

The Global Women's Rights Movement

*Power Politics around the United Nations
and the World Social Forum*

Wendy Harcourt

This United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) Programme Paper has been produced with the support of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). UNRISD also thanks the governments of Denmark, Finland, Mexico, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom for their core funding.

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Acronyms

| | |
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| APDC | Asia Pacific Development Centre |
| AWID | Association for Women's Rights in Development |
| CEE | Commonwealth of Independent States |
| CIS | Central and Eastern Europe |
| CSW | United Nations Commission on the Status of Women |
| DAWN | Development Alternatives with Women in a New Era |
| FINRRAGE | Feminist Network of International Resistance to the new Reproductive Technologies and Genetic Engineering |
| G8 | Group of 8 industrialized countries |
| GCAP | Global Call for Action against Poverty |
| MDG | Millennium Development Goal |
| RAINBO | Research Action and Information Network for the Bodily Integrity of Women |
| SID | Society for International Development |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNCED | United National Conference on Environment and Development |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| UNDPI | United Nations Department of Public Information |
| US | United States |
| WEDO | Women's Environment and Development Organization |
| WID | Women in Development |
| WIDE | Women in Development Europe |
| WICEJ | Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice |
| WSF | World Social Forum |
| WTO | World Trade Organization |

Summary/Résumé/Resumen

Summary

This paper examines the discourse, inputs and reorganization of strategies that emanated from the lobbying of women's rights movements vis-à-vis global agencies like the United Nations (UN), as well as the World Social Forum. Harcourt sets out some key strategic questions for consideration: How much have women's movements achieved by working in collaboration with the UN? Is there a recognizable global women's rights movement as it is perceived on the UN stage? Is there such an entity as a global women's movement, or is it just a skilfully played mirage?

The author seeks to answer these questions based on her experience as a feminist researcher and activist involved in women's rights issues, as well as through reference to the literature and ongoing debates. The essay is a contribution to these heated debates: about the role of global agencies; their effects on the autonomy, legitimacy and representativeness of social movements; and their local impacts and actual benefits for women around the globe.

Wendy Harcourt is Editor of *Development*, the flagship journal of the Society for International Development (SID), Rome, Italy.

Résumé

L'auteure s'intéresse ici aux mouvements pour les droits de la femme, à leur discours, à ce qu'ils ont apporté et à la réorientation des stratégies dont témoigne leur action auprès d'institutions mondiales comme l'ONU et le Forum social mondial. Wendy Harcourt pose des questions stratégiques clés qu'elle soumet à notre réflexion: Qu'est-ce qu'ont gagné les mouvements féminins à travailler en collaboration avec l'ONU? Y a-t-il un mouvement mondial pour les droits de la femme reconnaissable perçu comme tel dans l'enceinte de l'ONU? Existe-t-il vraiment un mouvement mondial des femmes ou est-ce simplement un mirage dont on joue avec adresse?

L'auteure cherche à répondre à ces questions en se fondant sur son expérience de chercheuse et de militante féministe engagée sur les questions des droits de la femme, ainsi que sur la littérature et les débats en cours. Son essai est une contribution à ces débats passionnés sur le rôle des institutions mondiales, leurs effets sur l'autonomie, la légitimité et la représentativité des mouvements sociaux, leur impact au niveau local et les avantages réels qu'en tirent les femmes à travers le monde.

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Resumen

En este documento se analiza el discurso, los aportes y la reorganización de las estrategias resultantes del cabildeo que han realizado los movimientos de derechos de la mujer ante organismos internacionales como las Naciones Unidas, así como ante el Foro Social Mundial. Harcourt formula una serie de preguntas estratégicas clave, a saber: ¿Cuáles han sido los logros de los movimientos de mujeres al trabajar en colaboración con las Naciones Unidas? ¿En el escenario de las Naciones Unidas se percibe y reconoce un movimiento mundial de derechos de la mujer? ¿Existe una entidad que pudiéramos llamar movimiento mundial de mujeres, o se trata de apenas un espejismo manejado con destreza?

La autora busca responder a estos interrogantes a partir de su experiencia como investigadora de temas feministas y activista en el campo de los derechos de la mujer, así como mediante

referencias a la bibliografía pertinente y los debates actuales sobre estos temas. Este ensayo es una contribución a los candentes debates en curso sobre el papel de los organismos internacionales, sus efectos sobre la autonomía, legitimidad y representatividad de los movimientos sociales y sus repercusiones a nivel local y beneficios reales para las mujeres en todas partes del mundo.

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Introduction

In recent years, the global women's rights movement has become a visible player in civil society and United Nations (UN) negotiations. Particularly around the big UN conferences of the 1990s, the lobbying of women's rights networks has established issues such as women's empowerment, gender mainstreaming and women's human rights as a key feature of UN intergovernmental negotiations and agreements. As Tinker states:

UN Conferences were critical in raising women's issues globally and promoting networking. ... The four world women's conferences and the many events that surrounded them legitimated women's agendas and united women across ideological and national boundaries (Fraser and Tinker 2004:xxvii).

In recent literature, there has been a celebration of the results of this engagement. Joanna Kerr, executive director of the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), enthusiastically remarks that

feminists a hundred years ago could never have dreamed of the successes so many of us enjoy today. Just imagine how feminists in the twenty-second century will celebrate our achievements (Kerr et al. 2004:37).

At the same time, even those very close to the process are questioning the energy that women give to the UN processes. Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck, a global women's rights leader from the Open Society Institute questions

whether or not the United Nations and its mechanisms and instruments should still be our focus...the international women's movement will have to deal with the pros and cons of retreating from the UN altogether...a critical question given that for the last thirty years the UN has contributed greatly to building the women's movement (Kerr et al. 2004:187-188).

The question I would like to explore in this essay is to what extent both this questioning and celebration is valid. I am interested in the growing unease among women working around the UN processes and the shift toward global justice movements as the pivots of the global women's movement's attention. Questions are now being raised about how much women have achieved outside the world of the United Nations and its statements, documents and complex negotiation processes. In addition, questions are being raised about whether the women working at the global level are visible beyond the halls of the United Nations as a genuine movement. Has there been a recognizable success of their work back home, among the communities to which they so often refer? Is there an identifiable global women's rights movement in other political arenas as it is perceived on the UN stage? Are women's rights on the agendas of other social movements? Who are the defining players of this global women's rights movement? What is their legitimacy both within and beyond the women's rights movement at national and regional levels? And what is their relationship to the World Social Forum (WSF)? Is there such an entity as a global women's rights movement, or is it just useful to some women as a political mirage?

As a feminist researcher and activist involved in women's rights issues since the mid-1980s,¹ I explore these questions by looking at the last 15 years of global political work by women in the North and South who have banded together as a global women's rights movement in response to the UN processes. The essay is a frank insider's view, based on my own reflections,

¹ I have been working in international development issues since 1988 when I joined the Society for International Development (SID) as coordinator of the Society for International Development-Women in Development (SID-WID). I have been active in various networks and attended many of the UN conferences as a non-governmental organization (NGO) delegate representing SID and Women in Development Europe (WIDE). I am currently chair of WIDE.

conversations, writings and readings that are part of my work for women's rights in the global arena.²

My focus is on what I see as the specific contribution of the global women's rights, as a self-defined movement – an issue I take up throughout the essay – to development policy and social movements. I look in some detail at the cluster of issues, which I label body politics, that are at the heart of what distinguishes women's rights movements from other rights movements. Essentially, this refers to struggles to end gender violence, ensure sexual choice and promote reproductive rights and women's health. It is difficult to prise this set of struggles from other political and economic concerns that impact on women, so the essay also looks at how these issues interact and engage with other "gender equality" battles.³

As the global social justice movement is building up a new momentum that is shifting the focus of civil society away from the United Nations as the primary arena for global expression, it is important to consider the history of the global women's rights movement around the United Nations and also its interactions within global social justice movements. By analysing the way the global women's rights movement has been operating, the essay aims both to contribute to the current documentation of women's rights movements, teasing out the various processes, tensions and contradictions that have defined it histories, and also to foster connections with other global social movements.⁴

Definitions

The knowledge and terminology used in this essay is both specialized and contested, and indeed this contestation is part of the history of the global women's rights movement. To begin with, the term global women's rights movement is itself not a neatly defined identity. As queried above, is there a global women's rights movement as such? And if so, who belongs to the global women's rights movement? These are certainly contested questions and the answers vary.

Even if Antrobus confidently titled her book *The Global Women's Movement*, in the introduction she states that the term is problematic and clarifies this by adding that it is a movement

formed out of many movements shaped in local struggles and brought together in the context of global opportunities and challenges...as women discover commonalities and come to a better understanding of how the social relations of gender are implicated in the systemic crises (Antrobus 2004:2).

In her edited collection of local feminisms, Basu talks about women's movements from a global perspective, clearly uncomfortable with the concept of a global women's movement even if she states that "few social movements have flourished in as many parts of the world as women's movements have" (1995:1). She immediately qualifies this with the comment

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