# 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,[1] 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 (Afkhami 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" (Afkhami 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.[2]

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?