Gender Equality and the Economic Empowerment of Women
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Abstract
This paper examines the notion of rights discourse and its international application in recent feminist theory. Feminists seem to take at least two contradictory views of rights. On the one hand, some feminists criticize the notion of rights as a highly individualistic, abstract Western idea. They argue that rights are a culture-bound construct that does not do justice to more relational understandings of self, or to communal cultures. Yet other feminists argue that rights is an important tool for securing women’s protection from violence, and promoting women’s equality. I argue that both of these views inadvertently neglect economic issues, and so long as this is the case, current discussions of rights by Western feminists have only limited benefit for poor women in developing countries. I suggest that feminists concerned with global women’s issues and rights prioritize economic and social rights, rather than political and legal rights. I illustrate the connection between women’s economic empowerment and the resulting overall improvement of quality of life by looking at the impact of Indian women’s employment in two co-operatives, Marketplace India and SEWA (the Self-Employed Women’s Association).

Introduction
Much of the feminist debate at the international level concerns the issue of human rights. In so far as human rights promote the fair and equal treatment of individuals regardless of gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and religious orientation, feminism and human rights seem to be natural allies. Many feminists argue for the importance of fully including women in the scope and application of human rights. Clearly, women should be offered the basic protections and freedoms that men enjoy. Moreover, feminists argue that simply extending human rights to women does not go far enough because there are a number of gender specific circumstances, such as reproductive issues and domestic violence, that remain outside the scope of human rights as currently conceived. This approach to securing women’s equality globally focuses on women’s inclusion in the scope of human rights, and questions the gender neutrality of the concept of human rights.

In contrast to this feminist view, which I shall call the liberal feminist view, some feminists criticize the notion of universal human rights itself. They argue that rights are a culture-bound construct that does not do justice to more relational understandings of self, or to communal cultures. They point to the history of human rights as originating in Enlightenment Europe. And they caution against applying the notion of human rights cross-culturally without attention to historical context or cultural particularity. Feminists who hold this view claim that the idea of rights is not only male-biased, but culturally biased, and so cannot simply be uncritically adopted by feminists. Recent work in feminist theory demonstrates that gender cannot simply be abstracted from culture, religion, nationality, ethnicity, race, and sexuality, but
must be understood as intrinsically related to all these other aspects of social identity. Various feminisms comprise this approach, multicultural, postmodern, and postcolonial; here I shall refer to this position as the multicultural feminist position.

In this paper I shall argue that both the liberal and the multicultural feminist views inadvertently neglect economic issues, and so long as this is the case, current discussions of universal human rights have only limited benefit for poor women. Although no nation is immune from the deleterious effects of poverty, the unequal distribution of wealth and power among nations makes the issue of poverty particularly acute in less wealthy, less industrialized countries, so called “developing nations.”¹ I suggest that feminists concerned with global women’s issues and rights should prioritize economic and social rights, rather than political and legal rights. If someone’s basic needs for food, shelter and health care are not met, they may not have the time or energy to concern themselves with gender equality under the law or in the political sphere. The granting of rights is empty without the corresponding ability to exercise those rights. The view that I put forward here may be called the socialist feminist view because of its emphasis on economic issues.

Although I believe that economic justice is foundational for other types of social justice, it alone cannot provide equality for women in the face of persistent gender stereotypes and women’s devaluation. But economic power is linked to social power. Two organizations that I have researched, Marketplace India and SEWA (the Self-Employed Women’s Association), illustrate the connection between women’s economic empowerment and the resulting overall improvement of quality of life. Both are co-operatives that employ women as well as providing services and programs that promote women’s leadership and empowerment. I believe that these organizations, both located in India, can provide a model for transnational feminism that links

¹ I use the term “developing countries” with serious reservations. Any attempt to divide up the world is fraught with problematic implications. For instance, the term developing countries carries with it the assumption that the modernization and industrialization of capitalist consumer societies is the standard that all countries should strive to attain. For this reason the less loaded term “newly industrialized countries” or NICS was used at the 1985 United Nations Non-Governmental Organization Conference on Women in Nairobi, Kenya. Although this alleviates the issue of taking industrialized Western countries as the ideal to be achieved, one should be aware that any attempt to divide the world carries unanticipated value judgments. Moreover, these divisions may be geographical, political, economic, or conceptual, each with its own assumptions about the salience of particular features of the world. This is reflected in some of the commonest terms used to divide the world—Western/non-Western, Global North/Global South, and First World/Third World. Many of these divisions privilege the West, specifically Europe and the United States, leading Homi Bhabha to ironically characterize the distinction as between “the West and the Rest.” To date, I have not found terms that are completely satisfactory, and thus whenever I employ terms that divide up the world, it is with a certain amount of ambivalence.
the economic with the cultural and social. They improve women’s lives both individually and collectively through simultaneously teaching skills, providing employment, and teaching women to value themselves and each other, and to expect to be valued by others.

Rights and Equality for Women: the Liberal Feminist View

The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in its very first Article, proclaims that all individuals deserve the right to equality. But it stops short of detailing how this equality could be achieved, either within a nation or among nations. Complicating matters further is the variety of inequalities, including but not limited to: economic, racial and ethnic, and sex/ gender. Although contemporary feminist theory recognizes the interconnections among these various inequalities, feminists tend to privilege and prioritize sex equality. Consequently, many feminist agendas focus on securing equal rights for women under the law. International documents, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, help to provide the moral grounding to make political claims that promote equality within nation-states. The notion of universal human rights is based on the assumption of the equal worth and dignity of each human being. Rights discourse is a powerful tool for making governments accountable for the treatment of their citizens, often preventing or inhibiting violations of human rights such as false imprisonment, forced labor, torture, the lack of due process under the law, and restriction of civil liberties. Understandably, feminists have adopted this powerful discourse to help secure women’s rights. In many cases, such as the previous examples, securing women’s rights simply means ensuring that women are included in the group to whom the right of due process is extended. However, all too often women are systematically disadvantaged in the law when it comes to owning property, inheritance, marriage and divorce, reproductive issues, and equal access and opportunity to jobs and education. Because of this, many feminists advocate the view that “women’s rights are human rights.”

Feminists who hold this view believe not only that women should be included in the purview of existing human rights, but also that the notion of human rights needs to be broadened to include such issues as sexual violence, domestic violence, reproductive issues, and gender specific violence, such as

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2 For an excellent discussion of this position, see the essays in *Women’s Right’s, Human Rights: International Feminist Perspectives*, Eds. Julie Peters and Andrea Wolper (New York, Routledge, 1995).
honor killing, female genital cutting, and dowry murder. Feminists should exercise caution, however, when focusing on these latter issues. Historically, feminists have labeled these problems as cultural, thus setting up rights as the antithesis of culture.

For example, some feminists such as Susan Moller Okin and Charlotte Bunch argue that women’s rights and gender equality must take precedence over culture and tradition, because the latter are patriarchal. For instance, Bunch states, “Most cultures as we know them today are patriarchal.”3 Okin goes even further, saying, “Many violations of women’s basic human rights both occur within families and are justified by reference to culture, religion or tradition.” 4 Okin even goes so far as to claim that women and girls in minority cultures might be better off if their culture became extinct and they were fully integrated into the majority culture.5 Understandably, feminists responded by defending the importance of culture both to their own identities and for international feminist discourse and activism. I agree that if feminism aims to embrace a global vision, it must be culturally and historically sensitive and not impose ethnocentric views from the dominant West. I believe it is unfortunate that the notion of cultural integrity and sovereignty has become juxtaposed to the notion of rights and equality for women. In the next section I discuss some of the problems with pitting culture against women’s equality and rights.

Feminist Challenges to Rights as Universal: the Multicultural Feminist View

Extending rights to women, and correcting gender bias in the scope and application of rights are important strategies to promote women’s equality globally. Yet this strategy leaves the notion of rights, more specifically universal human rights, unquestioned. As many feminists have pointed out, the use of rights discourse privileges certain notions of the person. Rights are possessed and exercised by the individual. Moreover, the notion of rights asks us to abstract from all the particularities of a person, such as her culture, religion, social class, ethnicity, race, sexual identity and nationality. This very conception of rights as inhering in individuals already precludes other conceptions of identity, where one might identify more strongly as a member of a cultural, religious or ethnic group than as an individual. Feminists defending this

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multiculturalist position caution against simply assuming that applying human rights cross-culturally is the most liberating or effective strategy to achieve gender equality. The basic argument of such feminist work is as follows: white Western feminists ought not simply apply notions of equality or rights to other countries and other cultures without recognizing that these concepts have historical roots in the Western liberal tradition.

Given this origin, these concepts may carry Western liberal bias, such as the idea that culture, religion and tradition can easily be left aside in favor of (abstract) individualism. This devaluation of culture reinforces the dominance of the hegemonic Western view. As Oyeronke Oyewumi says, “…one cannot assume the social organization of one culture (the dominant West included) as universal or the interpretations of the experiences of one culture as explaining another one.” 6 Many Third World feminists share her view that categories and concepts cannot simply be extrapolated from one culture to another. If culture provides a set of social meanings with which we make sense of our selves and the world, then its importance cannot be overvalued. Many feminists, such as Chandra Mohanty and Lila Abu-Lughod, point out the similarities between the contemporary discourse of equality, freedom and rights and earlier colonial discourse about Third World women. As Abu-Lughod notes, historically the West has justified its intervention into other cultures by seeking to “protect” women.7 Or as Gayatri Spivak puts it, history is full of examples of “white men saving brown women from brown men.”8 While Spivak is referring to men’s historical role in colonialism, even well meaning feminists may inadvertently undermine a woman’s cultural or religious identity in the name of equal rights. One contemporary example of feminist disagreement is over the issue of veiling. As Abu-Lughod and others point out not only does the practice of wearing the veil differ from country to country, but its meaning varies with respect to nation, history and politics. It is reductive and ethnocentric to view the veil as a sign of women’s oppression and to advocate for its abolition. Instead, the practice of veiling (and other cultural and religious practices) must be understood and addressed in their specific historical and cultural context. Understanding issues in their historical and cultural context can provide important insights. Feminists uniformly

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condemn cases of gender-specific violence such as dowry murder mentioned earlier. But looking at it as solely a cultural issue, rather than as an economic one, distorts and sensationalizes it. In reality, dowry murder is not sanctioned by tradition or culture any more than killing one’s wife for the life insurance money is sanctioned in U. S culture. Both happen primarily for economic reasons, in the context of a host of other issues, including structural inequality between men and women. Assigning the blame for dowry murder to culture, rather than looking at it as a fairly rare occurrence that is nonetheless serious because its part of the larger problem of violence against women, contributes to the Othering of non-Western cultures. It is in everyone’s interest to stop violence against women, but we must also exercise caution so that feminist analyses do not perpetuate cultural stereotypes and inadvertently suggest Western cultural superiority. Viewing dowry murder as some exotic cultural practice sanctioned by tradition serves to simultaneously vilify and justify it as something totally outside the scope of non-Indian experience. But perhaps more importantly, this type of reductive analysis can impede solutions, which need to take cultural, economic, historical and political factors into account. As Uma Narayan points out in her book, *Dislocating Cultures*, attributing violence against women to cultural factors is much more likely to happen when First World Western feminists describe the situation of Third World non-Western women. Part of this problem lies in the issue discussed earlier, that the West is privileged as the standard, and so is taken to be normatively neutral. This presumed neutrality results in blaming culture for the problems in non-Western countries, but not for problems in Western countries because they are presumably culturally neutral, i.e., they do not have culture. Thus, Western feminists engaging in international, cross-cultural work need to be reflective about the ways that they include cultural considerations in their work, and to recognize their own specific cultural location.

Taking cultural difference seriously complicates any attempt to promote a global or transnational feminism. As discussed earlier, feminists have made great strides in the past 35 years in getting women’s rights issues on the international agenda. While including women’s rights as human rights represents an important advancement, such advancement should not come at the cost of marginalizing women of the Global South. Mohanty, Abu-Lughod, and Oyewumi

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raise significant criticisms of ethnocentrism and colonialism in some feminist approaches to international issues.

All too often, liberal feminists who focus on rights and multicultural feminists who emphasize culture seem to come to an impasse. But some feminists, such as Uma Narayan and Seyla Benhabib, have moved beyond the juxtaposition of rights and culture; they question the concept of culture itself. Both caution against a reified and monolithic view of culture, urging us to recognize the variety of heterogeneous and often contradictory practices that make up a single culture. I agree with their view that cultures are heterogeneous and complex. And that feminists should employ a nuanced understanding of cultural difference with respect to gender equality. But I believe that the struggle over which should predominate—rights or culture—overlooks the primary issue on which women’s equality hinges: economics.

Feminism and Economic Empowerment

The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights includes social and economic rights, along with political and legal rights. But feminists, like many others in the international arena, have rarely argued for the interconnections of these fundamental rights. In his book, *Pathologies of Power*, anthropologist and physician Paul Farmer discusses the situation of the poor, those who lack basic resources such as enough food, safe drinking water, a place to live, and access to health care. Referring to the deprivation suffered by the poor, he uses the term “structural violence.” Structural violence includes extreme and relative poverty, as well as social inequalities such as racism and gender inequality. I agree with Farmer’s claim that, “civil rights cannot really be defended if social and economic rights are not.” Contemporary feminists must acknowledge that the economic status of women is bound up not only with their quality of life, but also with their ability to exercise political and legal rights. Of the 1.3 billion people in the world who are recognized as the ‘absolute poor’ (living on less than $1 a day), nearly 70% are

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12 Ibid. 9.
women. Interlocking problems of illiteracy, inequitable wages, and poor health, bolstered by patriarchal systems and social customs make it difficult for women to break free from a life of poverty. Yet according to a recent Population and Development report from the United Nations, promoting the status, education, and health of women is an essential human rights goal, and also holds the key to social development in all societies, improving lives and strengthening families and communities. It is by now a commonplace in development literature that improving women’s quality of life enhances the quality of life generally.

My interest in the feminist debate about culture as inimical to rights led me to believe that feminists need to complicate our understanding of culture, and that recourse to cultural explanations alone to explain gender inequality undermines cross-cultural understanding, as well as inhibiting useful strategies for change. Furthermore, focusing on the culture versus rights aspect of global feminism elides the larger issue of the structural violence of poverty. No nation is immune from poverty. Economist Amartya Sen notes that, “deprived groups in the ‘First World’ live, in many ways, in the ‘Third.’ For example, African Americans in some of the most prosperous U. S. cities (such as New York, Washington or San Francisco) have a lower life expectancy at birth than do most people in immensely poorer China or even India.” But the domination of some nations over others through institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary fund reinforces global patterns of economic inequality.

Poverty and lack of resources obviously affect men and boys as well as women and girls, but societal and cultural gender bias means that poverty disproportionately affects girls and women. Promoting the status of women and girls is an uphill struggle no matter where one lives, but when resources are scarce, the devaluation of women and girls can result in real harm, even death. There are myriad examples of gender inequality and poverty both in the developing and the developed world. Here I focus on India because of the contrast between seemingly stark conditions for poor women and girls, and the possibilities for creative resistance and transformation offered by the co-operatives that I researched. India is the second most populated country in the world, and the largest democracy, but still a country in which there is widespread poverty. According to recent statistics gathered by the United Nations Development Programme,

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14 Ibid.
15 Amartya Sen, “Foreword” in Farmer, Pathologies of Power, xii.
in India an estimated 39% percent of adults are illiterate, 47% of all children are underweight and undernourished, and 34% of the population live on less than $1 a day. Moreover, 14% lack access to safe water, and 67% don’t have access to proper sanitation.\(^\text{16}\)

Scarce resources, combined with the lack of economic and earning power of women and girls, means that gender discrimination is perpetuated for both economic and cultural reasons. In her article, “Violence Against Women: The Indian Perspective,” Indira Jaising states: “The persistence in India of cultural practices that discriminate against girls and women means not only the abuse of but finally, the deaths of countless women…. one study showed that 7,997 of 8,000 fetuses aborted were female…If a girl is lucky enough to be born, she experiences discrimination in her infancy. Girl children are fed less and for shorter periods and are not given foods like butter or milk, which are reserved, for boys. …Access to education, too, is affected by gender discrimination. Only about 50% of girls are enrolled in primary school, compared to 80% of boys.”\(^\text{17}\) The cultural devaluation of women is reflected in the preference for baby boys, and the withholding of nutritious foods from girls, although this of course varies depending on the region, social class, community and family. But this allegedly cultural preference stems from a variety of sources, including family structure, kinship systems and the difference in earning power between men and women. Moreover, when girls receive less education than boys the cycle of gender discrimination continues. Those without much formal education are unlikely to get skilled or professional high paying jobs. In addition to these implicit forms of gender bias, Kirti Singh notes that violence against women in India is on the rise, between 1982 and 1992 crimes against women increased by 104%\(^\text{18}\).

The issues of legal reform and economic reform cannot be easily separated; Singh mentions that positive changes in dowry laws without corresponding changes in property and inheritance laws do little to improve women’s condition. She states, “All this [these legal changes] makes her financially dependent on her husband and makes it extremely difficult for her to opt out of a violent home.”\(^\text{19}\) Providing women with opportunities to earn a living wage and contribute to the support of their families can serve to increase their status within the family

\[^{19}\] Ibid. 392.
and allow them to exercise more control over the resources of the family, as well as opt out of a bad family situation if necessary.

Two organizations, Marketplace India and SEWA (Self-Employed Women’s Association), are exemplary in addressing women’s economic and social inequality.\(^\text{20}\) Both organizations aim to ameliorate the situation of poor women; they focus on empowering women as workers. Ela Bhatt the founder of SEWA, like Paul Farmer, decries the violence of poverty: “poverty is wrong because it is violent; it does not respect human labor, strips a person of his or her humanity, and takes away their freedom.”\(^\text{21}\) SEWA and Marketplace India are co-operatives where resources are shared and decisions are collectively made. The two organizations are different sizes and have different histories. Marketplace was founded in 1980 in Mumbai by sisters Pushpika Freitas and Lalita Monteiro, and currently employs just over 500 members. SEWA began in 1972 in Ahmedabad, and is the largest women’s trade union in the world with over 700,000 members. Despite these differences both organizations seem to share a vision that includes work with dignity and increased access to the basic necessities for poor women and their families. They cultivate values of solidarity and sisterhood among members of their organizations while providing important economic opportunities.

Marketplace India is comprised of thirteen cooperatives that employ over five hundred members. They produce clothing and household items. Five of the thirteen cooperatives produce the hand printed fabric, while the other eight cooperatives sew and hand embroider the products. Every two weeks representatives from the sewing cooperatives meet to share information and ideas and to discuss any problems with the production work. This collaboration enables the groups to share their experience and wisdom and to collectively problem-solve. This spirit of collaboration runs through every aspect of Marketplace. The organization combines gainful employment for marginalized women with social programs that educate and empower them. Because Marketplace workers are almost all women, tasks are not assigned by gender and women assume leadership roles. Marketplace provides the structure and resources for each group to participate in workshops about health, parenting, social issues, global issues, and promoting social change. While the organization provides some access to outside programs, most are developed, modified and managed by the women themselves.

\(^{20}\) Information about these organizations was obtained through my research visits to India in 2004, 2005 and 2006.  
\(^{21}\) Ela R. Bhatt, We Are Poor, But So Many: The Story of Self-Employed Women in India (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006) 8.
An example of a successful social action program is health education. In one cooperative, all members went through an outside workshop on preventative health, with an emphasis on inexpensive home remedies. After this coop went through the workshop, they put together an educational health program themselves. They created all the material such as posters, flip charts etc., and they ran peer workshops for the other coops. Through these social action programs the women learn that they have the power to create positive change not only in their own lives, but also in the community. Because the women in Marketplace share their knowledge and promote change within their communities, the scope of change looks like an inverted funnel, starting with the group of women within the cooperative, but broadening out to include each woman’s extended family, neighbors and community. Focusing on particular, local issues helps each group to successfully set and reach their collective goals. With each small success, they are encouraged to tackle larger issues. Marketplace not only provides each individual with knowledge, skills and a fair wage, but also fosters a sense of solidarity and collective empowerment.

SEWA defines itself as a movement not a program. It is a member organization where the needs and goals of the members are given priority. The common denominator is each member’s desire to earn enough to help provide basic necessities for herself and her family. But SEWA’s success lies not only in helping each individual achieve her goal, but also in helping all members realize the power of acting collectively. As a workers’ movement, SEWA stays close to its roots by facilitating the formation of co-operatives and unions. Both unions and co-operatives have a democratic, participatory structure that fosters empowerment of individuals within the organization as well as introducing the power of the group. As an all female group, SEWA promotes and fosters the idea that women are powerful and capable. Women are encouraged to take on positions of leadership, which are not generally available to poor women with limited education. The skills that they learn in these leadership roles—traveling outside their village, collecting information, public speaking, running meetings, and keeping accounts—increases their confidence and their status in the community. Along with these skills, the women benefit from increased security due to their affiliation with SEWA. Membership in SEWA costs only 5 rupees per year (the equivalent of twelve cents), and it provides the women access to SEWA’s co-operative bank, health care insurance, disaster insurance, child care, literacy classes, computer classes, transportation for raw materials and finished products, etc. In addition to all
these benefits, in many cases women’s income improves as a direct result of SEWA’s bargaining for higher wages and better working conditions.

Empowerment in their personal lives is directly related to the increased economic and political power that the women have by being members of SEWA’s unions and cooperatives. As one’s economic power increases, so does one’s status in the family and the community, which often shifts the gendered power dynamics and gender roles. SEWA anchors women’s power firmly in a material and economic basis—as bank members, property holders, income earners, policyholders, etc. But this individual empowerment remains inextricably tied to the women’s membership in a larger group and their collective power to transform the conditions of their lives. By working together, the women are able to secure a decent livelihood, access to education, health care and insurance, childcare, and loans. They recognize that their success relies on the success of their SEWA sisters as they share resources and problem-solve together. Empowerment not only changes individuals’ lives, it also transforms social relations in concrete, particular ways. SEWA fosters values of economic and social justice, and creates solidarity among poor women.

Conclusion

Feminists can learn important lessons from Marketplace and the Self-Employed Women’s Association. Gender inequality is embedded in a series of other systemic inequalities, including economic. Addressing the unjust economic situation of poor women is an important aspect of addressing gender inequality. Political and legal remedies are not enough, because even if the law supports equal pay for women, women without education or job skills remain left behind. Organizations such as Marketplace India and SEWA focus on alleviating poverty through work with dignity. By providing work and job-related training they provide a sustainable income for women and their families. Grassroots, local, non-governmental organizations can play an important role in ameliorating gender inequality because they can address both economic and socio-cultural factors that perpetuate gender discrimination. If feminists are to succeed in our mission to promote gender equality and social justice
transnationally we need to employ a variety of strategies, focusing not only on the legal and political arenas, as has too often been the case, but on economic issues as well.

References


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