

Editors' Introduction

Two years after September 11, 2001, and the United States' military incursion in Afghanistan, Arundhati Roy, the award-winning novelist, public intellectual, and human-rights activist, challenged U.S. President George W. Bush's lofty pronouncement that U.S. intervention was an effort to liberate oppressed Afghan women. As Roy wrote in December 2003: "It's been made out that the whole point of the war was to topple the Taliban regime and liberate Afghan women from their burqas. We're being asked to believe that the U.S. Marines are actually on a feminist mission."¹ Roy argued that the Bush administration was exploiting the rhetoric of women's oppression and, by extension, of international struggles for women's and human rights to further national and global interests. Far from liberating women or even highlighting the vagaries of oppression, however, such vacuous and power-invested claims have actually obscured women's complex material realities, worldviews, and grounded liberation strategies — particularly with regard to human rights.

The claim to human rights has been a progressive, even radical intervention. Yet current politics require problematizing human rights as a liberating discourse and activist agenda for women. In its most progressive sense, the notion of human rights has elevated and linked local, seemingly disconnected grassroots battles to a broader global agenda of social justice. But by the status quo, human rights claims have also served as a mechanism for reconstituting hierarchies and asserting agendas that more often than not have had little to do with those suffering harm. The establishment of universal human rights claims did not (and does not) necessarily dismantle raced and gendered inequality, either in the public or in the private realms. An examination of women's varied activist struggles critically underscores this historical and contemporary reality and demands that we consider the intricacies of the origins, contours, purposes, and efficacy of human rights for women wherever they are.

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This special issue of the *Radical History Review* interrogates and complicates the relationships between women's liberation and human rights. How should we define, periodize, and discuss human rights while being mindful, as the historian of human rights Kenneth Cmiel argued, that "much of the activism for social justice had taken place without using the idiom of human rights"?² Are discourses on human rights gendered, and if so, how? In what ways have women's liberation ideas and/or activism shaped human rights and vice versa? To what degree are human rights constituted as transnational phenomena? How have women's politics, while often bounded by the particularities of the nation-state, operated within a fluid global world? In deliberating these questions, this issue's contributors explore the contemporary iterations of human rights debates, document the historical origins of human rights discourse and social-justice activism, and examine the relationship among and shaping influences of women's material realities. They look at local conditions and universal claims. They explore the interactions among women occupying and traveling across different geographical spaces and assess the efficacy of human rights for women's social-justice struggles.

The "Reflections" section opens this issue exposing how recent scholarly dialogues and advocacy work focused on women and human rights have primarily emphasized the contemporary tragic realms of sexual violence, armed conflict, and postconflict situations. These dialogues and campaigns—more common among legal, nonprofit, and activist organizations—have usually addressed Western-derived international bodies, particularly the United Nations (UN), and established international laws and doctrines. In 1948, the UN passed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which, as Elizabeth Heineman writes, "codified international expectations regarding human rights." Not until the 1990s was sexual violence in conflict zones officially debated as a human rights issue, but with her conference report Heineman historicizes these acts of violence by documenting current scholarly research that extends back to the Middle Ages and transverses national boundaries. Christina Binder, Karin Lukas, and Romana Schweiger assess the efficacy of Resolution 1325 adopted by the UN Security Council in 2000 for protecting women's human rights and transforming the way in which women experience conflict, deal with postconflict situations, and participate in the rebuilding of peaceful societies and of their lives. They do this by tracing Resolution 1325's development at the level of international law and examining its local effect in Uganda. Shifting the lens to the Middle East, Arzoo Osanloo also engages the Westernized paradigm of human rights, but argues that applying it to women and societies outside the West has the potential to obfuscate the geopolitics of women's localized battles and reforms.

While providing critical interventions particularly on the ways in which contemporary international regulations shape human rights imperatives, these essays also reveal the dire need for greater historical research and theorizing about the genealogy, character, and content of women's human rights. In recent years, scholars

such as Cmiel have called for historicizing the popular idiom of human rights and for examining its emergence as a “political language in different cultural settings.”³ The articles in our “Features” section attempt to do this by focusing on the chronological development of human rights as a contextually situated political discourse, on the activists who privilege the “human” in their struggles against inequalities, and on how “travel” within and across national boundaries has shaped those discourses and struggles. Jay Garcia examines how the U.S. southern writer Lillian Smith challenged the racist social order in the 1940s by developing a “vernacular form of human-rights thinking” influenced by her travels to China in the 1920s, as well as by her exposure to East Indian activists’ anticolonial philosophies. Erik McDuffie explores how a short-lived 1950s U.S. black radical women’s activist group, the Sojourners for Truth and Justice, sought to expose and contest the government’s human rights violations both domestically and internationally. With a view on Canada, Dominique Clément traces the political development of the human rights state. While indebted to local women’s activist rights demands, the Canadian human rights state nevertheless failed to fully achieve—and at times even devalued—women’s substantive social and economic equality.

The artistic renderings of Sonia Báez-Hernández’s battles with breast cancer featured in “Curated Spaces” force us to consider the universality in the human. She explores the territories—or crossroads—of the human body that are often differentially mapped by race, gender, culture, and inequality. In the next section, “Voices,” Erik Esselstrom’s essay on Hasegawa Teru and Alan Eladio Gómez’s interview with Olga Talamante expose how the crossing of borders—geographical, intellectual, linguistic, and cultural—by a Japanese and a Chicana feminist provided the critical foundation for each woman’s human rights iterations and social-justice activism. In their own ways, both of these activist women’s voices challenge and complicate the West as the heralded author and pristine model of human rights.

We conclude this *RHR* issue with an “Intervention” by Karen Sotiropoulos that addresses contemporary matters in transracial and transnational child adoption, and with a “Teaching Radical History” section that takes human rights, transnational feminism, and social-justice organizing into and outside of the classroom. In particular, Leila J. Rupp, in her discussion of transnational feminisms, addresses the complexities of globalizing discourses and alerts us to new scholarship on the horizon. Jean Allman and Antoinette Burton provide a bibliographic archive and trace the genealogy of their pedagogical use of *transnational* in theorizing gender and colonialism. Finally, Andrea Smith provides a pedagogical model for interrogating the effectiveness of human rights as a framework for advancing social justice activism.

—Karen Sotiropoulos and Rhonda Y. Williams

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Notes

1. Arundhati Roy, "Not Again," *Guardian*, September 27, 2002.
2. Kenneth Cmiel, "The Recent History of Human Rights," *American Historical Review* 109 (2004): 119.
3. *Ibid.*, 120.