



Anne-Marie Hilsdon, Martha Macintyre, Vera Mackie and
Maila Stivens (editors)

Human Rights and Gender Politics

Asia-Pacific Perspectives

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ix, 250 pages

reviewed by [Carol Warren](#)

1. *Human Rights and Gender Politics - Asia Pacific Perspectives* is a confronting book for both the human rights and feminist movements. Challenging questions thread through all the case studies from the Asia Pacific presented in this important collection: How can human rights discourses, derived from masculinist and western individualist frameworks, be made to support the claims of women in the Asia Pacific for justice, security and dignity? And conversely, how can feminist rejection of the universalist framework of global human rights discourse be squared with the appeals of Third and Fourth World women to this strategic ground of struggle?
2. Pursuing Sen's opening remarks to her chapter on the human rights of gendered citizens in Indonesia, as 'the "woman question" unsettles the neat paradigms of human rights discourses' (p. 107), so too the questions raised in the struggle for human rights by women throughout the Asia Pacific unsettles core feminist propositions. Paradoxically, at the same time feminist theorists are questioning the universalist and essentialist assumptions of the European Enlightenment project which animate human rights discourse, Macintyre notes, '... women in the Pacific are embracing them and claiming them as part of their political struggle in the post-colonial era' (p. 158). For Altman, rejection of universalist premises threatens the position of subalterns who expressly seek to assert themselves on the basis of universal human rights—including rights to difference in sexual orientation, with which his chapter is concerned.
3. The Asia Pacific context is particularly of interest here because debates in these regions about distinctive 'Asian values' and 'Pacific *kastom*' have been used by political elites to set these cultural traditions against both feminist and human rights claims. The latter are selectively portrayed as incompatible with the collectivist ethos of these societies, because they are derived from western individualist premises.
4. If the culturally relative defences of national policies are highly politically charged, so too has

been the deployment of the gendered human rights critique coming from the west. What is interesting about Finnane's exploration of human rights debates on China (at least to those who are already familiar with widely publicised data on sex-ratio discrepancies in census data for some areas of rural China—attributed to practices of female infanticide, sex-selective abortion and other forms of gender discrimination in a still strongly patriarchal society) is the extent to which women's rights as human rights enter into international debate largely when it serves particular political and economic purposes of western democracies. Little attention, she points out, is given in international circles to statistics showing comparably skewed sex ratios in some parts of India or Taiwan, where democratic or market oriented systems appear to place gendered human rights beyond the purview of international critics.

5. An interconnected theme, which comes through strongly in the Ram, Finnane, Macintyre, and Jolly chapters in particular, is the paradoxical consequence of a persisting opposition between 'traditional' and 'modern' that tends to situate feminist and human rights discourses together at one end of the implicitly progressivist binary. The effect is to marginalise the voices, identities and relationships of those women who find aspects of local culture a source of strength. The significance of the collectivities with which these women identify is not well accommodated in either feminist or human rights models. At the same time, subject positions proffered by 'modern' global structures and cultural models have ambivalent implications for women.
6. Margaret Jolly argues in her chapter on domestic violence in Vanuatu, that assumed binaries setting modern-liberative against traditional-repressive cultural treatment of women are 'motivated caricatures' which overlook equally constraining and exploitative modern practices such as cosmetic surgery, sex tours and other forms of commercialised sexuality. Jolly argues that these binaries deprive women of collectivist and culturally relevant solutions, offering in their place a standardised set of identities and rights based on an individualist construction of human rights.
7. Not least disempowering are men's claims to represent women in the political arena and market place. Macintyre explores the critical spaces Papua New Guinea women have created for representing themselves through poetry. The literary movement initiated by tertiary educated women, writing mostly in English, sometimes in Pidgin, and taken up by church and women's community groups, is becoming a genre distinctively belonging to women. In verse these women aim critical-reflexive volleys at the many forms of male colonisation of women's bodies and identities:

'Bride Price'

Bride Price makes me feel just like a speedboat
Or a truck that can be bought...
It makes my husband think that I must always obey him...
(Vanuatu woman, quoted in Macintyre, p. 166.)

'Civilized Girl'

Cheap perfume
Six inch heels
Skin-tight pants
Civilized girl ...

Where am I going -
Forward, backward, still?

What do I call myself
Mrs Miss or Ms?' ...

Why do I do this?
Imitation
What's wrong with it?
Civilization.

(Sipolo, quoted in Macintyre, p. 157.)

8. The practical consequences of misplaced binaries and mutual misconstrual of feminist and human rights agendas is painfully illustrated in Langer's account of the tensions and lost opportunities for mutual support between two Salvadoran solidarity groups of women refugees in Australia. The disjunctions along class, regional and political lines that emerge in this study demonstrate the practical problems of building solidarities and valuing difference in what might have been a common liberation project. In drawing particular attention to the sometimes disjunctive relations and fracture lines in the micro-politics of global solidarity movements, this case study and others point to the importance of moving beyond dichotomies. Several of the writers propose building both theoretically and strategically on what Yuval Davis calls 'transversals', reconstituting new forms of universals linking diverse feminisms and other social movements.
9. But for all that the dichotomies of universal/culturally relative, traditional/modern, and public/private reify structural categories that women's experiences transcend, they nevertheless remain significant axes for analysis, pointing to serious theoretical problems and glaring gaps in international human rights law where it intersects with gender issues.
10. Mackie's study gives special attention to the discursive aspects of gendered human rights politics, the naming of hitherto silenced abuse, so central to human rights and feminist political action. The brutal war experience of women forced into military prostitution under Japanese occupation was only exposed after decades of silence with the publication of a number of the women's testimonials. Both the difficulty of making public their private unwanted memories and the lack of language to adequately represent that experience conspired to conceal institutionalised gender-specific forms of violence in war. The Japanese euphemism, 'comfort women', had been used to soften the representation of what these women experienced as war crimes of rape, slavery and forced prostitution. A different vocabulary and discursive context was needed before their experiences would be recognised as 'real and serious events' (p. 39).
11. The case of Flor Contemplacion, the Filipino domestic worker executed for murder in Singapore, on what many believed were false charges based on a forced confession, brings to the fore the continued failure of human rights law to penetrate the opaque and unregulated domain of the domestic sphere, where women's civil rights are systematically violated. Hilsdon's study is a critique of limitations to the universal application of human rights and international labour law when they come up against the 'privacy' of the domestic sphere. In this case both the household and the state assert sovereign territorial domestic boundaries where international human rights law, it is claimed, ceases to apply.
12. Global concern with the particular human rights of women is itself relatively recent. The 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was the most important among a number of interventions which began to ameliorate the gender blindness in the human rights movement. But gendered human rights issues have only begun to move toward mainstream recognition as a result of concerted efforts by NGO

activists and academic researchers, efforts which have been highly contested. Stevens argues that despite the dilemmas posed, it is possible and necessary to transcend polarities to build common cause across the gender and human rights movements through a 'transversal politics' based on dialogue and debate. We need to seek new universalisms which acknowledge both common identities and differences.

13. It is at the points of intersection between the feminist and human rights movements, practice and theory, that some of the most important work remains to be done to address this question put by a Papua New Guinea woman poet:

Tell me why as a woman
I have all this burden
When God, the Constitution and the
United Nations all tell me
You and I are equal in all respects?'

(untitled, Dewenis quoted in Macintyre p. 147)

This book sets out the parameters and lays the groundwork for beginning that urgent task.

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