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Effective Organizing in Terrible Times: The Strategic Value  
of Human Rights for Transnational Anti-Racist Feminisms

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# International Feminism, Human Rights and the Women's Studies Curriculum

## *A Conference at the Nexus of Pedagogy and Activism*

ED. BY LAURA H. ROSKOS AND ANDREA L. HUMPHREY

### *Introduction: Conference-making*

BY ANDREA L. HUMPHREY

On March 20, 2003, the United States began a full-scale invasion of Iraq, based partly on the rationale of liberating the Iraqi people from the human rights violations perpetrated by an abusive dictator. Nine days later, the second annual New England Women's Studies Association's (NEWSA) conference took place at Suffolk University's Law School, while across Tremont Street in the Boston Common over 50,000 people gathered for an anti-war rally and die-in. Most of the conference presenters and attendees felt torn by the need to express opposition to their government's actions and the need to examine the ideological underpinnings of the opposition itself. With the guidance of co-chairs Laura Roskos and Amy Agigian,<sup>1</sup> the NEWSA conference explored human rights discourse and raised awareness among U.S. women's studies practitioners of a paradigm in wide use internationally among feminists and social justice activists, including those located in the countries of the Middle East.

The conference was an expression of NEWSA's mission as "a feminist anti-racist network open to all which actively seeks new meeting ground

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for discussions about Women's Studies and social change." This mission statement was generated in September 2000, after NEWSA had acted as program committee for the National Women's Studies Association's (NWSA) annual conference held that June at Simmons College in Boston. The following spring, we organized half-day workshops on racism and white supremacy, and in the spring of 2002 we sponsored our first regional conference in several years at Bentley College: "Culture, Work and Power: Building Working Relationships among Women of Color and White Women." Our 2003 conference on human rights, for which this section is an abridged "proceedings," gave us new insights for implementing NEWSA's mission and underscored the importance of introducing the human rights paradigm in women's studies classrooms. Not surprisingly, many of the essays included here grapple with the problems of holding the U.S. government accountable to international norms and standards.

In her keynote address that opened the conference, Anannya Bhattacharjee raised provocative questions about ideology and education. In the U.S.A., the women's studies classroom is one of the few contexts in which students can engage in theoretical analyses of effective activism. Yet, the parity between theory and practice mandated by feminism only produces scholar-activists—and makes activists of their teachers—when the connection between ideology and action is pedagogically explicit and reinforced by course requirements. While it is enormously difficult to apply one's critical faculties to those ideologies that one holds dear, understanding their history, limitations, major debates, and central conflicts from the standpoints of all concerned provides a powerful grounding for activist praxis.

In the interview below, Laura and Annanya explore some of the debates recalled in Annanya's keynote address, "From Civil Liberties to Global Democracy: Responsible Feminist Citizenship in a Changing World Order." Laura asks Anannya to take apart terms like "citizenship" and "feminist" and to compare the role of nonprofits and NGOs in the U.S., India, and Brazil. Their discussion reflects a globalized economy structured by multinational political alliances and transnational corporate forces. They describe a situation where the capacity of national governments, accessible and accountable to some extent to individuals and community groups, to address human rights concerns is uncertain, or perhaps even diminishing. Increasingly, non-profits and NGOs take on the

weight of remedying human rights concerns even though they are not sufficiently funded, staffed, structured or popularly mandated to effect institutional or social change (Afkhani et al. 2002, 665). Under such pressures, non-profits or NGOs may choose to ignore or gloss over the ideological conflicts amidst which they carry out their work, narrow their analysis to a single-issue, or become mired in over-professionalization—any of which can dissipate the very social justice movements with which such organizations imagine themselves to be most aligned.

In addition to referring to a specific body of international treaty law, human rights can be understood as a discourse or ideology. As an ideology it has given rise to a particularly complex history of conflicts among feminists. In “Effective Organizing in Terrible Times: The Strategic Value of Human Rights for Transnational Anti-Racist Feminisms,” Barbara Schulman recalls that she “was extremely skeptical and resistant to the HR model.” She explains her doubts and her “conversion” through her work for Amnesty International on the New York City Human Rights Initiative. Barbara’s doubts invoke one of the central feminist debates regarding human rights: can feminists trust the universalist aspirations of a discourse “derived from masculinist and western individualist frameworks?” (Warren 2003, 1). The whole project of women’s human rights challenges the anti-essentialist trends of late twentieth-century Western feminism. Yet, identity politics and collectivism, which third wave Western feminists like to think of as obsolete, are key strategies for women defined and oppressed as such by their societies. These conflicts are expressed in the false binary of “tradition”—which women of non-Western cultures are encouraged to abandon in order to obtain their human rights—as opposed to “modern”—which conveniently ignores modern Western penchants for cosmetic surgery, sex tours, and commercialized sexuality (Warren 2003, 6). Thus, absolute dismissals of identity politics and collectivism made by some Western feminists are themselves universalist and essentializing.

Particularly since the 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights, feminist analyses have exposed the extent to which government-sponsored human rights movements have deployed universalized essentialism to mask the gendered effects of human rights violations (Coomaraswamy 1997, 4). When governments see international human rights standards primarily as a vehicle for coercive diplomacy, they obscure the potential those laws hold for effecting domestic change in two ways. First, such

efforts sideline instances of human rights violations occurring within the state's domestic jurisdiction. Second, they shield human rights violations occurring in private venues, inside family homes, for example, or in intimate relations, from scrutiny and cure (Bhattacharjee 1997, 324).

The recognition that human rights are indivisible and enforceable in the domestic life of community members leads to the recognition that human rights violations do not always take the form of interpersonal violence. Mary Bricker-Jenkins's work with the Kensington Welfare Rights Union (KWRU) is based on economic human rights, in particular the rights to housing and food, as guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and other human rights conventions. The violations KWRU documents are most often the result of structural violence, which serves to entrench and reinforce social inequities. In Mary's report, "Legislative Tactics in a Movement Strategy: The Economic Human Rights-Pennsylvania Campaign (EHR-PC)," a grassroots movement grapples with a state legislature in a constitutional context that does not explicitly mandate human rights as defined by the UN. The popular education initiative Mary describes is just one of several tactics KWRU has made use of in its efforts to characterize poverty as a curable human rights violation; in addition to public hearings, KWRU has staged human rights tribunals outside the United Nations in New York City and has brought a petition against the U.S. government to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, thereby continuing a tradition initiated by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's 1948 petition to the United Nations (Glendon 2001, 82). EHR-PC activists and leaders come predominantly from among the homeless, because once they understand their economic human rights, they are able to quickly identify which public policies violate their rights. The human rights paradigm authorizes the marginalized, who are, after all, "the majority of the world's citizens," to imagine and claim a public voice to call for human rights on their own terms (Afkhami et al. 2002, 659).

However, the theory and practice of human rights is further complicated by the historical contingency of the definitions and concepts (Afkhami et al. 2002, 663; Roskos 2003, 7, 41). For example, in "Redefining the Terms: Putting South African Women on Democracy's Agenda," Leslie Hill describes how women were able to braid claims based on their gendered social roles as wives, mothers, and sustainers of family and kinship

networks into a definition of citizenship, which then came to be seen as integral to post-apartheid democratic reform. South Africa's experience with radical political transition and constitutional renewal offers lessons for feminists in the United States, but as Leslie demonstrates, international influences also contributed to shaping the political demands of South African women, when, for example, veterans of other African revolutionary movements confronted South African women with gender injustices in the anti-apartheid movement itself. In combination with a process of broad constituency mobilization and coalition-building, South African women were able to make use of emerging international human rights norms of gender equity to institutionalize legal guarantees of representation and full citizenship in the newly constituted state.

Definitions and applications of human rights change over time, but also from location to location. If the human rights of indigenous populations are jeopardized in all colonial contexts, securing human rights means something different in each case. In South Africa, the goal was reclamation of political power by a formerly colonized indigenous population. However, in Andrea Smith's report, "Beyond the Politics of Inclusion: Violence Against Women of Color and Human Rights," reclamation of political power is not enough. As Andrea's work as co-founder of INCITE illustrates, rereading the colonization of America's indigenous peoples as a human rights disaster exposes genocide and reveals that institutional reparations must go beyond pay-offs to reach for social change in U.S. culture and for healing in the indigenous community itself. It requires "systematically dismantl[ing] the inequities based on a colonial heritage and associated systems of 'race' privilege, class exploitation and gender oppression" and reconfiguring leadership "as responsibility, not power and privilege" (Afkhani et al. 2002, 666).

The SisterLove project epitomizes this kind of institutional transformation. In her contribution, "Reflections of a Human Rights Educator," Dazón Dixon Diallo describes the founding of the SisterLove program, which deploys human rights discourse in consciousness-raising work among women of color struggling with HIV/AIDS. Like KWRU in Pennsylvania, SisterLove staff and volunteers come from the constituency they serve. But early on, SisterLove observed the intersectionality of race and gender in the spread of HIV/AIDS among "already reviled and disrespected 'minorities.'" The intersectionality of multiple identities and multiple

oppressions differentiates the struggle of individuals identifying, for example, as female and as African-American from that of white women and of men of color. However, as Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw observes, “intersectionality offers a way of mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identities and the ongoing necessity of group politics.” Furthermore, since human rights are indivisible, intersectionality becomes “a basis for re-conceptualizing race as a coalition between men and women of color” (Crenshaw 1994, ). Thus, the power of SisterLove’s work is multiplied in coalition with men of color affected by HIV/AIDS as well as with HIV/AIDS organizations that also serve white women.

The second effect of human rights intersectionality is the elimination of hierarchies among rights violations, which pits populations against each other and forestalls coalition-building. As Krishanti Dharmaraj and Dorothy Q. Thomas insist, “As soon as human rights activists ourselves begin to privilege one set of rights over another, or to advance our cause at the expense of someone else’s, or to challenge bias in others without examining our own, the transformative potential of our work is greatly diminished” (14). These two effects of intersectionality—coalition-building and anti-hierarchization—facilitated by the human rights paradigm help resolve many human rights debates.

Since the UDHR was adopted unanimously by the UN General Assembly in 1948, these debates have generated six more major UN treaties, some of which are mentioned in the articles that follow:

- Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) in force January 4, 1969.
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR) in force March 23, 1976.
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) in force March 23, 1976.
- Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in force September 3, 1981.
- Convention Against Torture (CAT) in force June 26, 1987.
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in force September 2, 1990.<sup>2</sup>

While these documents represent the core of international agreement on human rights, the meanings accorded to them have been elaborated in

numerous declarations, country reports prepared under the terms of these treaties, and commentaries authored by the various treaty bodies, and augmented by the published analyses and observations of human rights activists.

NEWSA's March 2003 conference brought together several of these activists and legal theorists to consider human rights and feminism as they operate in the U.S.A. The disjunctures, tensions, and disparities among our contributors' observations and analyses map the terrain where new interpretations and activist strategies for social justice and gender justice struggles will, we hope, flourish. In her remarks that conclude this section, conference co-chair Laura Roskos offers some ideas for using these unresolved questions as resources in moving a feminist human rights agenda forward. NEWSA is grateful to the *Meridians* editors for allowing us to share the following reports with a broader audience of race, gender, and social justice theorists and activists, as well as with women's studies practitioners.

## The Challenges of Feminist Citizenship: An Interview with Anannya Bhattacharjee

BY LAURA H. ROSKOS

*Anannya Bhattacharjee's 1996 article, "The Public/Private Mirage: Mapping Homes and Undomesticating Violence Work in the South Asian Immigrant Community," opened up new ways to think about women in community and the link between enforcement violence as manifested by private and public actors. This interview with her was conducted in New York City on June 6, 2003.*

LR: You were in Boston a few months ago, on March 29, to give the keynote address at the New England Women's Studies Conference, shortly after the United States began its invasion of Iraq and while a large anti-war rally was taking place directly across the street on the Common. Addressing feminist citizenship in a changing world order, you noted that the nature of that change was particularly difficult to gauge at that moment. Now, several months later, do the dynamics of change have greater definition for you?

AB: I think first it will be useful to just talk about the word “citizenship” because in today’s world of global migration we need a concept of citizenship that goes beyond a legalistic definition. Within the United States, given the wide spectrum of people who inhabit the immigrant communities—ranging from undocumented immigrants to people who are legal residents or who have legal citizenship—citizenship should have a broader meaning. We are also living through a time of increased, indeed draconian, restrictions on democratic participation. To counter this trend, we have to infuse the spaces that we are already in with citizen participation. By citizen participation, I do not mean only a token participation as in the votes we cast every few years or the false choices we have as consumers. I am talking about engagement that democratizes the various aspects of human existence making it possible for us to define a society at local, regional, national, and global levels based on transparency, accountability, equality, justice, respect for life, and peace. This would counter the current government trends toward greater secrecy and mystification in the name of national security.

LR: The increased emphasis on national security in the United States and the tightening of national borders has problematized “citizenship” as a usable word, and I noticed that you were using “engagement” rather than “citizenship.”

AB: Yes. And if we want to build democracy, it’s important for us to realize that voting is just one aspect of a democratic society. Just as it is not viable to say that if you don’t have a passport then you are not a citizen, it’s not appropriate to say that since you cannot vote you are not a citizen. To me the concept of citizenship extends to undocumented workers who have the right to engagement and participation to determine the conditions they live in and this goes far beyond just casting votes during elections. Electoral processes and political campaigns are of course important watersheds. However, if citizen action and participation are geared solely towards candidates and their campaigns, then citizen participation will wither away over time. This is especially true in the U.S. where electoral activism is limited to two parties with relatively little political difference between them and where new parties are not being generated out of mass movements.

LR: You often speak of your experiences at the World Social Forum where new forms of engagement and social organization from Latin America have gained visibility. One concept that excites me as a concrete juxtaposition to neo-liberal models of economic growth is what I think is called “community budgeting.” Is anybody in the United States experimenting with that?

AB: One term for it is “participatory budget process.” Organizing to determine the use of resources is key to self determination. Resources can mean many things but budget is one of them. However you define your community—neighborhood, block, county, state, nation, even the globe—budgetary decision-making is definitely one aspect of self-determination and a venue for citizen participation and engagement. Porto Allegre has a participatory budget process, which has excited North Americans at the World Social Forum. In the United States, organizations have brought up issues about taxation and think tanks have tried to put citizen’s budget priorities together, but in Brazil it’s actually an organizing approach where you slowly build from the bottom up what citizen participation would mean in budgeting. In India, it’s been part of this whole concept of “self-rule”—Gandhi being one of its key proponents. So U.S. activists have come back saying “what if our city council members could be exposed to the potential of this kind of citizen participation? Wouldn’t that make our elected officials much more activist? Much more engaged with their constituencies?”

LR: When a municipal or other governmental budget grows from the neighborhoods up does it turn out to be any more gender balanced in terms of whose needs are getting met?

AB: Women are very civic people. Women engage with their families and communities, and if they can access the opportunities, then they participate. However, violence in the home, men using women as voting proxies, and other gender inequalities can block women’s participation.

LR: You’ve shifted my question which positioned “women” as the end-users or recipients of public services to a framing that positions “women”

as allocators of resources, as political decision-makers, and I think this is significant. Ratna Kapur has recently raised concerns about the foregrounding of what she calls the “female victim subject” in campaigns aimed at mobilizing international support to stop violence against women (2002). She notes that placing individual women who have suffered in horrible ways at the center of appeals has proven a very successful means of building the political will to try to address various manifestations of gender-specific violence. But she also says that this approach can undermine an image of women as empowered agents or political actors in the popular imagination. She finds that such campaigns tend to result in legalistic remedies, which, in conservative political contexts, often means protectionist, regressive legislation.

AB: I firmly believe that legislations are only as strong as movements that inspire them. So unless there is a movement of women and men who take ownership of the legislation and stand behind it and hold the legislation accountable after it has been passed, the passage of legislation has limited and sometimes even regressive consequences. I would say that it would be the same for a human rights approach that is narrowly legalistic. First one has to build a sense of participation and engagement with the issues which then crystallizes into legislation. To come at it from a legislative framework and say let’s put the legislation in and then we will monitor it and see if it works — that’s not my definition of transformative change.

LR: This has ramifications for the ways in which we organize our work around social issues, doesn’t it?

AB: The broader issue is the kind of culture we are producing for social justice movements. Within the United States, non-profit organizations, or NGOs as they’re called in some other parts of the world, are the dominant mode of institution building in the activist community. As a counter-example, the World Social Forum is an open space that brings together diverse entities engaged in bringing about transformative change in their communities. And it’s important to note the phrase “diverse entities” because there are NGOs (non-governmental organizations) or non-profits; as well as mass-based people’s movements, faith-based institutions, unions, academics, journalists, writers, cultural activists, and so on. So in

this landscape, the NGOs are just one sector and there is a conscious decision that in order to fight the powers that be we need diverse entities at the table. In the U.S., however, given that the labor movement is a lot less progressive than one would want, there is a lot of pressure on non-profits and NGOs to then create social change. This has important consequences. First of all, you cannot rely on one sector to create a just change. Second of all, one needs to ask whether non-profits or NGOs have the capacity to bring about the desired kind of change at the necessary scale.

So, for example, in India, where we have mass-based people's movements, various types of trade unions, and political parties arising out of movements, there is a fairly vigorous debate about how NGOs fit into this field of activity in a way that is most constructive. In a mass organization or a trade union, you have certain constituencies and bases as well as leaders who are elected by the constituency. This is not to say that corruption and unaccountability do not happen, but at least there are mechanisms to make leaders accountable. The resources of NGOs are really coming externally from foundations. Even though some non-profits are membership organizations, they don't exactly have mass base or accountability mechanisms that some of the older institutions have.

This raises issues about what exactly the role of an NGO should be. You know, some would say, for example, that, with their access to funding and professional staffs, NGOs are really good for doing research and support work for mass movements. However, in the U.S., non-profits often play the role of organizing in a community by building membership and bases. In that case, how is a professional staff organizer accountable to the constituency that she or he is organizing? How can such organizations achieve mass scale? I come from the world of such NGOs myself. Although an important sector, I have doubts about the potential of this sector to create the change that we need on the scale that is necessary in the absence of other adequately visionary sectors such as mass organizations, trade unions, etc.

LR: Well, the fact that there aren't a lot of other institutions means that any non-profit is going to want to address any problem it sees through many different activities—from direct service to advocacy and organizing to research and lobbying—which may mean that it tries to be too many things at one time.

AB: Sure, that can happen. It also happens that non-profits become very single-issue oriented, as we have seen in the rise of domestic violence organizations which have become very single issue and professionalized. So I think the loss of focus as well as the distilling of one issue to the exclusion of others—both dangers are there. I think a culture of professionalization and external funding that does not come from the constituents themselves can lead to an entrepreneurial spirit entering social change work which increases fragmentation rather than diversity. Some of the best NGOs have a deep appreciation of these hazards and work hard to counter them.

LR: Well, isn't it sometimes the case that the behaviors, the ways of being and acting that would be rewarded by the constituency, let's say of a neighborhood action group, can be very different from what external funders want to see in the staff?

AB: The management of the non-profit becomes an enormous issue in terms of being accountable to funders. Managing to respond to a constituency is different from managing to respond to funders. The non-profit field right now is full of consultants and trainers eager to help in these areas, and there is less and less attention, time and resources for building a transformative politics.

LR: You mentioned at the conference that there isn't a lot of intergenerational sharing of world view and experience, and this spoke to me of the ways in which a culture of professionalism may mask other realities. I began to wonder if professionals may themselves be blind to the ways in which the culture they have helped create privileges professionalism, in somewhat the same way that white people are blind to white privilege.

AB: Earlier I said that there is this sense that if you have a particular set of skills and know your heart is in the right place, you simply set up a non-profit and do the work you need to do. But this is very different from more traditional institutions that go back beyond ten, fifteen years—like union and political party organizing—where there is, for better or for worse, a sense of institutional history. One cannot just say, okay so I'm going to start a party or a union. Since it's not unthinkable to start a non-profit, young people coming out of graduate school with good politics get the

impression that all you need is a certain analysis and you can run these organizations. There is no infrastructure for mentoring people entering non-profit activism.

However, we should remember that with often unwelcoming trade unions and few mass movements, NGOs have often provided almost the only space for new social justice activism. Non-profit organizations have had a resonance because they are filling a void: people feel a great need to participate and engage, and right now there are few other paths available for doing so.

All the different forces of change have their problems, but I think that non-profits are new enough that they have not yet really developed a practice of internal reflection. This professionalized world with trainers, consultants, and philanthropists all too often excludes unconventional forms of action and stays with bourgeois ideas of what is legal and right. It's important to make a distinction between entrepreneurial, individual non-profit management decisions and collective movement decisions which say here is our NGO which we will use for certain purposes. So, it's not so much the institution of the NGO itself that's necessarily problematic; it's more the culture surrounding this institution right now. Dedicated, intelligent activists and organizers can and do figure out creative ways to use non-profits as instruments, as only a means. So it's more that we need to be very aware of what it is that we're doing so that we can come at it with the right approach.

I want to distinguish my critique of non-profits or NGOs from that coming recently from the Right wing. The Right wing's criticisms are motivated by its desire to keep social justice discourse out of the political landscape. In fact, its critique only demonstrates that good NGOs can in fact play a useful and effective role.

LR: The footnotes to your essay "Private Spaces and Public Force" (2002) all point back to conversations inside the activist community which you take seriously, learning from and then re-using to actually produce new theory that comes out in your writing.

AB: Yes, it's coming out of my conversations. It's not just that I as an individual am thinking this way. As somebody in the activist community who is writing, I feel very responsible to all the people I work with. I have

collaborated with INCITE and the Committee on Women, Population and the Environment (CWPE). I was part of the first Color of Violence conference where we were saying that we very much believe in ending violence against women but are also frustrated with current framework and strategies. We have tried strategies that have not worked, so you know we're critiquing ourselves.

LR: So you've created a space for reflection and self-criticism with colleagues and friends.

AB: Yes, yes. And I think we need those spaces desperately. There are not enough of them. A lot of people don't speak up. There are all kinds of implications. We get mired in the work we are doing as activists. We don't want to offend our colleagues. We don't want to jeopardize our funding. I mean, there are all kinds of reasons for self-censorship, including sometimes anti-intellectualism. So we need to figure out constructive ways to reflect on the work we do and establish spaces where we can make mistakes, learn from them, and be able to speak about them, and write about them.

LR: I'd like you to be more explicit for a moment about process. You're talking with all these people and together you're developing some new angles, and reaching out to communicate with new groups. To me that's cultural work, because it's both creating new ways of doing and new communities of doers. It goes beyond the transmission of information, because new practices and ways of being in the world are evolving.

AB: I mentioned CWPE earlier. It is a space where some feminists come together and it's really been an important space for individuals who actually work in the women's movement to come together in. I use the word feminist with some specifications, but I think that writing and thinking collectively is important. I find the process to be quite transformative. I have to read in order to write so I learn. It clarifies my thinking. It gives me a sense of the larger context, like "why am I doing this at all?" "Why is it worth it?" (laughs). I discover new ways of looking at my work. You know you have one idea but it's actually part of something bigger and you cannot arrive at it until you start articulating it.

LR: You said feminist with some specifications. Do you want to put those on the table?

AB: The reason I said it is because many of us don't really know what the word means at this point. There are so many ways of defining feminism; you can take it from any perspective, as immigrants, as women of color, or identities like that within the United States or you can take it in the context of global south vs. global north. I mean there are different *feminisms*. The important thing is that I engage with feminism and I consider that a very important part of the work that I do whether I am organizing workers or fighting the prison industrial complex, or corporate power or violence against women. In all of this, my engagement with feminism, be it in a friendly way, be it as critic, whatever, my engagement is an important part of my identity. At a very basic level, I think women are central to any transformative change. That to me is feminism, and so I'm a feminist in that sense.

LR: And you don't see "understanding women as central to any transformative change" as the dominant or most common definition of feminism in our historical or cultural context?

AB: To pick up on your last phrase—"our historical and cultural context"—that is indeed a challenge facing feminism today. It is imperative that as we continually build a women's movement in the world, we also respect the different histories and contexts that shape feminism. Feminism is about understanding inequalities and privilege but we have to turn that analysis onto ourselves as well so that we take into account the differences in privilege among women. Without this understanding, feminism can begin to stand in for the lowest common denominator or the highest common privilege—however you want to look at it.

LR: You've expressed similar reservations about the use of "human rights" as a frame for transformative social change. How might "human rights" become a more useful instrument for that purpose?

AB: Well at the conference, I was surprised by how receptive the audience was to my remarks about political vision and ideology. A lot of people in

human rights came up to me and said that human rights is a framework that encompasses vision and ideology, and could be used to do the work. I appreciate their comments to the extent that obviously they are not restricting themselves to a legalistic framework. But my sense is that the human rights discourse, especially in the U.S., does not address imbalances of power as they exist in the world today, like capitalism and corporate power. And I would like human rights activists to ask harder questions about how this framework can be used to change these imbalances of power.

## *Effective Organizing in Terrible Times: The Strategic Value of Human Rights for Transnational Anti-Racist Feminisms*

BY BARBARA SCHULMAN

These are terrible times, and terrible times require those committed to social change to rethink our approaches—not only to ensure that we remain relevant but also to help sustain hope, both in ourselves and in others.

Recently, I've encountered hope in an unexpected place. After twenty years of activism, writing and teaching under a variety of mantles—primarily feminism and anti-racism, but also anti-militarism, anti-imperialism, and queer liberation—I've become immersed in the world of human rights. My turn to the human rights framework is certainly contextual: it is a response to the current political climate, as well as to the expansion and radicalization of the global human rights movement, both of which I will address below. But more fundamentally, it is a strategic turn, one that engages issues of naming and movement-building. While I passionately subscribe to the multiracial and transnational feminist vision articulated by radical women of color, indigenous and “two-thirds world” women, this is a difficult politic to package accessibly. Moreover, representing oneself as a feminist of any kind can trigger knee-jerk antipathy from a variety of quarters, even before one has a chance to begin the conversation. In the face of the intense and rapid consolidation of repres-

sive forces globally since 9/11, it is obvious that if those seeking to upend the existing social order can't work together across issues and identity groups or make our messages meaningful to broader sectors of the disenfranchised and disenchanted, we simply can't be effective. The question of how we represent our politics is therefore more urgent than ever.

In light of these challenges, one of the most important strategic advantages of the term “human rights” for proponents of social change in the United States is its ubiquity. Barring religious extremists, there are few who do not profess support for human rights—at least in the abstract. Both government officials and their most radical critics are equally comfortable claiming the term, often, of course, to advance disparate agendas. But the overall goodwill that attaches to human rights only runs skin deep, since few are actually acquainted with either its specific principles or formal mechanisms. Despite the best efforts of human rights advocates, the vast majority of U.S. Americans remain unaware that every human being is entitled to a comprehensive and internationally accepted slate of rights, regardless of gender, race, nationality (or lack thereof), citizenship status, political or religious affiliation, or any other identity; that this slate includes the rights to an adequate standard of living, affordable healthcare, a life free from violence and discrimination, a culture, and even adequate time for rest; or that an increasingly elaborate system of legal tools and monitoring bodies has been designed to enable ordinary people to hold our government accountable for respecting, protecting and fulfilling these rights.

This disparity between the general favor directed toward human rights and the lack of concrete knowledge about it actually creates a raft of opportunities for activists working within a variety of liberatory traditions, because the relatively non-threatening language of human rights can function as the opening wedge in conversations with those who may be resistant to more pointed critiques. Re-framing issues through the lens of human rights can help garner support for all manner of progressive agendas. But this is not a politics of mirage, since all manner of progressive agendas legitimately fall within the domain of human rights. The drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or UDHR—the originary statement of principles adopted by the United Nations in 1948 from which all formal human rights instruments flow—sought to identify the conditions necessary for every human being to live a safe, fulfilled, and

dignified life. This aim required a vision and a system flexible enough to address unforeseen abuses, to be extended to newly disenfranchised groups, and to accommodate new rights claims as they might arise. It is this adaptability and comprehensiveness, all wrapped in a broadly palatable package, that makes human rights a radical model in liberal clothing.

I was not always a proponent of human rights. For many years I was extremely resistant to the model, in large part because its ostensibly “universal” standards obscured an analysis of the global imbalance of power. In the context of accelerating inequalities between nations and peoples, human rights has frequently been wielded as an ideological club by wealthy and powerful nations—such as our own—against those they seek to keep in line. Similarly, the language of human rights has provided yet another rhetorical means for globally dominant cultures to demonize cultural and ethnic groups already ravaged by centuries of colonialism, racism, and, now, neoliberalism.

So what accounts for my conversion? I want to identify a few of the factors that pushed me to rethink my resistance to the human rights model, because I believe they help point to some of its advantages, especially for feminists working from anti-racist and transnational perspectives. First, as I alluded to earlier, I was increasingly concerned about the disconnect between various progressive movements at a time when broadening our base of action was critical. Like many before me, I recognized in human rights a vehicle for grass-roots multi-issue organizing across communities of comfort, identity, and interest. Second, in this era of globalization, many of the problems facing individuals in our communities are directly linked to the same international economic, social, and political forces affecting others around the world. Yet we often are mired in domestic myopia, working with limited international consciousness, and in structural isolation from opposition movements elsewhere. Since the human rights framework is transnational not only in concept but in formal structure, engaging the model positions us as part of a global movement, and provides forums, tools, resources, and a common language that facilitate conversations and strategic networking across national and cultural boundaries.

Third, much has transpired over the last decade to dramatically alter the face of the human rights movement, and these factors play a role in enhancing both the appeal and the relevance of human rights in the

current moment. One important shift has been in the area of economic, social, and cultural rights, which are theoretically considered to be indivisible from civil and political rights, but which have remained virtually ignored by both Western governments and large human rights organizations alike. In recent years, activists in the Global South have been especially successful in getting these rights—which pertain to the provision of food, housing, healthcare, and education—onto the movement’s agenda, and more and more organizations are integrating this perspective into their work at both international and domestic levels.

On a related plane, here in the United States—where most people think we already have all the human rights we need—social justice advocates increasingly have been “bringing human rights home” by integrating the model’s rubric and tools into their work. When U.S. activists identify and confront human rights abuses here in the United States, we challenge the imbalance of power within the global human rights movement by disrupting the master script of cultural superiority that legitimates the “rescue” of others ostensibly victimized by their own (presumably inferior) cultures. We also undermine our government’s self-righteous posturing in the international arena by forcing recognition that it, too, is a human rights violator.

Another important shift in the human rights landscape over the past decade has been the emergence of a vibrant and remarkably effective global women’s human rights movement. Using human rights principles and tools, and supported by a series of formal international conferences and forums held under the auspices of the United Nations—including the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing—advocacy networks representing women from every corner of the globe have, in a very short period of time, succeeded in redefining the terrain of human rights to address the specific conditions, experiences, and vulnerabilities of women. Similarly, activists have secured recognition within the human rights framework of the particular abuses directed at members of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered communities, and along with proponents of women’s human rights are developing new standards for a sexual rights agenda.

Yet another area of expansion related to identity-based discrimination is transpiring among racial justice activists, including those from indigenous communities, both in the U.S. and internationally. Renewed focus on race

and human rights—a prominent feature in the development of the human rights system, birthed, as it was, amidst a landscape of anti-colonialist and national independence movements—led to coordination of the 2001 World Conference Against Racism (WCAR). For many U.S. civil rights activists who participated, the experience of addressing racism from a transnational perspective and an international base generated new interest in the possibilities of the human rights model.

To illustrate how some of the advantages of human rights can be put to work on the ground, I turn now to a local campaign that I'm currently involved in: the New York City Human Rights Initiative. Amnesty International USA's Women's Human Rights Program, where I am working as a consultant on this project, is one of five organizations currently coordinating a campaign to pass a NYC law that will locally implement two important international human rights treaties—the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, or CEDAW, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, also known as CERD. The four other coordinating organizations are the Urban Justice Center Human Rights Project, the Women of Color Policy Network at NYU's Wagner School, NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, and the American Civil Liberties Union Women's Rights Project.

The vision of human rights articulated in the UDHR is formally brought into law through a series of international treaties that governments can choose to ratify, but the United States has an abysmal record when it comes to treaty adoption. While our government has ratified the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Convention Against Torture (CAT), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), it has done little to implement many of these treaties' standards. And, thus far, the U.S. has failed to ratify CEDAW, the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and a number of other important international agreements.

One of the most transformative aspects of international human rights treaties is that they obligate governments to *pro-actively* identify discrimination, and to implement remedies that fulfill the promise of human rights and prevent future violations. This aspect of treaty adoption is what makes it so appealing as a local, grass-roots informed, bottom-up human rights strategy. The precedent for the New York City campaign was a successful San Francisco mobilization of women's human rights advocates and local

feminist activists led by the Women’s Institute for Leadership Development (WILD) for Human Rights.<sup>3</sup> This coalition secured passage of a city ordinance in 1998 that endorsed the principles of CEDAW and created a framework for integrating them into municipal governance. A task force comprised of community representatives and public officials has since been overseeing gender analyses of the employment practices, budget allocations, and service provision of various city departments. Each of the six departments that has completed a review thus far has come up with an action plan, and has begun implementing concrete changes that redress inequities.

Inspired by the San Francisco success, the New York City Human Rights Initiative was launched in 2002. While the San Francisco law focused exclusively on CEDAW, the New York campaign will break new ground by integrating the principles of the “women’s convention” and the convention on racial discrimination. Combining these two treaties addresses the problems facing a broader cross-section of New Yorkers and counters discrimination against one of the most marginalized populations in the city: women of color. One of the most exciting aspects of this campaign—and there are many—is that integrating the principles of two international anti-discrimination treaties may enable us to encode intersectionality into law, a strategy that has proven rather elusive within existing U.S. jurisprudence. The New York City Human Rights Initiative is working with members of the New York City Council to introduce the legislation sometime in the next year. The Initiative is also conducting workshops and presentations to educate local grass-roots and advocacy organizations about the campaign and about the value of bringing human rights frameworks and tools to their work, as well as soliciting input from these groups as to what they would like this legislation to achieve.

Local treaty implementation is an innovative strategy that enables activists to bypass federal resistance to international human rights standards and instead focus on putting these standards to work right where we live. Mobilizing communities to hold their *local* governments accountable to international human rights law, especially in the current political climate, offers an important new avenue for improving the lives of women and their families. But this local strategy also points to the broader advantages of the human rights model for feminists seeking to advance complex agendas in terrible times. In addition to the generally benevolent

feelings it inspires, human rights offers a comprehensive range of rights covering every area of life and addressing multiple forms of discrimination, and thus a natural platform for broad-based multi-issue organizing; obligations to which governments can be held accountable and pro-active mechanisms to make accountability meaningful; opportunities for public participation at local, national, and international levels; and both a connection to global women's movements and a structure for participating in them. Finally, like transnational anti-racist feminism, it offers the vision of a world in which every one of us is fed, housed, clothed, educated, and secure from discrimination, dislocation or abuse.

## *Legislative Tactics in a Movement Strategy: The Economic Human Rights- Pennsylvania Campaign*

BY MARY BRICKER-JENKINS

The Kensington Welfare Rights Union (KWRU) is a membership organization of poor and homeless families and others, like myself, who are not currently living in poverty but know that it can and must be ended.

Founded in Philadelphia in 1991 by five “welfare moms,” KWRU works from local to global levels to build a movement to end poverty based in the unity and leadership of the poor—that is, we are consciously multiracial, focus heavily on leadership development, and our program is rooted in the analysis and vision of the organized poor. The members of our policy-making body, the War Council (because there is a war on the poor in this country), are drawn primarily from the ranks of the poor. We have no paid staff; our core leaders get housing and a stipend when we have funds, which is not all the time.

KWRU is the lead organization in the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC) which is a national and indeed international network of grassroots organizations that have come together with a particular mission—to end poverty in the United States and, in fact, in the world. We are about building a mass movement to end poverty—not

“reducing” or “ameliorating,” and certainly not “managing” poverty. As a KWRU leader often points out, “Reducing poverty sounds great until you ask a poor mother which of her children she’s going to leave in poverty. Only ending poverty is acceptable.” So, in concert with many other organizations, we are building a mass movement to end poverty and using an economic human rights framework to do so.

One of our many projects is the Economic Human Rights Pennsylvania Campaign (EHR-PA), which contributes to building that mass movement and is eminently replicable. At KWRU, the Education Committee is at the core of KWRU action because education is key to any successful social movement and everyone in our organization is expected to study. I chair the Social Work Strategy Subcommittee of the Education Committee. This sub-committee coordinates the EHR-PA, which is a joint project of KWRU/PPEHRC and the Pennsylvania Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers as well as visionary state representative, Larry Curry, a Democratic legislator from a heavily Republican district just north of Philadelphia. As we shall see, the EHR-PA campaign is a child of analysis and opportunity.

First, the analysis: in order to build this EHR-PA mass movement, we need at least three things. We need a new consciousness. We need new relationships. And we need new grassroots organizations with leaders that can pull together this kind of movement. One instrument we use to achieve these objectives is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, particularly articles 23, 25 and 26 which include the rights to food, clothing, housing, health, education and work at livable wages. I will return below to how we are using this instrument.

Another point of analysis: the EHR-PA campaign uses legislative tactics to accomplish strategic objectives, but I want to make clear that we are not seeking legislative solutions to poverty. At this point in history, the primary work of legislative bodies is not to meet the needs of people but to produce weapons of mass destruction called policies and the budgets to deliver them. These policies are placing increasing numbers of people on the edge of poverty—just one plant closure, uninsured illness, or divorce away—or working two and three jobs to keep up. These folks must be included in a mass movement because their financial security and human rights are circling the economic drain. The concept of rights has historically moved the people of the United States, and the legislative process still has

credibility with most of them. So while we are not seeking a legislative solution to poverty, we are using legislative tactics to organize a mass movement at the base of U.S. society where legislative hearings can reveal the nature of people's vulnerability and the language of economic human rights can contribute to a new consciousness.

Now for the opportunity: In August 1996, we were under pressure from many quarters to dismantle our homeless families' tent city in North Philly. Having no options for housing its residents, we decided to march to Harrisburg, the state capitol, to appeal to the legislature for protection and homes for the homeless. On the day we broke camp and started walking the hundred miles to Harrisburg, Cheri Honkala, our director, spotted a tall, grey-haired, rather distinguished looking man walking along with us and instructed me to go find out who he was.

So I went over and introduced myself and asked if I knew him from somewhere. He passed me a business card identifying him as Lawrence Curry, a state legislator. Knowing there wasn't a single vote from his heavily Republican district on this line of march, I asked diplomatically why he had come. He explained that he was also a student and teacher of history. He understood movements.

On that day, he became "twenty-mile Curry" because he walked that important first twenty miles with us. Over the next few years we stayed in touch with him but didn't have a particular project until I was called upon to chair the Social Policy Committee of the state chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW-PA). In that role I called Rep. Curry and asked, "Larry, what have you got coming up in this legislature that we can support?"

And he said, "Absolutely nothing."

I said, "What are you waiting for, Larry? We're bleeding out here!"

And he said, "I'm waiting for action in the streets."

I took that back to our meetings at KWRU and then approached Rep. Curry and said, "Larry, let's make a deal. What if I placed a couple of social work students in your office as legislative assistants and in return you sponsor for us an economic human rights resolution that will call upon the integration of the principles of economic human rights into the laws and policies of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania?"

He asked, "Has this been done before?"

And, only because I was misinformed, I said, "Yes. It's been done in

Massachusetts.” I knew that social work Professor Joe Wronka at Springfield College was instrumental in introducing into the Massachusetts legislature an economic human rights resolution. I did not know then that it had never gotten out of committee. But my misinformation convinced Rep. Larry Curry that it would be safe to move forward. Yes, I had to “fess up” later.

In spring 2002 the “Curry Resolution,” HR 473, was introduced to the Pennsylvania legislature calling for the establishment of a special house committee to study the feasibility of integrating economic human rights principles into the laws and policies of the commonwealth. We actually didn’t want the resolution to pass because then the study would go into the hands of the Republican controlled legislature. We simply wanted the opportunity to travel around the state with Rep. Curry having hearings on the resolution.

In preparation for these hearings, NASW-PA divisions and social work educators organized training sessions on economic human rights and the movement which were conducted by KWRU members (including social workers). People learned the core concepts of economic human rights: how to document rights violations, and how to organize hearings in key areas, especially rural areas and small cities. The hearings then brought together social workers, other professionals and advocates, and the people with whom they were working as “clients” to bear witness to economic human rights violations, both personal and political, individual and institutional. We were able to capture the attention of the media in these small communities by personifying and punctuating esoteric analysis of socioeconomic forces and data trends with stories of local people’s lives.

And then, lo and behold, the bloody resolution passed—200 to nothing!

At that point, we mobilized across the state for more hearings before the special committee appointed under the aegis of the Republicans. The appointed legislators were surprised to discover that they could actually fix some of the causes of violations they heard described in the hearings. So they voted unanimously to call for a new resolution—HR 144—mandating that the study continue another two years. HR 144 passed easily this spring, so we are busily organizing more trainings and hearings around the state.

Now, having told you that story, I want to reemphasize that our goal is not to have hearings to reduce poverty. Our goal is to build a movement to end poverty. The EHR-PA campaign has four strategic objectives that derive

from the need for a new consciousness, new relationships, and new organizations. First is to use the UDHR to redefine poverty as a violation of economic human rights—to introduce new language, new concepts, to provide a new intellectual scaffolding for the construction of new ideas about poverty, rights, and ultimately the role of the government.

A second strategic objective is to build the leadership and unity of the poor across color lines. In the United States, this is a seditious notion. Martin Luther King got killed when he tried to do this because it threatens to erode the foundation of institutions and mechanisms used in this country to maintain the status quo. But he knew and we know that it must be done.

A third objective is to facilitate new relationships among poor people. This is very difficult to do because poor people have absorbed the myths and legends about poverty and therefore they often don't like or trust each other very much. However, new relationships among poor people facilitate the emergence of new leaders among them. Social workers can have a special place in the movement because we often have contact with many more people living in poverty than individual poor people themselves have. However, the relationship between social worker and "client" must change from one of "service" to one of solidarity. The structure of the EHR-PA project promotes that change.

A fourth objective is to develop new organizations "at the base"—local economic human rights committees consisting of people directly affected by economic human rights violations as well as advocates and other allies indirectly affected. The people we seek to mobilize are found particularly in small and medium-size cities where economic dislocations are engulfing people who consider themselves middle class. Geopolitically and strategically, these people are our organizing edge.

These four strategic objectives shape and inform the activities of the EHR-PA campaign. We promote economic human rights resolutions in the legislature. We host community-based hearings and testify at those organized by legislators. We train social workers and advocates to understand and apply the economic human rights framework. We promote documentation campaigns. We are particularly interested in having social workers sit at computers with "clients" accessing [www.kwru.org](http://www.kwru.org) and filling out the economic human rights violation forms together on the Web. And we provide consultations with emerging leaders who wish to commit themselves to developing local economic human rights committees.

We believe we are living at a moment in history when it is crucial to remember Marge Piercy's assertion that "we make history or history makes us" (1976, 74). In this moment we have the technology and abundance to ensure that all human beings on this earth have basic needs met and all human rights promoted and preserved forever. The other road from this historic juncture leads to increased poverty and political repression. At this juncture, it is clear that poverty is not a by-product of production, but the raw material of production in our economic system, and it can and must be ended.

## Redefining the Terms: Putting South African Women on Democracy's Agenda

BY LESLIE HILL

*"Freedom cannot be achieved unless the women have been emancipated from all forms of oppression . . . and . . . they have been empowered to intervene in all aspects of life as equals with any other member of society."*

—President Nelson Mandela, May 24, 1994

Despite the emergence of democracy movements in all corners of Africa, only a small number of African states are governed now by democratic regimes. At least since the colonial period, African women have mobilized to challenge patriarchal states and societies on behalf of their concerns, yet their efforts have yielded scant fruit (Van Allen 1976). In a few countries, however—Namibia, Uganda, and South Africa—women recently have inserted themselves onto their states' political agendas and established a formidable political presence unprecedented on the continent post-colonially. In the revolt preceding the transition to South Africa's democratic regime, women forged novel analyses of the violence, marginalization, and exploitation fused to their status as "superfluous appendages to male units of labor." Black women activists challenged patriarchal privilege as a system interlocking with systems of white-supremacist and capitalist class power. They articulated an understanding of women as altogether human (contrary to the state's view of them) with co-responsibility in society and asserted a re-vision of the social order, one in which

justice entailed an “equitable distribution of social necessities” (Kaplan 1997, 8).

The strategies South African women have used to advance gender democracy during political transition include politicizing gender, constructing and advocating women’s interests in the context of mobilization against the apartheid state, and tendering a notion of gender justice that wove claims for social and economic rights with the political and civil entitlements of citizens. As women asserted demands for resources to meet the obligations of womanhood as wives and mothers, as they claimed space within liberation movements to articulate their own experiences of oppression, as they contended with their female counterparts in rival organizations to identify common concerns, and as they affirmed the legitimacy of their political leadership within their own organizations and in “normal politics” of the democratic regime, “The work of women in the battle for liberation, . . . laid the basis for intensified battle over and education about, gender oppression that is being waged by new South African feminists today” (Kemp et al. 1995, 143). Thus in a key transitional moment in South Africa’s political history, women refined and expanded the terms of their inclusion in the new democratic order.

As I survey here some of the contours of South Africans’ struggles for gender equity and gender justice, I foreground black—meaning African, Indian, and “coloured”—women’s activism because their struggles provided the major catalyst for mobilizing broad, multiracial coalitions of women to press for democratization of gender relations. Always aware of the complications of terms and contexts, I assume that “women’s interests” are heterogeneous since differences in class, culture, geography, and sexuality situate women variously in structures that facilitate differential access to power and resources. Understanding how activists have begun to transform systems of privilege and oppression in various political settings offers an opportunity as well for using “both ends of the telescope” to sharpen strategies for resisting hierarchical power in other localities and to become more critically aware of our own normative outlooks, conceptual and analytic frameworks, and political landscapes.

## Women’s Resistance

Women’s resistance to South Africa’s white settler state dates back to the late nineteenth century, but became most visible and organized in 1940s

and 1950s mass boycotts, and again in the mass democratic movement of the 1980s. The latest social uprising, which precipitated the fall of apartheid, was sustained for several years by women's mobilization in rural areas and townships, in military units and civic organizations, in spontaneous boycotts and carefully forged alliances among the regime's opponents (Bernstein 1985, Walker 1990, Cock 1993). From the 1970s women active in small local grassroots associations began "claiming certain prerogatives" —social and economic rights—on the basis of their standing as human beings. These struggles "helped to establish new criteria for justice, standards that combined democracy with social need" and in the process overcame women's "diffidence about their abilities to make political decisions, intervene in governing processes, and even assume leadership in movements for political change"(Kaplan 1997,156).

When the state increased repression of resurgent liberation forces in the 1980s, more women joined the resistance helping to make the townships and bantustans (state-segregated residential areas) "ungovernable." They protested state exploitation of their labor and control of their movements that they felt circumscribed their ability to carry out their gendered roles. Women demanded access to community resources, too, challenging "traditional and cultural sanctions that [restricted] their full participation in decisions affecting their lives" (Kemp et al. 1995, 144–45). Activists formed their own organizations as never before to service their own needs, which as one writer notes, "could not be addressed in broader organizations": child care, literacy and media skills, amenities for squatter camps, and assistance to victims of rape and sexual violence (Cock 68). Activist and writer Asha Moodley understands that these contributions to struggle ". . . created a space to put women's issues on the agenda and press very strongly for [them]. . . . [H]aving taken on co-responsibility for waging the political struggle, . . . there was no way women would continue their silence . . . their suspension of the gender struggle" (1994). South African women found political voice and power in their community spaces and traditional gender roles.

Simultaneously, in global forums, exiled anti-apartheid activists drew lessons from consultations with African women survivors of other national liberation struggles and in debates in international meetings with feminists who challenged the absence of women's rights on the national liberation platform. Conversations with African feminists who had fought in Angola's and Zimbabwe's wars of liberation only to be marginalized in

state reconstruction convinced ANC women activists and some men (including, most importantly, ANC President Oliver Tambo) that a struggle for women's equality had to be incorporated into South Africa's reconstruction. Frene Ginwala, Speaker of Parliament and long-term ANC leader in exile, noted that "We have this unique opportunity in South Africa where we come from a knowledge of systemic oppression. . . . Therefore, it is not difficult for us to make the jump to understand the oppression of women" (1994). Clearly, South African women activists developed analytical frames to address women's issues in the freedom struggle.

## Gender Politics in the Transition

Just prior to negotiations over the transition to a democratic regime, women activists (principally in the ANC), armed with new and radicalized analyses of gender relations, recognized the urgency of cultivating a dialogue within civil society and the state about issues of gender equity. As a practical matter they sought to ensure women's representation and participation in the new political community. Heeding Frene Ginwala's admonition that "unless we empower women organizationally, we can't liberate ourselves," a broad range of more than eighty organizations launched the Women's National Coalition (WNC) in 1992. The Coalition generated the political space and resources for women to participate in negotiations, monitor and caucus around gender implications of political issues in the transition, and later lobby successfully for cabinet-level status in the interim governing authority. Most importantly, it "helped bring gender directly into the mainstream of political discourse at a critical political moment"—at the point of negotiations for a new political order (INSTRAW 2000, 167).

The WNC furnished a platform for constructing and advocating women's interests and making the post-apartheid constitution, then under reconstruction, "gender sensitive." In a painstaking process organizers gathered women from all major political parties and from regional, community, civic, professional, and religious organizations to deliberate gender-democratic terms of women's inclusion in the constitution. Participants in local, regional, and national meetings generated a consensus document identifying women's demands for a range of political, legal, social, and economic rights together with government initiatives to give

them substance. The Women's Charter for Effective Equality recognized the intersecting impact of racial, gender, and economic oppressions on South African women and called for the incorporation of gender equity and anti-discrimination practices into the redesigned governance structure (Kadalie 1995; INSTRAW 2000). Thus, women from all regions and walks of life articulated in the Women's Charter a reformulated understanding of their subjectivity as fully human and equal citizens and outlined terms for a new gender regime and principles to guide South Africa toward gender justice.

As a result of WNC's work, South Africa's Bill of Rights and constitution ensure women's rights, prohibit sex discrimination, and promote women's equality. These documents establish gender (along with racial and sexual) equality as a fundamental value of the post-apartheid society. They offer a vision of, legitimate the goal of, and provoke debate on a national consensus for improving women's status. Formal provisions for political and legal equality in the constitution make the state accountable for dismantling gender discrimination. Further, they provide the "enabling framework" through which to install "gender machinery" (specific government structures and processes) to promote and monitor progress toward gender equity (INSTRAW 2000, 175). At every level of the state, "government structures [are] formally charged with furthering women's status and rights" (Okeke-Ihejirika and Francheschet 2002, 439). Moreover, the ANC-led government, prompted by the leadership of feminist public officials, signed a number of international agreements aimed at securing women's human rights and gender equity. The post-apartheid regime, thus, is committed internationally as well as domestically to substantiate the principles underlying gender justice.

Despite these multiple obligations, women "still have to engage in political and legal struggles to give meaning to the constitution in ways that will further their interests and rights" (Albertyn quoted in Kemp et al. 1995, 157). Women's striking presence in the state enables advocates to continue shaping the terms of women's inclusion as equal citizens and decision-makers. Comprising 29.8 percent of national legislators after the 1999 elections, proportions among the highest in national governments worldwide, women Members of Parliament command political space from which to articulate women's needs and ensure that women's issues reach government agendas. Moreover, ongoing efforts to establish gender as an

essential framework for policy development seek to incorporate women into policy at its conception.

Tragically, despite this momentum, the “enormous political space” for research and policy development under the government’s initial framework for transforming apartheid’s social and economic inequities, the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP), has been dramatically reduced due to neo-liberal restructuring processes imposed by the global economy. Feminist legislators and their allies face a “new climate of constraint” as the changing global political economy has altered the state’s economic paradigm to one which reprioritizes economic growth at the expense of urgent redistributive needs (INSTRAW 2000, 171, 174).

## Lessons

Women activists had developed a multi-pronged strategy that put South African women on the agenda of democratic change. First, they mobilized a women’s movement to apply pressure from below. A second prong targeted the state as both a site for women’s representation and leadership and an instrument of change in gender relations. The visible articulation of women’s needs and interests, cited as crucial to gender regime change in other transitional contexts (Alvarez 1990, Okeke-Ihejirika and Franceschet 2002), enabled activists and lawmakers to launch a third strategic prong: dialogue aimed at generating a broad-based, national commitment to gender equity. Now, gender justice advocates call for remobilization of women.

South African women had redefined themselves as political subjects and their concerns as central to the substance of democratic society. Using transitional discourses, feminists facilitated the insertion of women’s interests onto the public agenda. South African women’s explicit rejection of atomistic individualism in Western notions of rights was, perhaps, more instructive. The efforts of female comrades to alleviate the harms levied by apartheid on the collective well-being of their communities and their demands for equitable distribution of social necessities empowered their families as well as themselves as women. Women took account of their connections to family, kin, racial group, ethnic collective, and political movement as they honed their analyses of gender and other power relations.

The transitional nature of the political context in South Africa during

this period was crucial to perceptions of the appropriateness of women's claims. The national liberation and mass democratic movements had called into question the legitimacy of South Africa's racial "democracy" and globally circulating feminist discourses asserted conceptions of women as fully human and rightfully self-determining political subjects. These liberatory discourses corresponded to and sometimes employed a human rights framework, benefiting from its legitimacy. As old ideological structures of exclusivity and hierarchy were destabilized, politics and democracy were being reconceptualized. In this context, South African women redefined themselves as political subjects and their concerns as central to the substance of a democratic society.

As we have seen, South African women activists have bridged the distance between their historic support for the liberation struggle on one hand and advocacy for their own issues on the other with their emerging analyses of inter-structured systems of race, class, and gender oppression. They understood gendered claims as challenges to power, and thus political, and asserted women's demands in terms of principles of equity and justice. Rather than accept the masculinist and individualist terms of citizenship offered by instrumental approaches to democracy, South African feminists argued that women (indeed all citizens) should be viewed as both autonomous *and* connected agents, vested with rights as well as co-responsibility for enhancing the well-being of their communities. In this way, South African activists interpreted calls for women's rights and empowerment not merely as entitlements for individuals but as instruments for communities to improve their status and quality of life.

Gender justice advocates, offering revised criteria for equity by combining democracy with social need, insist that the survival and well-being of women is requisite to a proper, functioning democracy. Linking practical with conceptual issues, material conditions with political status, they suggest that gender equity can be woven into the principles and practices of democracy. The lesson, perhaps, for those of us resisting oppression in other contexts is to de-center our battle with exclusionary concepts and instead link our critical energies to the important work of redefining key community concerns—national security, a healthy economy, and adequate health care—in terms that make clear their construction by a patriarchal order and their impact on gender relations.

# *Beyond the Politics of Inclusion: Violence Against Women of Color and Human Rights*

BY ANDREA SMITH

What was disturbing to so many U.S. citizens about the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center is that these attacks disrupted their sense of safety at “home.” Terrorism is something that happens in other countries; our “home,” the U.S.A., is supposed to be a place of safety. Similarly, mainstream U.S. society believes that violence against women only occurs “out there” and is perpetrated by a few crazed men whom we simply need to lock up. However, the anti-violence movement has always contested this notion of safety at home. The notion that violence only happens “out there,” inflicted by the stranger in the dark alley makes it difficult to recognize that the home is in fact the place of greatest danger for women. In response to this important piece of analysis, the anti-violence movement has, ironically, based its strategies on the premise that the criminal legal system is the primary tool with which to address violence against women. However, when one-half of women will be battered in their lifetimes and nearly one-half of women will be sexually assaulted in their lifetimes, it is clear that we live in a rape culture that prisons, themselves a site of violence and control, cannot change.

Similarly, the notion that terrorism happens in other countries makes it difficult to grasp that the United States is built on a history of genocide, slavery, and racism. Our “home” has never been a safe place for people of color. Because many mainstream feminist organizations are white-dominated, they often do not see themselves as potential victims in Bush’s war in the U.S. and abroad. However, those considered “alien” in the United States and hence deserving of repressive policies and overt attack are not only people of color. Since 9/11, many organizations in LGBT communities have reported sharp increases in attacks, demonstrating the extent to which gays and lesbians are often seen as “alien” because their sexuality seems to threaten the white nuclear family thought to be the building block of U.S. society.

Furthermore, many mainstream feminist organizations, particularly

anti-violence organizations, have applauded the U.S. attacks on Afghanistan for “liberating” Arab women from the repressive policies of the Taliban. Apparently, bombing women in Afghanistan somehow elevates their status. However, the Revolutionary Association of the Women from Afghanistan (RAWA), the organization comprised of members most affected by the policies of the Taliban, has condemned U.S. intervention and has argued that women cannot expect an improvement in their status under the regime of the Northern Alliance with which the United States has allied itself. This support rests entirely on the problematic assumption that state violence can secure safety and liberation for women and other oppressed groups. Clearly, alternative approaches to provide true safety and security for women must be developed, both at “home” and abroad.

### Beyond Inclusion: Centering Women of Color in the Anti-Violence Movement

The central problem is that as the anti-violence movement has attempted to become more “inclusive” these attempts at multicultural interventions have unwittingly strengthened the white supremacy within the anti-violence movement. That is, inclusivity has come to mean taking on a domestic violence model that was developed largely with the interests of white, middle class women in mind, and simply adding to it a multicultural component. However, if we look at the histories of women of color in the United States, as I have done in other work, it is clear that gender violence functions as a tool for racism and colonialism for women of color in general (Smith 2002). The racial element of gender violence points to the necessity of an alternative approach that goes beyond mere inclusion to actually centering women of color in the organizing and analysis. That is, if we do not make any assumptions about what a domestic violence program should look like but, instead, ask what would it take to end violence against women of color, then what would this movement look like?

In fact, Beth Richie suggests we go beyond just centering women of color, to centering those most marginalized within the category of “women of color.” She writes:

We have to understand that the goal of our anti-violence work is not for diversity, and not inclusion. It is for liberation. If we’re truly committed

to ending violence against women, then we must start in the hardest places, the places like jails and prisons and other correctional facilities. The places where our work has not had an impact yet. . . . we have to stop being the friendly colored girls as some of our anti-violence programs require us to be. We must not deny the part of ourselves and the part of our work that is least acceptable to the mainstream public. We must not let those who really object to all of us and our work co-opt some of us and the work we're trying to do. As if this anti-violence movement could ever really be legitimate in a patriarchal, racist society. . . . Ultimately the movement needs to be accountable not to those in power, but to the powerless. (Richie 2000)

When we center women of color in the analysis, it becomes clear that we must develop approaches that address interpersonal and state violence simultaneously. In addition, we find that by centering women of color in the analysis, we may actually build a movement that more effectively ends violence not just for women of color, but for all peoples.

## Human Rights Framework for Addressing Violence

Developing strategies to address state violence, then, suggests the importance of developing a human rights approach toward ending violence. By human rights I mean those rights seen under international law to be inalienable and not dependent on any particular government structure. When we limit our struggles around changes in domestic legislation within the United States, we forget that the United States government itself perpetrates more violence against women than any other actor in the world. While we may use a variety of rhetorical and organizing tools, our overall strategy should not be premised on the notion that the United States should or will always continue to exist—to do so is to fundamentally sanction the continuing genocide of indigenous peoples on which this government is based.

One organization that avoids this problem is the American Indian Boarding School Healing Project, which organizes against gender violence from a human rights perspective. During the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, American Indian children were abducted from their homes to attend Christian boarding schools as a matter of state policy that again demonstrates the links between sexual violence and state violence.

This system was later imported to Canada in the form of the residential school system. Because the worst of the abuses happened to an older generation, there is simply not sufficient documentation or vocal outcry against boarding school abuses.

Responding to this need, the International Human Rights Association of American Minorities issued a report documenting the involvement of mainline churches and the federal government in the murder of over 50,000 Native children through the Canadian residential school system (Annett 2001). The list of offenses committed by church officials includes murder by beating, poisoning, hanging, starvation, strangulation, and medical experimentation. In addition, the report found that church, police, business, and government officials maintained pedophile rings using children from residential schools. Several schools are also charged with concealing on their grounds the unmarked graves of children who were murdered, particularly children killed after being born as a result of rapes of Native girls by priests and other church officials. While some churches in Canada have taken some minimal steps towards addressing their involvement in this genocidal policy, churches in the United States have not.

As a result of boarding school policies, an epidemic of child sexual abuse now exists in Native communities. The shame attached to abuse has allowed no space in which to address this problem. Consequently, child abuse passes from one generation to the next. The American Indian Boarding School Healing Project provides an entry way to addressing this history of child sexual abuse by framing it not primarily as an example of individual and community dysfunction, but instead as the continuing effect of human rights abuses perpetrated by state policy. This project seeks to take the shame away from talking about abuse and provide the space for communities to address the problem and heal.

A human rights approach can even be of assistance to traditional service providers for survivors of violence. The human rights approach provides an organizing strategy to protest John Ashcroft's dramatic cuts in funding for anti-violence programs, particularly indigenous programs. Adequate funding for indigenous-controlled programs and services is not a privilege for States to curtail in times of economic crises. Rather, as international human rights law dictates, states are mandated to address the continuing effects of human rights violations. Hence, the United States violates international human rights law when it de-funds anti-violence programs.

For indigenous women and women of color in general, sexual and domestic violence are clearly the continuing effects of human rights violations perpetrated by U.S. state policy.

## Conclusion

For too long, women of color have been forced to choose between racial justice and gender justice. Yet, it is precisely through sexism and gender violence that colonialism and white supremacy have been successful. This failure to see the intersectionality of racism and sexism in racial justice movements was evident at the UN World Conference Against Racism, where the types of racism that women of color face in reproductive rights policies, for example, failed to even register on the UN radar screen. Women of color are often suspicious of human rights strategies because white-dominated human rights organizations often pursue the imperialist agenda of organizing around the human rights violations of women in other countries while ignoring the human rights violations of women of color in the United States. Nonetheless, an anti-colonial human rights strategy can be helpful in highlighting the violence perpetrated by U.S. state policy and combating U.S. exceptionalism on the global scale—as well as right here at home.

## *Reflections of a Human Rights Educator*

BY DAZÓN DIXON DIALLO

In my early days as an activist, I spent a lot of my time examining the problems in the world, and dreaming of ways to eradicate the pain and suffering of life on Earth. So many forces work against the elimination of oppression, and so few choices exist for those of us who want a safer, saner, and more peaceful planet. Thus, I chose to be a fighter, although my weapons were (and are) education, organizing, and mobilizing. But still, I had to fight. The fight was against the marginalization of women of color in the feminist health movement. The fight was against a new disease with deadly consequences, and a strange penchant for already reviled and disrespected “minorities.” The fight was, and still is, against the fear and

hatred of difference and change. I had to fight against something, because I believed it was the only way to contribute to the social change that we all so desperately need.

As a woman of African descent born in the southern United States, I am among the masses of people who experience some form of oppression on a daily basis. I am from and in the grassroots, where change is essential for moving beyond survival to thriving. Whether the issue is HIV, sexual violence, gender discrimination, poverty, or lack of access, my own experience is inextricably intertwined with the struggle of millions of other souls throughout the world. Some of my struggle has resulted in the creation and development of an HIV/AIDS program for African-American women called SisterLove Women's AIDS Project.

When we formed SisterLove in 1989, we were on the cutting edge of the HIV/AIDS tide that was sweeping through the lives and families of women in our communities. We thought, then, that if we provided enough education, intervention, and support services to women at greatest risk for HIV, and for those living with HIV or AIDS, maybe the disease wouldn't hit our communities as hard as it was hitting gay men all over the United States. By 1992, when we became incorporated, we had heard lots of women's stories of pain, fear, rejection, and immobilization. And it became clear that HIV needed to be articulated and addressed in the context of women's lives.

We had been dealing with women's lives in the context of HIV, and it was a flawed strategy. Holistically speaking, we were indirectly responding to a myriad of issues—substance abuse, violence, poverty, misogyny, internalized oppression, family neglect/abandonment . . . the list could go on and on—that were layered inside the iceberg, of which HIV was only the tip. We knew that HIV was the connecting point for a lot of these experiences, but getting folks, especially the mainstream feminist groups and the growing numbers of AIDS activists, to see the direct connection was difficult and as labor intensive as helping folks understand HIV and its risks. We didn't have the tools or the language to pull these issues together.

In 1996, Loretta J. Ross founded the National Center for Human Rights Education (NCHRE), the first human rights education organization in the United States that focuses primarily on domestic human rights violations including civil, political, economic, social, cultural, developmental, environmental, and sexual rights. NCHRE's mission is to build a human

rights movement in the United States by training community leaders and student activists to apply human rights standards to issues of injustice. Ms. Ross introduced these concepts to SisterLove staff and volunteers, and we found the framework within which the HIV/AIDS work we were already doing could be buoyed, strengthened, and articulated in a manner through which the humanity of those living with HIV/AIDS and those at risk could be defended, protected, respected, and valued.

SisterLove's introduction to human rights education was a revelation of sorts. What a simple notion: that if all of us working on social justice issues could define those issues and combat human suffering through a common framework, then we may just effect the change that is needed. As we began to use the human rights education approach, it became even clearer that a perverse reality prevails in the simplicity of this notion and the complexity of its meaning.

I recently illustrated this "simplicity in complexity" when I gave a presentation titled "HIV/AIDS, Gender, and Human Rights: Women and Girls at the Apex and the Intersection." I used a visual that looked more like a simple infant's crib mobile than a complex diagram. Yet, the simplicity of the child's mobile perfectly conveyed the complexity of the categories of issues and populations most affected by those issues. HIV is the apex of the experience, and the axis upon which the issues turn in people's lives. The issues are the hanging baubles that keep spinning in motion, while those who experience the pain from these issues are lying or sitting in the center looking up at all this action, just out of their reach.

Working at the intersection of HIV/AIDS, gender, and human rights is a challenging exercise in working on complex issues for the sake of simplifying the work of social change. When I consider the litany of issues that impede the health and development of women at risk and women living with HIV or AIDS, I often feel overwhelmed by the interconnectedness of the layers of possible responses and necessary actions that must take place. Simultaneously, I feel empowered by the simple notion that many of these issues could be eliminated, prevented, or abolished if human dignity was valued. This is not yet the situation in the United States.

While SisterLove formed initially to answer the needs of people with information about the impact and risks of HIV/AIDS, we quickly moved to include women's reproductive and sexual health and rights on our agenda. As we began to articulate HIV/AIDS issues in the context of the human

rights framework, we were faced with the reality that human rights education was actually a more critical need than building an advocacy movement around HIV/AIDS in communities of color, because at that time more than 92 percent of the U.S. population had never heard of the UN Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

Today's fight against HIV/AIDS requires not only continued medical research, education for prevention, and compassion for all individuals without imposing gender-based boundaries on who they love. The fight also requires us to examine our attitudes and beliefs about poverty and classism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and human rights. In addition to "finding a cure," our aptitude for halting the spread of HIV/AIDS rests upon our ability to convince those who have generally been unseen and unheard to fight for everyone's right to health information, ethical treatment, and responsive health care. Yet, it is impossible to expect people to fight for rights they do not know they have.

With so few human rights treaties ratified by the United States, and with nearly no existing legal recourse for retribution or compensation for victims of human rights violations, it is strategically important to focus on the moral imperative of creating a human rights culture in the United States. In a woman-only context, women coming into SisterLove are taught how to think about their rights. SisterLove focuses on learning and sharing black and African feminist theory because the "inclusion" of voices of color and their networks in the white-dominated mainstream human rights movements ignores the potential of the community of color to mobilize its own population and develop its own organization models. SisterLove recognizes the need to look outside the U.S. model of women's sexuality, which is based on white men's desire, to the international community to find models more suited to the experience of African-American women. In this way, HIV/AIDS was the centerpiece that helped define the myriad of interlocking reproductive health issues affecting Black women and other women of color—women marginalized by the broader society and even more so by the women's movement and its proponents.

SisterLove began to use the language of human rights in all of our programs and components, such as the Healthy Love Workshop and the LoveHouse, a transitional housing program for HIV+ women and their children. The Healthy Love Workshop is an interactive group-level intervention that addresses HIV and reproductive health information while

providing women with practical tools and applications to negotiate safer sex or abstinence, to use condoms and other latex barriers in their sexual activity, and to understand the social and political context in which individual and community change must take place in order to stem the spread of HIV and the impact of AIDS. We incorporate the human rights education paradigm so that women can envision their participation in HIV prevention as an opportunity to affect social change in their own households as well as in the streets of their communities.

We use a similar strategy for the HIV+ residents in the LoveHouse, who learn how to incorporate their understanding of rights and entitlement to human dignity into their understanding of how the Social Security System works, how funding reaches (or doesn't!) their communities to provide the necessary services and support programs, and how to access the information and care they need for themselves and their families. This work develops grassroots leadership with a deep understanding of the bridges connecting what happens in the lives of women in the United States to what happens for women living in other communities in the world similar to our own.

Nowadays, as I continue this work, I spend a lot of time thinking of the world that I want to live in, and the things we need in order to live without pain and suffering. Learning how to use the human rights education framework shifted my paradigm of thinking about how I may affect change and build a just and peaceful existence for all of humanity and life on Earth. As my mother still says, "Education never stops, so you never stop educating." Human rights education provides the opportunity to mobilize groups by bridging isolated issues and individual lived experiences with the language and understanding of basic protections of the things all human beings need to live in dignity and have quality lives. Using the human rights framework has taught me that it is much more productive to strategize around that which you are fighting for, rather than what you are fighting against. Those of us who wear the idealist's "rose colored glasses" know that "*change gonna come*" because of the positive and productive energies of the young and the old, the black and the white, the homosexual and the heterosexual, the advantaged and the disadvantaged. This energy, which we call love, is what moves us at SisterLove to continue our work. The power of love knows no bounds.

# From the Center to the Margins: The Radicalization of Human Rights in the United States

AFTERWARD BY LAURA H. ROSKOS

What can human rights tell us about power?

Throughout the winter of 2002–03, women in the United States participated with women around the globe in a multitude of mobilizations, virtual and embodied, that attempted to avert the U.S. military assault on Iraq. Shortly after the invasion began, NEWSA's conference provided an opportunity to bring together community educators, organizers, activists, and law professors versed in everyday use and explication of human rights. This was not a non-sequitur. Rather it clarified the question we had wanted to ask all along: can human rights help us restore a healthy balance of power in the world? Does it have some special leverage for transforming a multitude of mobilizations and projects into a sustainable "other" world? Because NEWSA has been explicitly addressing concerns of racism and classism in the academy and in New England society at large since its inception, we wondered if the tools of human rights—so many of which have been created by people of the global south—might help us move forward in some sort of cobbled commonality.

While there has existed for some time a lively feminist criticism, primarily among political philosophers and legal scholars, contributing theoretically to the elaboration and refinement of human rights, what have been rarer are narratives coming out of practice such as those collected here. These alert us not so much to the potential pitfalls of working with the human rights framework but to its possibilities for "infusing the spaces we are already in with citizen participation" (Bhattacharjee, in this volume). Aside from a case study of San Francisco's CEDAW ordinance (Waldorf 1999), the stories of local transformation that have been most available have tended to come from abroad, reinforcing the false sense that "civil rights applies to 'us' and human rights to 'them'" (Thomas and Dharmaraj 2000). From the applications described above, it seems clear

that improvisation and innovation in the interpretation of human rights law can and does happen *whenever* new constituencies—battered moms, the homeless, women of color with HIV/AIDS, genocide survivors—appropriate and inhabit the texts of human rights.

Addressing this human rights imperative to attend to the local, Charlotte Bunch wrote in the fall of 2002 that “Often what American feminists must do to help women elsewhere is not to focus on their governments but to work to change ours so that U.S. policies and corporate forces based here stop harming women elsewhere.” When women meet in international forums, talk often turns to the necessity for taking local responsibility for holding one’s own government accountable, as Leslie Hill reports above happened for South African women working as anti-apartheid activists. This is true even in those international meetings that acknowledge that governments are making “fewer and fewer decisions with respect to critical issues for women” (Symington 2002, 3).

Responding to the imperative to act locally, human rights movements, as Barbara Schulman states here, have “spawned an elaborate system of legal tools and monitoring bodies designed to enable ordinary people to hold our governments accountable for respecting, protecting and fulfilling” these rights. In the United States, during the summer of 2003, state and local, perhaps even the federal, governments are on their way to fiscal bankruptcy—yet human rights demands that they do more. The positive feedback loop facilitated by a human rights framework suggests one possible way of working ourselves out of this zero-sum bind by building a public agenda focused on promoting “the inherent human dignity” of all persons through the realization of Franklin Roosevelt’s famous four freedoms: freedom of belief and speech; freedom from want and fear (Glendon 2001, xviii).

When a community adopts and refines a human rights analysis of the harms they have suffered, Andrea Smith asserts above that it creates spaces for collective and connected healing. This is because human rights repositions “victims” in the community not as “survivors” but as “citizens”—citizens with multiple, intersecting identities and interests. As these citizens reclaim their stake in government, they contribute to building the capacity and legitimacy of that government and take co-responsibility for enabling that government to redress its failure to protect and provide for all. The universality and indivisibility of human rights are integral to their healing power.

## The limits of intersectionality

Intersectionality is an analytic technique for surfacing complexity and embeddedness, but attentiveness to human rights—its practice—provides a map for performing the understanding yielded by intersectionality in daily life. In her plenary address to the conference, Krishanti Dhamaraj, executive director of WILD for Human Rights, stressed that “to engage in the practice of fundamental human rights is different from the articulation of such rights.” I took her to mean that what is often temporarily suspended in the articulation is the exquisite balance, the indivisibility and universality of human rights, which cannot be held in a single thought or linear exposition. Human rights offers a system and a framework for understanding human dignity because, as several of the conference speakers pointed out, it engages both our oppression and our privilege. It’s not a panacea, but a powerful heuristic that might help us move from a discourse of feminism, fractured into identity feminisms and single-issue coalitions, to a political movement that transcends identities without disregarding any of them. Krishanti was clear that this is a shift that must occur in the register of practice and she suggested that we in the audience will be adept at this, in part because “from the time we get up in the morning, we play different roles till the time we go to bed, and every role is equally valid.” The selections here illustrate women connecting in various ways, working not only our identity, in the sense of identity politics, but also our identities in all their multiplicity, and changing in the process. Leslie Hill underscores this dynamic when she emphasizes the embeddedness of the various South African constituencies contributing to building a new South Africa.

By attending to the full, indivisible range of human rights, not sequentially but synchronically, we begin to create *human security*, a concept that has been gaining consensus in foreign policy circles for the past ten to fifteen years (Human Security Commission 2003). Human security addresses:

. . . how human beings can find security around the basic day-to-day activities they perform to create a peaceful and prosperous life for themselves. . . . When people talk about social exclusion, a presumption is made that “social exclusion” pertains to minority constituencies of citizens. But if we unpack that a little, if we have to name those constituencies, we find that we are in fact talking about the majority of the

world's citizens: women, older persons, conventionally socially excluded peoples, such as people living with disabilities or indigenous people, for example. Then we see that we are living in a world where a large number of people do not have a sense of security about their lives, a sense of security about their space. (Afkhami 2002, 659)

But the challenges of trying to institutionalize human security in foreign policy involve rethinking military and defense expenditures, putting the brakes on the international but largely private arms trade, and fulfilling the basic material needs of a domestic population. Thus, states “do not always guarantee human security. Where states are externally aggressive, internally repressive or too weak to govern effectively, people’s security is undermined” (Canadian Dept. of Foreign Affairs 2003). The policy changes required to move toward a condition of human security depend on the existence of transparent and effective governance structures at the local as well as the national levels supported by a ubiquitous, and robustly participatory, civil society. However, the potential for either of these prerequisites seems quite compromised in the United States at this moment in history. By releasing the creative problem-solving and community-building energies of people living within a jurisdiction, the practice of human rights might contribute to building the capacity of government in a context of civic participation.

## Human rights begins in small places, close to home

Countries, including the United States, that endorse the Universal Declaration of Human Rights have committed themselves, at least on paper, to promoting “universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms” and to strengthening understanding of these through their educational institutions (UDHR preamble and art. 26.2), yet few U.S. residents are unintimidated by the vocabulary of human rights treaties or the organizational structure of the United Nations. However, active participation in human rights movement building does require a certain baseline human rights literacy. As the experiences of community educator Dazón Dixon Diallo and of Mary Bricker-Jenkins in KWRU’s economic human rights campaign demonstrate, these skills can be learned in a variety of contexts.

Human rights training in the academy needs to migrate out of our law

schools and into the undergraduate curriculum. Human rights instruments, the human rights accountability structures, and public policies rooted in human rights perspectives are not topics amenable to study within the disciplinary structure of higher education. However, because human rights have been developed “topically,” as a means for understanding and addressing human needs grounded in material conditions, these subjects are all well suited for inclusion in the women’s studies curriculum. Several conference attendees were excited by the possibilities for engaging students in participatory research or internships linked to the activist projects presented at the conference. Equally important are the steps taken within the classroom. Classroom projects can draw on the techniques of community organizers by presenting the human rights system as a “work-in-progress,” undergoing continual refinement and open to local adaptations. The treaty documents can be included in syllabi for introductory courses wherever the topic of equality is featured. Research courses could include exercises designed to lead students through the extensive electronic archives organized by the UN Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (<http://www.unhchr.ch/html>) and the University of Minnesota (<http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts>). Capstone courses can be organized around the Beijing Platform for Action, examining each area in turn, and including in-depth discussions of the prep-con negotiations and outcomes of national commitments made at the conference. In each instance, such innovations in the direction of internationalizing women’s studies will be bound by a coherent conceptual framework that de-centers the experience of U.S. women, which is still too often taken as the yardstick against which other women’s movements are measured.

Our contributors by no means resolve the tensions that the human rights framework holds in its balance: the tension between the desire for a “higher authority” and the desire for self-determination, the need to stop perpetrators of violence while increasing the non-violence of society as a whole, the tendency to form affiliative communities of interest while maintaining identification with the whole of humanity. They do, however, speak unanimously to the urgency of claiming more local spaces where these impulses can be played out in the register of the social, in real life.

#### NOTES

1. Amy Agigian is Assistant Professor of Sociology and Director of the Center for Women’s Health and Human Rights at Suffolk University. NEWSA would also

- like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the creative contributions of conference committee members Sarah Avery Sullivan and Dominica Lord Wood without whom this conference would not have been possible.
2. The text of each treaty, as well as other UN human rights documents, can be found at several sites including: the UN Web site of Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights at <<http://www.unhchr.ch>>; the University of Minnesota <<http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts>>; and Bayefsky.com <<http://www.bayefsky.com/introduction.php>>.
  3. Extensive documentation of San Francisco's implementation process can be found on the Web site of the San Francisco Commission on the Status of Women, <<http://www.ci.sf.ca.us/cosw/cedaw>>. A guide to replicating the San Francisco initiative is available from WILD for Human Rights, <<http://www.wildforhumanrights.org>>.

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