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Transnational feminism: Political strategies and theoretical resources

BROOKE A. ACKERLY¹ AND BINA D’COSTA²

INTRODUCTION
For more than a decade, the women’s human rights discourse has been valuable for transnational and local activists seeking to gain international and local recognition for myriad and often invisible women’s issues. It has enabled women’s activists around the world to recognise the common ground between the demands of women in various locations with various material and identity crises such as those fighting for the rights of sex workers, trafficked women, children combatants, and survivors of violence. In addition, it has enabled a catalysing reformulation of issues such as global health and the environment. While advancing these and other visible achievements, it has also created less visible obstacles to some women’s human rights activism. For example, un-networked women, particularly from the global South, have not been brought into transnational dialogues, leaving them without the tools to access new sources of funding and political support. Their issues and approaches to activism are relatively under-funded compared to those who have been able to join the international dialogue.

What should the scholar-activist political and critical theorist learn from the successes and marginalisations of women’s human rights transnationally networked activism of the past two decades? Does marginalisation mean that women’s human rights are a theoretically incomplete or chronically problematic conceptual framework with which to guide women’s activism? Or can we gain theoretical insights from their activism which help us to clarify what the appropriate concerns and strategies should be for the coming decade of women’s transnational activism?

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In this paper we argue that although women and feminist activists have made different strategic choices, the great successes of women’s human rights activism have come by developing a theoretical coherence that is a good guide for addressing the challenges that have emerged through that activism. We bring together evidence from scholarship on transnational activism and the insights of transnational activists themselves. After a brief review of the recent history of transnational feminist activism, we describe our feminist methodology, applaud the successes of the women’s human rights discourse and related political strategies of the past decade, consider the challenges that the approach has encountered and created for itself, and look to the challenges that un-networked and well-networked feminist and women’s activists argue are important for our attention in the coming decade. We argue that, properly theorised, the human rights discourse has the ability to continue to evolve in response to its own shortcomings and to the further challenges identified by feminists and women’s activists. In sum, transnational feminists will and should be committed to developing the human rights analytical framework for dealing with feminists and women’s activists’ issues.

We recognise that for many women activists, ‘feminist’ is a politically problematic label that evokes such associations as man-hater, home-wrecker, colonialist, imperialist, Western-influenced, national or cultural traitor, and so on. Regardless of how they identify themselves, feminist and women’s activists share a conceptual understanding that it is important to put women’s interests and experiences of injustice on the political agenda and to treat knowledge from women’s experiences as analytically important when addressing political, economic and social issues and injustices. Consequently, whether or not they are feminist, many women choose to use a rights-based approach, feminists and activists for women share a need for an integrated gender and structural analysis of political, economic and social conditions and processes, and a goal of political, economic and social fairness. Many activists do not have a developed critique of these processes in the same way that some feminist scholars do; others can give experience-based accounts of gendered racism that might help the feminist scholar who is inclined to disaggregate oppression on axes of race, class and gender (for example) to rethink her approach.

We use the term ‘transnational feminists’ to include those women and men who are feminists and activists for women, and whose work concerns
issues that they and others would recognise as feminist or women’s issues, although they often have a broad impact on society. Transnational feminists often work with colleagues across borders and beyond issues that are directly relevant to their own, and they understand women’s human rights as integrated. The strategic implication of this is that promoting any women’s human rights promotes all women’s human rights. Consequently, transnational feminists are willing to stand and campaign with women from distant areas, and yet feminists do not always agree about what issues to take on board. Transnational feminists are not exclusively women’s rights activists or activists who are members of women’s movements. However, as we shall see in the history of the discourse of transnational feminism, many do now use a rights-based framework.

**TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM AND HUMAN RIGHTS DISCOURSE**

For decades before the Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing (1995), feminists were aware of the interrelatedness of women’s and feminist issues—peace, labour rights in the formal economy, worker’s rights in the informal economy, health, education, economic development priorities, institutions of political development, basic needs, minority or indigenous group rights, individual rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and intersexed, and queer (LGBTIQ) people, and so on. Working in each of these areas and across some of them, women activists confronted strategic obstacles to getting their issues heard. One such obstacle was their own difficulty in communicating common concerns across cultures, issue areas and critical perspectives. Discrimination and

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4 ‘There is an Indigenous patriarchy that is strong within Australia. But arguing against it is difficult—as one inevitably comes against the history of discrimination in Australia, which actually makes for a very different playing field because of the intersection of various relations of power. This issue is rarely publicly discussed, as it tends to generate serious conflicts between Indigenous people and also between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people …’ Interview with anonymous feminist researcher working on indigenous property rights, Canberra, 11 February 2004.
perceptions of discrimination inhibited transnational cooperation.\(^5\) Attempts at solidarity were challenged as elitist, imperialist, or merely disconnected from the lives of most of the world’s women.\(^6\) While the debates provided important intersections to mutual learning among feminists,\(^7\) they also took attention away from the material concerns of grassroots women who had been organising into social movements to better their lives.

In this intellectual environment, ‘women’s empowerment’ became the language of transformation. In grassroots organisations and social movements, activists pressed their issues and concerns; however, specific ‘women’s empowerment’ objectives facilitated flows of funds to health, education and economic development for women. Despite the implication of ‘empowerment’, with certain exceptions, women’s and feminist concerns were still marginalised in departments of Women in Development within governments, development organisations and donors. Through theoretical insights deployed programmatically, Women in Development (WID) and later Gender and Development (GAD) promoted social, political and economic equality between men and women. Donors and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) promoted equitable inheritance laws and property rights, credit opportunities, health, education and improved agricultural extension.\(^8\) Although they were visible in a range of contexts around the world and were able to be heard by local and transnational audiences, WID and GAD paradigms were not articulations supported by a broad international social movement, although many proponents certainly saw the need and potential for one.

\(^7\) L. H. M. Ling, *Postcolonial international relations: Conquest and desire between Asia and the West* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).
In the 1980s, recognising women’s associated objectives, frustrated with limited advances for women during the UN Decade of the Woman and in order to take advantage of upcoming global dialogues, feminist and women’s activists capitalised on the legitimacy of the human rights discourse and framed women’s concerns as human rights claims. In environmental activism, peace activism, health and economic development, feminist and women’s activists became women’s human rights activists. The human rights discourse enabled a focus around a common issue (with lots of recognised variation), and ultimately—with the use of the political tools of lobbying, caucusing and networking—a common strategy developed across women and feminist activists in social movements, grassroots organisations, and more professionalised NGOs, across scholars, activists, donors, and across issue areas. Over decades of working together, those participating in this movement and its discourse developed strong personal friendships and bonds of trust.

**METHODOLOGY**

In order to identify the theoretical underpinnings of women’s human rights as a political strategy and analytical tool, we turned to grassroots and well-networked activists and scholars who had been involved in such activism for the past decade and/or are committed to being involved in the coming decade. We asked these activists to identify the key challenges and opportunities for feminism in the next ten years. Our sources included interviews, workshops, websites and scholarly research. The two most important dimensions of our methodology for gaining the greatest insight

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and preventing a single view from dominating our interpretation of the data are, first, the method of identifying and documenting multiple and varied voices and silences from feminist and women scholars and activists, and second, interpreting that data through deliberative inquiry.

**Insiders, outsiders, multi-sited critics and multiple critics**

In addition to drawing on important work of the past two decades which documents transnational feminism’s use of the human rights approach, we gathered insight about feminist and women’s activism: 35 workshops and panels that were held at the World Social Forum (WSF), Mumbai, India, in 2004, and observed by the authors; and 23 interviews conducted at the same World Social Forum, in Australia and via email.

Those interviewed at the WSF and in Australia were international and local activists and scholars from 15 countries. We interviewed activists with a range of ages, and working in a range of organisational contexts. They were differently positioned within their local socioeconomic and political contexts, and in global politics—some were able to move about freely, and others were confined; some were more theoretically oriented, others were more substantively oriented, and still some eagerly shared their analysis of the substantive concerns of feminists; and some were from culturally accepted movements, whilst others challenged cultural norms or were socially outcast. Our interview subjects were disproportionately those who have not published their work and whose views have not been publicised, even in feminist venues. Some of our interview subjects were internationally known spokeswomen for women’s interests, some had national reputations, and some were unknown beyond their locales. Some had garnered support from national or international sources, others had not, and still others eschewed any funding. Our informants included those feminists who were visible organisers and participants in transnational feminist dialogues and those at the margins of these dialogues—some aware of them, but not invited to participate; others unaware of them. All of our

13 These categories of critics are discussed more fully in Brooke A. Ackerly, *Political theory and feminist social criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

14 For example, one of those interviewed, Hulan Khatibi, was able to come to the WSF 2004 in India with the support of the Global Fund for Women, but her subsequent email correspondence has been limited by the insecure environment in which she works in Afghanistan.
identified activists and scholars were ‘transnational’ in the sense that they were presently engaged in some kind of transnational or transcultural dialogue.

We did not focus on finding those scholars or activists who were known to us before arriving at the WSF, although we observed many of their panels and interviewed some. We focused instead on identifying those whose critical perspectives we would not have been able to know had we not travelled to India. We followed up with many who did not have time to be interviewed at the WSF and interviewed them via email. In Australia, we interviewed activists in exile from Asian countries for their human rights activism, and Australian women activists from indigenous and mainstream communities. Many of our respondents allowed us to use their names, whilst others preferred anonymity.

For interviews and panels we sought multiple critics from a range of critical perspectives, including the multi-sited critical perspective (the perspective that comes from moving between contexts). None of our sources were interpreted by us as being a collective voice representing others. All were asked to identify key components of the women’s agenda for the next decade. While offering their own perspectives, they often supplied evidence for why their account could be taken to speak for many and not just themselves. All were minimally multi-sited in that by coming to the WSF, living in exile in Australia, or working in and outside indigenous communities, they had moved between worlds. The WSF was a world of transnational activism which was new to most grassroots activists. It was a world of Indian-style street activism, which was new to many transnational feminists. We interviewed an LGBTIQ activist who loved the WSF because she could be openly gay, whereas she could not be in her home country; and another LGBTIQ activist who strove to promote a dialogue among LGBTIQ activists of the global South because she saw the differences between Southern activists (primarily from Latin America and South Africa) focused on identity issues and Southern activists (primarily from elsewhere in African and South Asia) focused on material issues related to health and security. No interview subject was representative in the sense of
capturing an essential quality of some group. Moreover, no interview subject displayed an interest in speaking for all women or all women’s human rights activists. To the contrary, many interviewees had some aspect of her insight or some turn in her account that could be interpreted as exclusionary.

In addition, there were many silent informants. We documented this silence in two interviews conducted with pairs of women. In both interviews, one of the interlocutors hardly spoke and always deferred to the other. In one interview, this seemed to be in deference to the other’s title, and in the other interview it seemed to be a result of personal style. In addition, in the audience of the panels there were those who never voiced the question or comment that was on their minds, nor affirmed or disaffirmed the insights being shared publicly by others. Further, there were many silent potential informants who by coincidence were not in the particular panels and workshops that we observed.

Depending on how we count—interview subjects, workshop participants, panelists, audience participants, authors, people cited by authors—we had between 58 and 1000 informants. This is a small percentage of those actively interested in promoting feminist and women’s issues, and not all of them use a ‘rights’ discourse.

How were we to make sense of the range of views, characteristic of many, but representative of none, yet individually and collectively full of insights? Should all insights be taken at face value, or could we contextualise our readings of them, just as the interviewees contextualised their own arguments? What does it mean to be true to the interviewees?

In our practice of a feminist methodology for learning from interviews, we do not merely reflect or represent the views of singular or plural others, but rather join their effort by offering political and analytical insights which we were able to glean from taking their thoughts together and situating these in a larger context. In order to process the insights of these critical voices, we needed to employ a method. We followed Brooke Ackerly’s three

part method: deliberative inquiry, sceptical scrutiny and guiding criteria. These work together in a dynamic way to challenge static notions held by any interlocutor or the researcher herself. Although we used all three aspects of this methodology, here we describe the details only of our deliberative inquiry, which is particularly important for our goal of drawing from a range of actors to give a rich account of the agenda and challenges of transnational feminism.

**Deliberative inquiry**
The epistemological assumption underlying deliberative inquiry is that dynamic exchanges among people and over time can yield valuable insights. Deliberative inquiry makes methodological use of the common experience of having one’s ideas stimulated in a collective setting, over time, or by the insights of others. As we show later, when we discussed the agenda for the coming decade, feminist and women’s activists did not have a common view of women’s issues or of what the rights-based approach recommends for promoting them. In order to draw from their sometimes divergent views a focus for the next decade of transnational feminism, we tried to work with their insights, but not to hold our own views hostage to any particular view articulated by a particular informant. When applied to qualitative research, deliberative inquiry is a method of collecting and processing insights from sources that include researcher-directed interviews and researcher observations. In addition, deliberative inquiry relies on the researcher’s ability to identify or construct opportunities for dialogue among informants. The panels of the WSF gave us many such opportunities.

**Sceptical scrutiny**
Inspired by a feminist intuition to self-reflect, sceptical scrutiny is the methodological tool that requires us to direct that self-reflection toward our sources, their insights, and our analysis of their insights. The challenge in executing sceptical scrutiny is not that a researcher might say, ‘I don’t need to do that’ but rather that she thinks she is already practicing

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16 Ackerly, *Political theory and feminist social criticism*.

this method adequately. We are inclined to be critical within certain boundaries, but not to direct our criticism toward the epistemological character of those boundaries. Sceptical scrutiny directs us to evaluate those boundaries including our sources, our practice of deliberative inquiry and our guiding criteria.

Guiding criteria
Guiding criteria are provisional critical criteria that we use to evaluate proposed strategies and to design solutions to evident challenges. We began the study with the guiding criterion that all rights-claims by interview subjects should be considered human rights. As we proceeded through the analytical phase of the project, we came to the view that these rights claims were indivisible and interrelated. As Subhashini Ali put it

… we don’t think that the battle is only against patriarchy. We think that the battle is against patriarchy and capitalism and all forms of exploitation. And, today, especially, we fear that in the globalised era, in this new stage of imperialism, the conflict, actually, between imperialism and the people of the world is really becoming very, very sharp …

Or as Sonia Correa argued on a panel on fundamentalism: ‘Fundamentalism is both a political and a religious phenomenon. Before fundamentalism captures state power, it first organises, and captures the hearts and minds of people. The main targets today: sexuality, reproduction, abortion.’

The view of human rights that emerged in this study—the understanding of human rights as indivisible (though as we will see this view is not universally shared), and the understanding of the rights of all humans as interrelated (though as we will see not all activists articulate this view either)—are the guiding criteria that activists use to assess their rights violations. These should likewise be the guiding criteria for assessing the rights claims and potentially exclusionary strategies of women’s human rights activists themselves. For example, when a respondent from Burkina

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19 Interview with Subhashini Ali, President, All India Democratic Women’s Association, Mumbai, 20 February 2004.
20 A paraphrase captured in the panel notes of Lyndi Hewitt, Research Assistant for this project.
Faso argues that rights related to sexuality are not universal, her claim should be evaluated against these two understandings.21

STRATEGIES FOR THE SUCCESS OF THE WOMEN’S HUMAN RIGHTS APPROACH
Working politically and analytically within the human rights discourse while challenging certain boundaries of its framework, transnational feminists have united feminists and women’s activists, who are situated in diverse locations, in a global commitment towards achieving women’s rights. Transnational feminism has used the rights framework not only to incorporate women’s voices but also to legitimate their influence in policy making. We identify some of the most important strategies adopted by the transnational feminist movement that made many successes possible.

Framing a myriad of concerns as ‘rights’ issues
Activists employed the women’s human rights discourse to oppose abuse in the family, war crimes against women, violations of women’s bodily integrity, socioeconomic injustice, and gender-based political persecution and discrimination. Activists claimed the right to assert these problems as rights issues and challenged the global human rights community to support their claims. The discourse proved unifying for the critical agendas of those concerned about conceivably disparate issues such as inadequate safe water,22 sexual and reproductive health,23 sweatshop labour24 and human trafficking.25

21 Elsewhere Ackerly develops the theoretical roots and the case for these two understandings as part of an activist-inspired account of immanent universal human rights.
22 The Gender and Water Alliance is a network of 133 organisations and individuals from around the world and links water rights with gender.
25 Emek M. Ucarer, ‘Trafficking in women: Alternate migration or modern slave trade?’, in Meyer and Prügl, eds, Gender politics in global governance, pp. 230–44. For example, the Coalition against Trafficking in Women (CATW) advocate for effective legal reform against trafficking and sexual exploitation of women.
Bringing local and particular issues to the global stage

In the past two decades, and particularly during the 1990s, the international women’s movement became closely linked with UN conferences: four global women’s conferences in Mexico (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985) and Beijing (1995); Environment and Development (1992), Human Rights (1993), Population and Development (1994) and Human Settlement (Habitat II 1996). The Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi was heralded as ‘the birth of global feminism’. An inclusion of local NGOs and social movement organisations (SMOs) in these global dialogues brought certain local issues such as women’s reproductive health and domestic violence, and local inheritance, property and divorce laws to the global stage. With women’s human rights visible at the global level, activists in other, less visible issues were able to articulate their concerns using the increasingly accepted language of women’s human rights. Thus, these activists brought international attention to issues including war rape, comfort women, female cutting, sex work and trafficking.

Using global discourse to raise visibility of women’s human rights at the local level

Probably the most documented example of making a global discourse local, is the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, who successfully evoked an international response to the disappearance of their family members and persuaded the subsequent government to investigate. The madres made political use of their private role as mothers. Ain-O-Shalish Kendro, a legal aid and human rights resource centre in Bangladesh, uses songs, role-playing, theatre, and various other non-threatening forms of advocacy tools to promote political awareness for women’s rights in rural areas. These non-threatening strategies target strong patriarchal resistance,

28 Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, Revolutionaryizing motherhood: The mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1994).
the tenacious power of religious fundamentalism, political oppression and religious discrimination experienced by all citizens in Bangladesh.

**Rewriting international universal human rights**

In addition to enabling a strengthening of women’s human rights activism locally and globally, the women’s human rights framework constituted a re-theorisation of the international human rights framework itself. Although we may debate the degree to which it has been effective, in the UN rights institutions, regional human rights conventions, ad hoc war crimes tribunals, international human rights groups, refugee work, and even UN Security Council peacekeeping missions, women’s human rights have become a principle concern.

**Highlighting women’s rights to bring attention to the human rights violations of all**

Even in some places where human rights have yet to break down the traditional edifice of national sovereignty, women’s rights have been a useful discourse. Activists in various states where rights arguments were politically infeasible, such as China, the US and Singapore, took advantage of the lessons learned from transnational dialogues and opportunities created through the transnational women’s movement. Although not without complication, activists found women’s and children’s rights to be less politically dangerous and thus relatively more

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29 One might argue that women’s human rights activists were able to reveal the ways in which international, national and local practices as they impacted women were inconsistent with the world’s existing commitments to the human rights of all. On this view, human rights were not re-visioned theoretically, but practically.


easy to deploy toward achieving other human rights goals such as migrants’ and labour rights.\textsuperscript{33}

However, whereas in the US the human rights discourse threatens national sovereignty, it has been underutilised in an effort to be responsive to the political audience. It is not clear that the women’s rights movement in the US has advanced human rights for all citizens.\textsuperscript{34} However, the potential for such an impact may be emerging in the present political environment in the US. In an effort to make certain abortion procedures illegal, the US Justice Department has requested medical records of patients who are not accused of any crime. This threat to privacy coupled with recent threats stemming from the Patriot Act may be enough to create an alliance between feminists, conservatives and civil libertarians to assert a right to privacy.\textsuperscript{35}

\textbf{Channeling resources}

The women’s human rights discourse enabled local NGOs and SMOs to gain access to international donor dollars by educating global donors about women’s human rights and convincing them to think of their issues as women’s human rights issues and by educating local actors on how to articulate their issues as women’s human rights issues in order to secure such support.

Two political trends created the opportunity for such education. First, with increased democratisation in Latin America, Asia and Africa, international donors were interested in strengthening civil society. Organisations using the human rights language were able to secure funding for grassroots political participation and collective action.\textsuperscript{36} Second, with

\textsuperscript{33} ‘In China, women’s issues are seen as apolitical. Not seen as a threat to power of the state. Now that can be a problem as well. On the one hand, women’s rights activists have freedom in areas which others didn’t have … But on the other, they might end up as service deliverer for the state to work as the state’s appendage’. Interview with Katherine Morton, a China specialist working on global civil society and advocacy networks, Canberra, 27 February 2004.

\textsuperscript{34} Victoria Pruin DeFrancisco, Margaret R. LaWare and Catherine Hellen Palczewski, ‘The home side of global feminism: Why hasn’t the global found a home in the US?’, \textit{Women and Language} 26(1) 2003, pp. 100–9.

\textsuperscript{35} Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 12.

the desire for grassroots participation in the UN Conference process (at least as the face if not the voice and analysis of women’s human rights violations), donors supported local NGO participation in the preparatory processes and ultimately in the NGO forums of the UN Conferences of the 1990s. Women with access to global feminist networks advocated for funding and training resources for local organisations and in addition facilitated dialogue among local counterparts in an effort to foster collaboration that could sustain these groups’ local activism after the UN Conference process.

Scholar-activist individuals and networks became key to the processes of channeling global money into the hands of local activists. To donors, scholar-activists of women’s human rights offer a way of leveraging donor money. When combined with others working for women’s human rights, donor investment toward social change (however that is understood in each donor’s mandate) has the potential for a much greater impact. Likewise, scholar-activists write reports and assist NGO and SMO activists in grant writing by describing the work of grassroots activists in the increasingly accepted language of women’s human rights as understood by donor communities. Principally through networks such as DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era), IRWIG (Institute for Research on Women and Gender), IWHC (International Women’s Health Coalition) and WGNRR (Women’s Global Network for Reproductive Rights), and supported by UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women), UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) and UNRISD (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development), the transnational women’s rights movement has successfully mobilised scholar-activists to channel global funding to local sources.

As Erica Lewis, National Policy and Research Officer for the YWCA of Australia argues, scholar-activists are the ‘intellectual capital’ of transnational feminism. Scholar-activist efforts are reflected in funding policies of various donor agencies such as the Global Fund, Ford Foundation, European Union, CAFOD (Catholic Agency for Overseas Development), Oxfam, Care, and government funding agencies such as NORAD (Norwegian Agency for Development and Cooperation) and CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency). Further, the power of this intellectual activism is such that organisations with religious affiliations
are no longer able to ignore women’s issues. For example, over the last
decade the Christian Children’s Fund, Caritas, and World Vision put
maximum emphasis on women’s issues although their funding strategies
still reflect a WID perspective. Even though the religious attitudes of some
donor agencies (for example toward homosexuality or certain reproductive
health services) may conflict with certain women’s human rights concerns
such as security and reproductive health, these donors have contributed to
promoting women’s rights in other areas.

**Contextualised human rights**
The method of theorising and re-theorising human rights employed by
women’s human rights scholar-activists has led to a reform in legal
thinking regarding rights. Whereas the norm of impartiality has been
assumed to require neutrality, the increasing discussion of gender in rights
and law has demonstrated that uninformed neutrality cannot yield
impartiality. For example, gender expertise has been used to write
guidelines for immigration judges determining asylum. In another
example, gender expertise on the Rwanda War Crimes Tribunal led to one
defendant being re-indicted so that his indictment included gender-based
war crimes.

**Transfer of leadership to the global South**
The previous discussion shows some macro level strategies that trans-
national feminists used to transform thinking about human rights. One of
the exciting aspects of women’s human rights activism of the past decade
is that the leadership of transnational feminist activism has been (at least
partially) transferred from the global North to the global South.

**Bringing activists working on common issues together**
The women’s human rights framework has also enabled locally oriented
activists, who are dealing with particular human rights violations as they
manifest themselves in a particular locale, to transnationalise their work.
Transnational feminism has brought together activists working on similar


38 The Prosecutor versus Jean-Paul Akayesu, Case No. ICTR-96-4-T, <www.un.org/ictr/english/
issues. For example, at the 14th World AIDS Conference at Barcelona, Spain (2002) a coalition brought together more than 400 activists who work on HIV issues around the world to address the gendered dimension in HIV/AIDS advocacy work.\textsuperscript{39} The Women at Barcelona coalition was founded through a joint initiative of HDN (Health & Development Networks), UNIFEM and the IAS (International AIDS Society) Women’s Caucus.\textsuperscript{40}

**Bringing activists working on separate issues together**

Likewise with a common discourse, feminists working on seemingly separable issues such as domestic violence, health, education, safe water, peace, and so on, have been brought together in virtual and physical ways through online working groups, edited volumes and international meetings for small and large scale dialogue.

In addition, women have sought to build bridges across movements. One reason these links have been able to be made is because, as Jayati Ghosh, Professor of Economics at J. Nehru University in New Delhi argues, as much activism at the WSF demonstrates, women have become the most dynamic contributors to other social movements including the *dalit* (untouchable caste), trade unions, right to information, and right to food campaigns.\textsuperscript{41} However, women are aware of the risk that their energy will be co-opted in such partnerships, that their gendered perspective on the broader issues will be de-emphasised when raised within the context of a larger movement, or as Angela Mandie-Filer cautions, the larger issue will be de-emphasised when it becomes politically identified as a ‘women’s’ issue:

> Just because women push for recognition for other issues they all become women’s issues. We are picking up the baggage! It should be

\textsuperscript{39} Solidarity and Action Against the HIV Infection in India, \url{<www.saathii.org/about_saathii/saathii_collaborators.html>}, accessed 25 February 2004.


\textsuperscript{41} Interview with Jayati Ghosh, WSF, Mumbai, 20 January 2004.
taken up by men as well! Things like a non-violent household—that is not women’s issues. We have inherited issues by involvement.42

STRATEGIC CHALLENGES OF THE PAST DECADE

While ‘women’s human rights’ have been the leading edge of transnational feminism for more than a decade now, the discourse has also created some strategic difficulties for women’s human rights. Having alluded to some of them above, we discuss six of these here. These challenges need to be taken seriously, but they are individually and collectively the basis for a call to strengthen, by invigorating and rearticulating, the human rights framework, and not a basis for rejecting the human rights discourse as a political strategy or for denying the analytical usefulness that a human rights framework gives to feminist and women’s issues.

Exclusions

While it is possible to convey many if not all women’s issues as women’s human rights issues, the approach leaves out those who don’t or can’t frame their issues as rights issues. Transnational feminists are aware of this problem and have devised strategies to bring local activists to the attention of global audiences. However, one of the major concerns is that in the transnational execution of this strategy, women from the global South become the face of women’s human rights violations rather than the voice of criticism, and poorly networked women are invisible altogether. This is problematic for the post-colonial, race and class dynamics of transnational feminist activism and may impede the visibility of intersectional experiences.

It is substantively problematic as well. Activists who have not thought to frame their issues as rights issues are cut off from the transnational resources that have been mobilised for women’s human rights and because they are cut off from transnational networks, they have limited access to the ideas of transnational feminists (including the women’s human rights discourse). As a gender and development expert from Guinea-Bissau described, while ‘many of our people … work in the field of human rights’, their understanding is abstract. ‘We must seek out and put into place

42 Interview with Angela Mandie-Filer of DAWN-PNG, Canberra, 8 March 2004.
methods that can help people to work out the concepts better, to internalise them and go out and put them into practice on a day-to-day basis.’43

Finally, international rights discourse, such as that provided by the CEDAW, gives legitimacy to local struggles if the participants can articulate their arguments in CEDAW’s global legal language. However, CEDAW’s monitoring processes demonstrate that nation-states and cultural norms have the resources to circumvent that language by undermining its local legitimacy, thus challenging the women who employ a rights discourse in their local strategies as traitors to their country or culture.44

**Dichotomies in analysis**
The use of a general universalising discourse risks treating the local activists as the illustration (that is as the voice or the face of women’s human rights violations), but denying their important analytical contribution to human rights. Further, even when scholars from the global South make theoretical arguments about women’s human rights locally, their arguments are sometimes not given the same critical attention (and thus respect) that the arguments of their colleagues from the global North receive. Such lack of critical respect reenacts a colonial relationship in the realm of ideas.

**Simplification**
Tying together all feminist and women’s issues as rights issues simplifies the complicated relationships among women’s issues. For example, in India the problems of honour killings, dowry increases, dowry death, female feticide, education, health and female labour force participation are all feminist issues that could be characterised in terms of women’s human rights. And yet that discourse invites treating each issue as an analytically distinct example of women’s human rights violations when in fact, as

43 Interview with anonymous gender and development expert from Guinea-Bissau, WSF, Mumbai, 21 January 2004.

discussions among activists in these areas indicate, these issues are conceptually and practically entangled.45

Crowding out
The global focus on women’s human rights has been very effective. Even the Association for Women’s Rights in Development changed its name to reflect the dominance of the discourse and its conceptual tools. However, despite successes, including successes at bringing grassroots and Southern women into positions to have an impact on the agendas of global forums (as discussed above), transnational feminism around women’s human rights has also had the effect of crowding out some grassroots feminist activism by funding those most capable of speaking the transnational discourse.46

Drawing away
Similarly, especially through the 1990s, transnational feminist human rights work drew local voices to the global stage, taking their attention away from local activists’ efforts during a period of democratisation in which feminist input was necessary to bring about social and political change along with national regime changes.

However, as Sonia Alvarez has pointed out in the Latin American context, with this degree of focus, the potential for networking is reserved for those who successfully conceptualise their work in this specific way.47 For others, as Annemarie Reerink, gender and development scholar and activist of women workers’ issues from Indonesia argues, ‘Women leaders and activists often have little time for reading or find language barriers an obstacle, and few have been able to travel abroad to conferences.’48

Moreover, women may have to change their focus or give up some fights in order to have their work better aligned with the women’s human rights


46 Alvarez, ‘Advocating feminism’.

47 Ibid.

agenda. Even feminists working on issues that seem to us (the authors) as clearly women’s human rights issues complain of donor expectations being too explicit or being too hard to decipher.49

Backlash
Even though feminists are reinterpreting and rearticulating the universal human rights discourse locally and globally, in some contexts, the use of human rights invites a backlash against Western universalism.50 Uma Narayan jokes that critiques of feminism are often leveled by Marxists or men wearing Western clothes.51 More politically, the human rights discourse adds fuel to the fire because of the way women’s human rights have been politicised and used by Western governments, most recently the US administration in justifying its political actions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

STRATEGIC CHALLENGES OF THE COMING DECADE
Each of these challenges of the women’s human rights approach as currently deployed presents a strategic and analytical opportunity, which may be met by transnational feminists as they set out the agenda for the next decade of women’s activism. As currently being employed, the human rights framework is no longer unifying. Our research shows that activists are split even as to whether to pursue a unified feminist analysis or an approach that celebrates the diversity of feminisms. The rights-challenges coming from outside the transnational feminist community present new challenges which, according to some activists, require a shift in strategy. In this section we consider whether these new political challenges require a different theoretical approach to human rights.

49 WSF workshop, Networking for Women’s Human Rights: A Workshop on Collaboration for Activists, Scholars, Policy Makers, and Donors.


Western human rights

The human rights concept deployed by activists is *not* bound to a Western or other particular cultural history. One challenge activists now face in deploying human rights discourse is that the United States has decided to deploy a particular culture and power-bound understanding of human rights in its contemporary international politics.

Competing priorities

Another of the challenges in addressing the issues that feminists and women’s activists raise is whether to pursue a *unified in diversity* or *multifaceted* strategy. Even when activists understand all rights as interrelated, they have different priorities depending on context. As the director of an activist organisation in Rajasthan, said, ‘a feminist perspective unites us’,\(^{52}\) but it does not dictate that we work on the same issues, in the same way, in the same places, at the same time. Further, not all rights activists see all rights as interrelated. Some weigh ‘identity’ issues as less important than ‘material’ issues; others emphasise ‘identity’ issues. We are going to problematise this dichotomy and in the concluding discussion propose a *multifaceted strategy unified by a human rights analytical framework*.

Local issues

The principle agenda item for transnational feminism of the next decade is to support the local activism of a range of feminists, women’s activists, and women activists in movements that are not exclusively female identified. These interests include economic reform generally,\(^{53}\) and specifically, agricultural reform,\(^{54}\) trade unions,\(^{55}\) *dalits*, right to

\(^{52}\) Interview with anonymous director of activist organisation in Rajasthan, India, WSF, Mumbai, 19 January 2004.

\(^{53}\) Both scholars—for example, Valentine M. Moghadam, *Women, work, and economic reform in the Middle East and North Africa* (London: Lynne Rienner, 1998)—and activists—for example, GERA (Gender and Economic Reforms in Africa) and DAWN—place importance on economic reform that incorporates women’s concerns.

\(^{54}\) In crop production, women provide most of the labour. In India, 40 per cent of the agricultural workers displaced by big agriculture will not get jobs in big agriculture. WSF 2004 workshop, Major Issues Concerning WTO: Policies and Strategies for the South in General, and India in Particular.

\(^{55}\) In the trade unions, women are visible in the rank and file and less in decision making positions, even in those organisations where there is significant feminisation of labour.
information, right to food, the rights of forest people and of forest workers, the rights of fisherfolk, water for livelihood, and access to health care particularly for mothers, children and people with HIV/AIDS.\textsuperscript{56} Other issues that affect the visible material conditions of women’s lives revolve around migration, including refugees, trafficking, illegal immigration, unsafe sex work and internally displaced people.\textsuperscript{57} Finally and perhaps most obviously, marginalised within their own communities and as members of groups marginalised within their societies, women are concerned with the social injustice of all forms of discrimination.\textsuperscript{58}

**Structural issues**

Women’s rights concerns are interrelated and sustained by structural conditions. Consequently, to redress many of the human rights violations feminists and women activists are concerned with, we need to develop constructive criticisms of neoliberal economic orthodoxy. Feminist criticisms need not only criticise trade, development, and international organisations, but should also offer the implications of gender analysis for these.\textsuperscript{59} It is not enough that the World Bank recognise that decades of market-led and trade-led development strategies have not brought about the development and elimination of poverty that were their supposed

\textsuperscript{56} Women have been particularly active in these movements in India. Our sources here include personal correspondence with Sonalini Sapra, Researcher in the Trade and Labour Rights Department, Centre for Education and Communication in New Delhi, 19 February 2004.

\textsuperscript{57} ‘For Burmese women, migration issues, refugee issues, human rights, all are linked. Especially, in terms of trafficking … When you work as an illegal immigrant you are not protected by the employer. So employers also exploit them.’ Interview with Ma Khin Mar Mar Kyi, a Burmese women’s human rights activist working on trafficking of women and children in the Asia-Pacific region, Canberra, 20 February 2004.

\textsuperscript{58} Australian indigenous activist and scholar Gordon Briscoe explained that for indigenous women, gender advocacy is integral to other efforts including fighting against racial discrimination and advocating for land rights, and these are instrumental to their gender activism. Interview with Gordon Briscoe, Centre for Indigenous History, Research School of Social Sciences, The Australian National University, Canberra, 4–5 February 2004.

objectives, and that it elicit the voices of the poor in support of its current development strategy. We need our criticisms of development strategies to get at the root causes of women’s oppression and not merely function as a call for a discourse of compassion that seems to be the current face of the Washington Consensus.

**Peace, security and justice**

As always, peace, security and justice are on the agenda of transnational feminism for the coming decade. To make our arguments for peace, for a feminist analysis of human security, and for recovering the hidden truths of past violations in order to create a path toward reconciliation and reparations, feminists extend our criticisms of power to international politics and to the politics of nation-building. Using the analytical framework of human rights, through the 1990s and early twenty-first century, grassroots activists networked transnationally to hold a range of state actors accountable for war-time violations of human rights and to make the gendered character of those violations a matter of public awareness and scrutiny.

Groups promoting peace, human security and justice have developed networks and garnered allies. Through their work, they are expanding and reinvigorating the human rights framework as a tool for holding governments responsible for non-military violence during military operations. The rights-framework may also be a tool for creating alliances between those working to stop violence against women in peacetime and wartime.

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Material, identity and community issues

For some feminist and women’s activists, the interests of LGBTIQ people are identity issues, not material issues. For others, even gendered and cultural issues are not as deserving of feminist and women’s activists’ attention unless ‘they become the big problem’. As Ghosh argued, Indian activists don’t have an ‘excessive focus on cultural issues because the material problems are so big’. Kyi asserted that ‘gay and lesbian issues are not important in the Asia-Pacific region. Asians might encourage rights but not gay and lesbian issues.’ Mandi-Filer frames sexuality issues as a matter of luxury: ‘there are other areas which are “non-luxurious”. Most of our women are just trying to survive.’ Likewise, an activist with the World March of Women says that feminist and women’s activists in Burkina Faso need to focus on:

things that are possible. It’s the visible struggle, you see, for example, for us, in our homeland, women living today die while giving birth because of health problems. This is an objective, realistic, feasible struggle. For us, there are groups of women who travel ten to 15 kilometres in order to go get water. It is unbelievable. And at least, for example, the government can do something to solve this problem. For us, there are women who do not have birth certificates, who do not have identification cards. This is a struggle we can win. For us, there are unclear parts of the law. The law is not equitable. Depending on the person, it changes … These are struggles we can win.

It is apparent in the discussions of these Indian, Asian, Pacific and African feminists that women are not united on whether issues of sexuality—or other issues that challenge cultural norms—should be part of women’s common cause. The challenges to analytical cohesion are not merely strategic. As the following shows, they can also be moral or epistemological. Consider the thoughts of the activist from Burkina Faso with the World March of Women:

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64 Interview with anonymous gender and development expert from Guinea-Bissau; interviews with two anonymous activists with the World March of Women, WSF, Mumbai, 21 January 2004.

65 Interview with Ghosh; interview with Kyi; interview with Mandi-Filer.

For me, feminism means that I commit myself, with all of my force, with all of my faith, in the struggle so that women succeed in this endeavour ... Nonetheless, we’ve had the time to ascertain that feminism, it means that we have to agree that everything is allowed and I think that, here on earth, everything is not allowed ... But we realised that, in the World March, there is something called sexual orientation. And we, we are not ready to commit ourselves to fight, to ask for the authorisation to have a sexual orientation other than what one normally has. I am talking about homosexuality. Whether it is right or not, for us, this is a difficult situation. It is not one of our primary concerns. Therefore, this is a difference between the North and us, which means that, from time to time, there are tensions.67

For her, LGBTIQ issues are issues of feminists of the global North and are not a moral imperative. While her organisation supports LGBTIQ issues by participating in the World March of Women, she does not understand those issues as analytically inseparable from the issues of legal rights for women and access to water which are the focus of her work. Moreover, despite the tremendous visibility of the South–South Dialogue—a coalition of LGBTIQ activists from the global South and the Rainbow Planet—at WSF 2004, she maintains that it is a ‘northern’ issue not relevant to her context.68

DEVELOPING THE EMERGING HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORK OF WOMEN’S HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS

The divisiveness on issues of sexuality and culture demonstrates that there is much more political and analytical work to be done. It is not enough for activists to agree to support one another on ‘their’ issues. While potentially strategically useful in the near-term, quid pro quo is analytically limited and strategically limiting in the long-run. If transnational feminism and human rights are going to be more than mere monikers with complex and nuanced meanings in particular contexts but with little shared substantive meaning, we need to understand all rights


68 Her perception may be because so much of WSF 2004 was in English. Feminists from francophone Africa were not able to see and hear the evidence that contradicted her assumption. Or it may be that she initially became aware of LGBTIQ issues through donors, scholars and activists from the global North.
issues as indivisibly part of the same analytical framework. How can feminists do this?

**Fundamentalisms: Economic, religious and political**

One approach might be to unite in shared opposition to a foe—a particular political, economic or cultural foe. Joseph Stiglitz proposes opposition to the constellation of institutions and political actors involved in globalisation. A WLUM activist-scholar argues for united opposition against religious fundamentalism, that is, the use of authoritarian interpretations of religious texts for political purposes. Sonia Corrêa and Gita Sen draw a connection between the many forms of religious fundamentalism—Islamic, Catholic, Hindu, Protestant—and ‘market fundamentalism’, that is

the dogmatic attachment to the principles of neo-classical economics that underpins neo-liberal life or, in other words, the ‘belief’ in a single economic model that can and should be applied in every corner of the world. Such ‘belief’ inhibits the recognition of problems and crises emerging from the implementation of the model.

For Ghosh, market fundamentalism is the primary foe, but religious and market fundamentalism are not materially distinct. She argues that it is not coincidental that in contemporary India the most fundamentalist political party has been the strongest supporter of ‘market fundamentalism’. Fareeda Shaheed rejects the use of the word fundamentalism and prefers to criticise those who promote an essentialist view of community. In each of these examples, the common foe is a constellation of political, social and economic influences.

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70  Marieme Helier Lucas (Women Living Under Muslim Laws–France), speaking at WSF 2004 workshop, Political Bodies: The New Emancipatory Struggles that Feed a Radical Democracy.


73  Corrêa, *Population and reproductive rights*, p. 3.

A multifaceted strategy unified by a human rights analytical framework

In order to continue to use ‘human rights’ for feminist and women’s activism to promote the various issues put forward for the transnational feminist agenda by feminist and women’s activists, we need to work within the framework to change it so that it better deals with the problems discussed above. Human rights needs to continue to be a coherent and dynamic framework that can be usefully applied to each of these agenda items, and theoretically responsive to the understanding of human rights proposed by them. We propose that feminists and women’s activists continue the work of women’s human rights scholars and activists—stimulating new discussions about the meaning of universal human rights while applying it to current and emerging issue areas.75

The three politically informed analytical insights emerging through the last decade or so of activism—gender analysis is essential, all rights are interrelated, and long-term maintenance of women’s human rights requires structural changes—needs to be sustained. For feminist transnational activism to have a successful unified multifaceted strategy that does not perpetuate the political and analytical problems discussed above, its underlying notion of human rights has to be dialogically responsive to the issues of women’s activists. Importantly, though no single metaphysical foundation should be sought, when making new rights claims, activists and scholars must thoroughly explore the gendered, indivisibility and structural aspects of the claim.

While we can gain a certain kind of traction on a problem by disaggregating rights claims in order to identify them and study them, we cannot understand them as analytically distinct. The HIV/AIDS crisis illustrates the point. Although there were voices early on who wanted to treat HIV/AIDS as a health issue, in the US the demand for attention to HIV/AIDS was treated as an issue of gay men’s identity politics. In the aftermath of an identity politics rather than integrated rights-based approach to AIDS, gay men are no longer a high risk group for HIV/AIDS and married women in Africa are suffering, with the long-term consequences for

health, education and development impacting on their countries. Moreover, their ability to seek medical care is undermined by the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS. As every aspect of the history of this disease illustrates, while health rights can be pursued in the near-term as material or identity rights, health rights will not be secured without an integrated analytical perspective and a long-term integrated political strategy.

The example of HIV/AIDS reminds us that the distinction between ‘big’ and ‘small’ issues has a political dimension to it. Though we do recognise that the distinction between ‘big’ and ‘small’ is sometimes politically important (as many of our interview subjects informed us), we do not see the distinction between ‘big’ and ‘small’ as analytically important.

An integrated analytical framework leads to a better way of arguing about another ‘big’ area. Community issues are an area in which women’s interests often appear in conflict with community interests. Feminists and women’s activists need an analytical framework that requires them to integrate the rights claims of those made vulnerable by the internal hierarchies of communities, and yet enables them to see the sustainability of communities vulnerable to external threat as a rights issue. Material claims are partially constitutive of identity, and identity claims cannot require alienating one’s own material claims. Therefore, respecting community rights claims cannot require denying the rights claims of its members.

Although there are feminists who have argued that women’s material claims are more important than community claims, that identity claims are as important as material claims, or that community identity is as important as women’s material claims, we want to argue that if we understand material and identity claims as **unable** to be disaggregated without misunderstanding either, there is no incoherence in holding all three of these

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77 Okin, with respondents, *Is multiculturalism bad for women?*; interview with Ghosh.


79 At WSF 2004 workshop, LGBT Alternative Strategies to Exclusionary Globalization.
views. We can adjudicate between seemingly conflicting strategic orientations without undermining our theoretical commitment to all three.

We need to have in mind the sources of disunity within the feminist movement such as those discussed above when we work through the problems of the women’s human rights analytical framework. We cannot be concerned only with the human rights violations that affect a certain portion—the most visible, most numerous, most articulate—of the population. Because the women’s human rights analytical framework treats all rights as interrelated, and feminist and women’s activists don’t want to offer analytical or strategic support to a view that argues that it is acceptable to de-emphasise human rights advocacy for the least visible, least numerous, or least articulate, feminist and women’s activists need to work to rearticulate our rights analysis so that it supports the strategic priorities that power-challenged activists need to make without treating human rights as divisible. Models of human rights that treat some human rights as ‘core’, ‘basic’ or ‘universal’, implicitly or explicitly treat others, often women’s human rights, as cultural or contested and therefore not the subject of universal rights. Such analytical perspectives on human rights give theoretical weight to cultural relativist responses to women’s human rights claims. Feminist and women’s human rights activists’ interests, however they manifest themselves—material, identity and community—can only be undermined by supporting the divisibility or hierarchy of rights approaches. While appreciating the concerns raised by cultural relativists, our respondents found that cultural relativism undermines feminist and women’s activism.

CONCLUSION: USING AND EXPANDING WOMEN’S HUMAN RIGHTS DISCOURSE

We have three ways of assessing the women’s human rights approach as a tool of transnational feminism: its achievements, its strategic shortcomings, and the agenda it faces for the next decade. While its achievements have been monumental given the range of challenges at local, national and international levels, its strategic shortcomings have given transnational feminists pause about the advantages and

disadvantages of continuing with the human rights approach as our political strategy and unifying analytical framework. In considering the agenda for feminist and women’s activists in the next decade, we have argued that we can continue to use the human rights framework by invigorating it through dealing with its shortcomings and wrestling with the challenges posed by the agenda.

One reason for abandoning the human rights framework might be a lack of confidence in that framework’s ability to continue to sustain women’s activism. Other reasons are that the concept of human rights is overworked by feminist theorists and misappropriated by non-feminists. All of these reasons for moving away from the human rights analytical framework seem to us to be at least theoretically and strategically undeveloped and politically problematic. Feminists should not cede the intellectual ground of human rights either because it has been well-trampled or because others want to claim it. Rather, the fact that human rights activism is continuing to expand the communities in which the discourse of human rights is commonly useful should be a resource for further strengthening feminist ends. The challenges offer opportunities for reinvigorating the rights analytical framework.

We cannot, however, be confident that just because transnational feminists want to be more inclusive, not to crowd out certain forms of activism, not to draw attention away from others, that we will be successful. As activists and scholars, we need to be vigilanty self-reflective. We must always ask ourselves are these the appropriate subjects of our criticism? Have all of the appropriate analytical perspectives contributed to the problem-solving? Are we guiding our critical inquiry by criteria that have themselves been the subject of our critical reflection?81

One way to subject the reinvigorated human rights analytical framework to critical scrutiny is to ask if the human rights framework can do a better job of articulating the concerns of those who would argue using an analytical framework associated with capability, human security and gender mainstreaming (or other concepts one might propose) than those

81 For a theoretical development of these questions as tools of Third World women’s activism and theoretical thinking see Ackerly, Political theory and feminist social criticism.
frameworks can. While full-fledged arguments in favour of each of these perspectives is beyond the scope of this article, we suggest that while these or other discourses may be helpful in reinvigorating or complementing the human rights framework and in helping develop conceptual links that may be important to sustaining the particular efforts of certain transnational feminist and women’s activists, they should not analytically displace the human rights framework for uniting transnational feminist activism.

After more than a decade of using the rights discourse, it is still being extended—as in the right to information and right to food campaigns in India, and in the Resolution on Sexual Orientation and Human Rights submitted (and then withdrawn) by Brazil to the UN Human Rights Commission 60th Session in April 2004. In no small measure, one reason for continuing to work within the framework is because, to date, feminists have been so successful at working within the human rights framework while changing it. Moreover, using this discourse, grassroots and well-networked women have been effective in bringing about material change in both women’s lives at the grassroots and in global rights institutions. To switch from the rights framework would be to abandon those who have invested in the project at great opportunity cost.

The unity that we are proposing transnational feminism should continue to foster is not a unity of issues, nor a unity of language, nor a unity of opposition. Rather we are proposing that we sustain through a shared critical analysis—of gender, indivisibility and structure—what has been a powerful strategic and analytical framework for feminist and women’s activists, that is, the human rights framework.