform the conversation to one of women's fundamental humanity and their value as citizens and political actors. The excitement and energy flowing from those times was palpable. We felt the promise of human rights was just the beginning, and that positioning violence against women as a human rights issue was just the groundwork of a larger reconfiguration of dominant paradigms, normative social constructs and gender relations more broadly. It was not only about securing human rights for women, but shifting the discourse in order to end discrimination based on gender, class, race, religion and sexuality and to create new institutions that would respect the human rights values of dignity, equality and justice for all.

I now look back on the euphoria of that period while grappling with the realities and challenges we currently face. Women today occupy a more important role in how policies are articulated, particularly in a development context; many countries have since passed laws against domestic violence with additional punitive measures against violators; and women now hold leadership positions in institutions, corporations and government entities (Kerr 2004: 24–9). In every corner of the world, women are challenging social and cultural norms and laws that reduce them to second-class citizens. They are engaging in courageous acts to stop the pandemic of violence that

permeates the lives of women and denies the talents and strengths of half the world's population (Dutt 1995: 232). We have also reached a moment when the grassroots activism that has always been a cornerstone of women's collective strength is being met with global recognition.

As I write this Foreword (from my vantage point in the US), the International Violence Against Women Act is working its way through Congress (Amnesty International USA n.d.). Once passed, this piece of legislation will make ending violence against women a priority in US foreign aid and diplomacy. The Clinton Global Initiative now has a focus on women and girls, which will hopefully result in more investments in the areas of violence, sexual health, education, financial empowerment and peaceful societies (Clinton Global Initiative 2010). The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation just announced a \$1.5 billion pledge to improve maternal and child health, family planning, and nutrition programs in developing countries (Preston 2010). The Dutch Government's funding of the Millennium Development Goal for gender equality has enabled small, on-the-ground organizations such as my own, Breakthrough, to grow their critical work. Women and girls have a global positioning that was previously unimaginable, and it is important to acknowledge and celebrate these tremendous achievements.

However, unspeakable inequality, inexcusable violence and the persistent marginalization of women's voices remain. We are still fighting battles with conservative religious and state forces that would undermine women's reproductive rights and other issues of self-determination (Dutt 1995: 233). Women's lives today continue to be fraught with sexual violence; state violence; increasing forms of fundamentalism; the feminization of poverty; migration policies; homelessness and joblessness. A post-9/11 national security agenda has given state violence a new and more dangerous articulation, and the collapse of economic structures has resulted in frayed migration policies that disproportionately impact on women. While the old forces of inequality persist, they are now exacerbated by the innumerable global crises that unfold, almost on a daily basis.

It is at this moment that I feel the transformative potential of the human rights framework must be re-examined for its enduring promise. I had imagined that the strategic alliances formed in the past and the analysis and positioning we developed would have provided a much stronger vision for alternative futures, but our ability as feminists to put those paradigms into effect has not yet been realized. Even during this moment of unprecedented visibility, we have not yet articulated and implemented cohesive critiques of failing economic institutions and advanced in its place a normative plane that demands the creation of a just economic system with global accountability mechanisms (Dutt 1995: 238). We are not yet able to mainstream a vision of human security that challenges terrorism and state violence and replaces the need for borders with the need for shelter, food and health. Women and girls are on the global agenda but we have yet to renegotiate

the larger structures that affect our lives – building more than just an awareness of sexual violence or violence within the home for instance – and insist that ending gendered violence is but the beginning of building just and peaceful societies that respect human rights for all.

Someone recently asked me why I was being so demanding of the women's movement (and myself) when *no* social movement has been able to occupy the agenda-setting vacuum left by the general collapse of global systems and structures. This question has no easy answer. In my view, many levels of analysis are needed for a critical feminism to materialize in which new human rights agendas can be established. This Special Issue reflects vital advancements in these levels of complex inquiry generated by the groundbreaking work of feminist thinkers and activists in human rights today.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Katie McDonough for her assistance with this Foreword.

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# *New Directions in Feminism and Human Rights*

## AN INTRODUCTION

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### Abstract

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On the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, feminists are at a critical juncture to re-envision and re-engage in a politics of human rights that underscores the creative displays of grassroots resistance by women globally and affirms transnational feminist solidarity. In highlighting feminisms and human rights that are antiracist and social justice oriented, this issue highlights new research that reveals the transformative potential of a feminist human rights praxis that embraces collective justice. In this introduction, we discuss dominant critiques of human rights frameworks and explore critical human rights activism 'from below' in order to establish the context for this special issue on new directions in feminism and human rights.

### OUR VISION

The relations *between* feminist political struggles worldwide and the hegemonic projects, institutions and discourses associated with human rights appear to be fraught with both peril and promise. One peril, in particular, gripped our hearts as we prepared this narrative. On 27 April 2010, state-supported paramilitaries assassinated Alberta Beatriz 'Bety' Cariño Trujillo, who was taking part in a human rights caravan to support the besieged, autonomous



Triqui community of San Juan Copala in México. A victim of a bullet to the head in a targeted strike, Bety was a widely known and loved leader within indigenous-led human rights struggles in Southern México. Bety was a personal *compañera* to one of us (Molly): she opened her home and shared her time, words and various journeys with me when I visited Huajuapán de León, Oaxaca as an activist-researcher. Bety organized savings circles among poor women of the Mixteca region of Oaxaca (an area with the country's highest emigration rates); she was the director of the Center for Community Support Working Together (CACTUS) and she was centrally active in a number of campaigns and organizations, which address a wide range of issues, from transnational corporate mining exploitation of indigenous and rural lands to the forced sterilization of indigenous women. She paid particular attention to the lives of women and youth, while embracing a culturally grounded and inclusive vision of human rights and justice.

To say that Bety's courage and clarity are deeply humbling to us is no act of romanticization. Having survived multiple death threats and office invasions, Bety was highly aware that her own life was in jeopardy. Yet she refused to separate her own right to security and well-being from others in her community, nation and beyond. Her persistent articulation of a vision and praxis of human rights derived from her lived experience as an indigenous woman, a mother and the daughter of landless, Mixtec sharecroppers – and, in her own words, derived from the experiences of 'those below who suffer and struggle' – also signals the promise that we hope this issue, and the explorations presented herein, helps to further cultivate.

We are a collective of feminist scholar-activists who developed this project because we seek to understand the contradictions that emanate from, on the one hand, the institutionalization of human rights among imperial nation-states and global governmental bodies and, on the other, the growing embrace of human rights logics and languages by activists like Bety Cariño who are struggling for justice across the world. More precisely, we ask: How can critical engagements with these contradictions – by scholars, activists, journalists and artists – help us to create new vocabularies and strategies for achieving antiracist, feminist justice on an international scale?

The conditions and struggles of the world's women – the majority of whom are women of color, of the Global South, non-elite and faced with an appalling range of daily lived injustices – might easily lead to the conclusion that the objective of safeguarding women's human rights is far from being actualized. As a result of the divergent cultures, histories and dire economic conditions that shape and regulate the lives of women, a singular model of 'women's human rights' is difficult to sustain. However, the feminist lessons we have learned through our own research portray a complex reality with regard to the grassroots inter-relationship between feminism and human rights that we wanted to explore further. We now turn to our diverse, yet interconnected research, which laid the groundwork for this collaborative project.