

International Networking for Women's Human Rights

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In the last half of the twentieth century, women's activism reached a critical mass that was both reflected in and enhanced by the United Nations Decade for Women from 1976 to 1985, and four world conferences on women culminating in Beijing in 1995. Central to women's organizing in the 1990s has been a global movement for women's human rights. In asserting that "women's rights are human rights," it seeks to demonstrate both how traditionally accepted human rights abuses are specifically affected by gender, and how many other violations against women have remained invisible. This international movement has many manifestations, and reflects women's collaborative efforts across diverse contexts. This chapter examines one aspect of that development – the Global Campaign for Women's Human Rights and looks at other global networks such as DAWN.

The Global Campaign for Women's Human Rights is a loose coalition of groups and individuals worldwide, formed in preparation for the Vienna human rights conference in 1993.¹ Since the initial call for the conference did not mention women or recognize any gender-specific aspects of human rights in its proposed agenda, this became a natural vehicle for women's activities. One of the early actions of the campaign was a petition launched in 1991 that called on the Vienna conference to "comprehensively address women's human rights at every level of its proceedings" and to recognize "gender violence, a universal phenomenon which takes many forms across culture, race, and class... as a violation of human rights requiring immediate action." The petition, distributed by the Center for Women's Global Leadership and the International Women's Tribune Center, was circulated through dozens of women's networks and taken up by women at all levels to further their organizing efforts. The petition was re-issued after Vienna and directed to the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing two years later. By the time of the Beijing conference, the petition had gathered well over one million signatures from 148 countries in 26 languages, and had garnered over 1,000 sponsoring organizations.

This petition had been launched at the first annual campaign of "Sixteen Days of Activism Against Gender Violence," which provides a global umbrella for local activities that promote public awareness about gender-based violence as a human rights concern. Groups participating in the campaign select their own objectives and determine their own local activities, within a larger global effort with some common themes. The campaign has grown steadily over the past ten years, involving groups in over a hundred countries in events including hearings, demonstrations, media

campaigns, cultural festivals, and candlelight vigils. Many of its activities also mobilized women to participate in the UN World Conferences, and since 1995, some have been directed at implementation of the promises made to women in the various Conference documents as well as in UN treaties such as the 'Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.' The success of the global campaign was rooted in the activities of national and regional women's groups who defined the issues important in their countries as they focused attention on the World Conferences. For example, at the UN regional preparatory meetings for the Vienna Conference held in Tunis, San José, and Bangkok, women demanded that the human rights of women and gender based violence be discussed. Women in Latin America organized a parallel women's human rights conference called La Nuestra, where they prepared a nineteen-point agenda to present to the regional meeting in San José (FIRE 1992). Women in Law and Development in Africa (WiLDAF) organized a series of sub-regional meetings where women defined their human rights concerns and drew up a regional women's paper which was presented at the preparatory meetings (Butegwa 1993).

As part of this process, the Center for Women's Global Leadership held a Strategic Planning Institute to coordinate plans for Vienna with women from around the world who had been active regionally. This meeting worked on lobbying strategies for the Conference, including further development of recommendations on women's human rights that built on regional proposals and served as the focus for the final international preparatory meeting in Geneva in April of 1993. It also began preparations for a Global Tribunal on Violations of Women's Human Rights that would give vivid personal expression to the consequences of such violations by providing graphic demonstration of how being female can be life threatening, subjecting women to such abuses as torture, terrorism and slavery. Thirty-three women from all regions of the world testified in the Tribunal about violations in five inter-connected areas: Human Rights Abuse in the Family, War Crimes Against Women, Violations of Women's Bodily Integrity, Socio-Economic Violations, and Political Persecution and Discrimination (Bunch and Reilly 1994).

The UN World Conferences.

In Vienna, the message that "violence against women violates human rights" came through loud and clear. It advanced the introduction of new human rights instruments, including the adoption of a UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women and the appointment of a UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women.² Women effectively challenged the public/private divide in the global human rights arena and exposed violence against women as a human rights violation whether perpetrated by a male relative in the home or by a soldier in a war zone. The Vienna Declaration devotes several pages to "equal status and human rights of women" as a priority for governments and the United Nations. This progress was the product of women's organizing and networking nationally, regionally, and globally both before and during the conference. Daily women's caucuses formed at the final Preparatory Committee Meeting in Geneva and during the Vienna conference proceedings constituted a critical part of this process. These caucuses crossed lines of North and South as well as NGOs and government in a concerted effort to make gender visible. The Women's

Caucus lobbied governments, but it also provided a space where women could learn about the process and debate what they wanted to achieve. The experience at Vienna provided the emerging women's human rights movement with a place to formulate an identity, which in turn facilitated the networking that has continued to take place among activists at other world conferences, as well as at other UN sessions and in various regional and international settings.

Much of the focus of the Global Campaign during 1993-95 continued to be on the UN World Conferences. In order to move beyond the initial focus on violence against women, the campaign sought to underscore the indivisibility of women's human rights and to emphasize the interconnectedness of the civil, political, social, economic, and cultural dimensions of all human rights in its activities. These included workshops, strategic planning meetings, human rights caucuses, and hearings on women's human rights at the Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo (Dutt 1995), the Summit for Social Development (WSSD) in Copenhagen, and at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. The Copenhagen Hearing on Economic Justice and Women's Human Rights was co-convened in 1995 by the Center for Women's Global Leadership and DAWN ('Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era'). It highlighted United States' complicity in perpetrating human rights abuses within the US and internationally, with women from around the world testifying about violations resulting from structural adjustment programs, budget cuts against social welfare, trade policies and economic sanctions indifferent to women's human rights, forced prostitution, and the abuse of female migrant workers (Dutt et al 1995). While women did not transform the Social Summit's final Programme of Action, there were positive advances towards a gender-aware understanding of human rights as indivisible, and towards greater accountability on the part of international financial institutions.³ These advances included an affirmation of the importance of core human rights standards, as well as a recognition of the increased burden on women created by poverty and a call for the valuation of women's unremunerated work.

The culmination of this series of hearings was the Global Tribunal on Accountability for Women's Human Rights, which took place at the NGO Forum in the city of Huarhou, outside of Beijing where the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women was convened. The key issue for Beijing was accountability for implementing the promises that had been made at previous UN conferences. The Global Tribunal therefore sought to move the women's human rights agenda from visibility to accountability, and from awareness of violations to active implementation of women's human rights. The process of organizing the Beijing Tribunal followed a path similar to that of previous hearings convened by the Center for Women's Global Leadership. An International Coordinating Committee was formed, composed of representatives from networks as well as regional and national sponsoring organizations who identified and developed potential testimonies for the Tribunal from their regions and/or areas of work. The final decisions about which testimonies to include and how to frame the issues were made through consultation with this committee. The focus was on the interconnected themes of violence against women in the family and in conflict situations, economic discrimination and exploitation, violations of health and bodily integrity, and political persecution. Testimonies were selected to highlight these themes and work that tried to address

them, as well as to reflect the diversity of women's experiences across race, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, culture, religion, and geo-political lines (Reilly 1996; Bunch et al 1996).

The Beijing Tribunal was an early formative event at the NGO Forum that helped to demonstrate the centrality of human rights to many of the critical areas of concern being debated in the Platform for Action at the governmental conference. Previous UN conferences on women had been seen primarily as discussions about "women and development" or "equality," but the Beijing conference expressed the issues more emphatically as questions of human rights. Many people came to understand that the Beijing Platform was a referendum on the human rights of women in a whole range of areas. The women's human rights movement that had first become visible in Vienna came of age in Beijing. This shift in consciousness was the result of organizing and lobbying that women's human rights activists had been doing at the local, national, regional, and global level. The function of the Global Campaign for Women's Human Rights was to help give this diverse activity a coherent international expression and visibility. The women's human rights caucus in Beijing worked to incorporate human rights perspectives in many parts of the Platform and collaborated with other NGO caucuses to prevent the conservative backlash against women's gains that threatened to utilize Beijing to undermine the achievements women had made. The international and regional networking that women undertook for Beijing ensured that the Platform for Action reasserted the universal and holistic nature of women's human rights.

Since Beijing, the work of the Global Campaign for Women's Human Rights has shifted to the implementation of intergovernmental agreements and human rights treaties. This means both pressuring national governments for domestic level implementation of the promises they have made at the international and regional levels, and keeping the momentum of the international networks going so that governments know that they are being monitored worldwide. Groups from the Campaign continue to work together globally to lobby the various human rights mechanisms of the UN to fulfill their commitment to the full integration of gender concerns and awareness into their work. In 1998, the Global Campaign organized to ensure that gender perspectives were part of commemorations of the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and IT is now working to make certain that the five year reviews of the various UN World Conferences advance women's human rights.

Diversity, Universality, and Women's Human Rights.

The human rights approaches used by women in the campaign have strengthened local mobilization efforts and advanced local objectives, while at the same time linking local agendas to a larger international movement with broad common goals. Women from different regions have been able to use human rights concepts to articulate diverse demands in relation to a broad array of issues. Human rights language creates a space in which different accounts of women's lives and new ways of demanding change can be developed. It provides a set of overarching principles to frame alternative visions of gender justice, without dictating the precise content of those visions. The idea of universal human rights provides a powerful vocabulary for naming gender-based

violations and impediments to the exercise of women's full equality and citizenship. Furthermore, the large body of international human rights covenants, agreements and commitments gives women potential political leverage and concrete points of reference for their organizing and lobbying activities.

Women's human rights networking has also faced criticisms of its efforts to find a common articulation of women's concerns or a common basis for women's organizing. Some argue that to do so is to universalize the category of "woman" and to impose a limited agenda on all women on the basis of the experience of some - usually white, middle-class, and living in the global North. As women's movements have grown over the past three decades, grassroots and professional activists and academics have had unprecedented opportunities for dialogue around gender-based oppression. In the course of these important and often contentious debates, women have been pressed to think about the ways in which geography, ethnicity, race, culture, sexuality, class, and tradition shape what it means to be a woman. These issues, combined with the specificities of local and national politics, point to the fact that it is difficult to conceive of women or the women's movement as singular entities.

A major bone of contention has been that patterns of exclusion and invisibility are reinforced by an uncritical assumption that all women share common and easily identifiable experiences and self-understandings. Women of color in the United States, for example, have leveled powerful critiques at the theory and politics of mainstream feminists, arguing that their analyses and visions for change have tended to be formulated around the concerns of economically privileged, heterosexual, white women-citizens. When this happens, inequality and power differentials among women are not adequately taken into account as key factors that shape women's lives. In order to consider how issues such as class, race, culture, or sexuality actually affect women, such factors must be incorporated into the structure of theory and strategy, not simply added on at a later date. Many of these critiques came from the writings and activism of women in the Global South. Basu (1995), for example, argues that "women's identities within and across nations are shaped by a complex amalgam of national, racial, religious, ethnic, class, and sexual identities," and that these specificities shape and inform the challenges that women face and the work that women do. If feminism is defined only in terms of Western conceptions, not only is there a danger of inappropriately imposing Western priorities, but there may be a failure to recognize the strength and transformative potential of women's organizing as it exists at local levels. The need to recognize the specificity of local feminisms and women's activism is at the heart of debates about the role of universal claims in women's organizing. The challenge is to reconcile the recognition and strength of the multiplicity of women's experiences with the need to find a common basis for women's international networking and collaboration.

The international movement for women's human rights has consciously sought to respond to these challenges. The global campaign encouraged regional networks in the South to play a leadership role at both the local and international levels. National and local groups participated in defining and implementing international lobbying strategies at UN conferences. The Campaign also included many women who worked

in mixed sex groups in development or human rights organizations to ensure that women's concerns were viewed from different angles, and began to form an integral part of these other agendas.

In thinking about how to reconcile differences among women and still find common ways to work politically, Mohanty (1991) emphasizes that women can identify opportunities for coherent "Third World feminist" struggles that are based on "common differences." Even though women experience oppression differently, they do so in relation to common systems of power and domination that affect all women in the Third World. Similarly, the experience of the women's human rights movement suggests that international networking does not require homogeneity of experience. Rather, the complexity with which different women contend can enrich the movement's understanding of the multiple forces it faces, even as it finds common themes in the opposition that women face. For example, economic globalization is experienced in different forms according to context – economic liberalization, structural adjustment, downward pressure on wages, and loss of job security - but women affected by the global economy can join in making common demands. As women have worked to incorporate diverse perspectives into their work, they have also struggled to create alliances across different groups in the face of a conservative, fundamentalist backlash against feminism in many parts of the world. Faced by the need to do justice to the many different ways women experience and act on their concerns and the need to make claims in the name of "women" in order to counter this backlash, what does it mean to say that women's human rights are universal? As Butegwa (1993) points out, human rights are universal in the sense that all human rights laws, treaties and procedures theoretically apply equally to all people. In addition, by shifting the focus away from particular experiences to an analysis of the interconnected ways in which power is exercised in the world, an argument can be made that universal human rights provide the only system of accountability that is able to confront these systems of power across the globe.

When local women's groups use human rights thinking and practice, especially in the context of international networking, they are actively demonstrating the complementary links that exist between universal ideals and local struggles for justice. The international movement for women's human rights has challenged the idea that we must choose between universality and particularity by developing its ideas and tactics through a process of networking at the local, national, and international levels in all regions of the world. DAWN's experience provides a good illustration of this process.

Women's Regional and International Networks: the case of DAWN.

DAWN is a network of women from the South who are actively engaged in feminist research and analysis of global issues related to economic justice, environmental sustainability, reproductive health and rights and political restructuring. Launched in the context of the United Nation's Third World Conference on Women held in Nairobi in 1985, DAWN represents Third World women's increasing concerns about the impact of debt, food security, environmental degradation, deteriorating social services, militarism, political conservatism and religious fundamentalism on the lives of poor women. DAWN's analysis,

drawn from the experience of poor women in the South, provided the basis for a platform document, for the NGO Forum at Nairobi and underpinned a series of Panel Discussions on Feminist Perspectives on Development (Sen and Grown 1987). By introducing an analysis that related the daily experiences of women to colonial relations between countries and the macroeconomic policy framework, DAWN gave women a new way of viewing global processes and development issues. DAWN's analysis is characterized by its:

- focus on the experience of poor women living in the global South;
- acknowledgement of regional diversity;
- linking of economic, social, cultural and political factors;
- attempt to link experience at the micro level of women's daily lives to an understanding of the macroeconomic policy framework;
- understanding of the political nature of development;
- use of a feminist framework – rejecting dichotomies, validating women's work and experience and working in solidarity with women.

This analysis has changed the terms of the debate on Women in Development (WID) in many arenas. The shift to a more holistic, political analysis of the issues also helped to mobilize women worldwide into a real political constituency.

Following the success of the Panels at the Nairobi Forum, DAWN's Founders⁴ organized a meeting in Rio to launch an ongoing program of research and advocacy. A Steering Committee, representative of the five regions of the South was formed and a General Coordinator selected (Neuma Aguiar of IUPERJ in Rio de Janeiro). DAWN's first Secretariat was established in Rio using IUPERJ as an institutional base, but it was always envisaged that the Secretariat would rotate to different regions – to the University of the West Indies in 1990 (with Peggy Antrobus as General Coordinator) and to the University of the South Pacific under Claire Slatter six years later. At the General Assembly in Rio in 1990, the Steering Committee was restructured by separating the functions of regional representation (under Regional Coordinators), and research and analysis (under Research Coordinators). Research Coordinators were selected to facilitate work on environment, reproductive rights and population, and alternative economic frameworks.⁵ DAWN's research is developed through regional meetings that enrich the analysis with specific experiences. Participants include activists as well as researchers so that the analysis is informed by political realities and linked to organizing and advocacy at the regional level.

DAWN's experience shows that effective grassroots mobilization requires consistent analysis and strategic thinking. The network's ongoing research program has provided the basis for powerful ideas and strategic thinking and has served as a catalyst for a South-based and South-led global women's movement. In 1996, DAWN's work program was redefined to build on the gains made through the UN conferences, while retaining the network's core function of producing cutting-edge feminist analyses of global issues from a Southern perspective. At this meeting it was also decided to strengthen engagement at the regional level and give greater attention to regional issues and priorities by linking to, and working in partnership with, existing organizations and

institutions. DAWN's mainstreaming activities also included the involvement of network members in the work of progressive networks such as the Society for International Development and Focus on the Global South, and in NGO initiatives such as SAPRI (the Structural Adjustment Program Review Initiative), which involved a wide range of civil society groups in evaluating World Bank adjustment operations.

From 1997, improved access to e-mail and the Internet brought a new dimension to DAWN's work, strengthening the network by facilitating consultation and collective decision-making on a regular basis, and building close and supportive relationships through regular communications. The relocation of DAWN's Secretariat to Fiji in 1998 was greatly facilitated by the rise of information technology. Basing the Secretariat of an active global network in a far-flung, small island state illustrates the potential for new network structures in the age of electronic communications. For DAWN, the policy of rotating the Secretariat also ensures that the different regions of the South will benefit from exposure to its analysis and advocacy work, and will eventually give DAWN a profile in each of these regions.

Other networks contributed to the global campaign in similar ways. Women Law and Development in Africa (WiLDAF), for example, took a leadership role in the international women's human rights movement.⁶ What is important about the development of WiLDAF and other networks is that the process of formulating mission and priorities, and of raising the necessary support, was broadly participatory. Established in 1990, the planning process originally included women from nine African countries, but eventually drew on the ideas, suggestions, and energy of women from more than fifteen, and from other regional and international networks. The International Solidarity Network of Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML)⁷ defines its mission according to the needs of women living in Muslim communities all over the world. Its structure fosters respect for the diverse "contextual constraints within which women are obliged to live their lives" and for the choices women make (Shaheed 1994). WLUML gains its strength and critical edge through creating links between diverse women living in a Muslim context, giving women's organizations access both to each other and to information about the sources of law and customary practices. The exchange of information and cross-cultural visits and research provide women in the network with an alternative identity through which they develop political analyses and strategies for change. In networks, different groups can use their organizational strengths, commitments and resources to participate in projects on a flexible basis. Networking allows for coordinated but decentralized and non-hierarchical action around common goals.

Lessons Learned.

The chief impact of the global campaign lay in opening spaces for women from different racial and ethnic groups, countries, classes and occupational backgrounds to meet on a consistent and continuous basis. These meetings enabled women to gain new knowledge and to learn from each other's experience. They facilitated the organization of joint projects and collaborative efforts. They gave birth to issue-based networks at local, regional and global levels, which in turn provided the research and analysis which served to empower women's advocacy. They helped women to develop self-confidence

and leadership skills. They linked activists with researchers and, more importantly, validated and encouraged the pursuit of research among activists, and activism among researchers. They forged and strengthened links between organizing at local and global levels. They facilitated the growth of a global women's movement of the greatest diversity and decentralization, a movement which expanded its agenda from a narrow definition of 'women's issues' to one which embraced a range of concern for human rights and transformed itself into a major constituency for a more humane world.

The Global Campaign for Women's Human Rights has been based on personal and institutional relationships among feminist organizations and regional networks that are comfortable in using loose forms of networking as a primary mode of mobilizing. Their driving force is a shared commitment to action-oriented networking in relation to specific opportunities and events. Participants have varied according to which groups shared a common interest at particular moments in time. Hence, while the campaign cemented working relationships, it has not led to a permanent governance structure or a defined set of members. This has given the campaign great flexibility, but it has also weakened its ability to maintain sustained pressure and pursue commitments on an on-going basis. One of the keys to the campaign's success has been the unifying value system and legitimacy provided by organizing around human rights for women. Another has been the selection of common issues around which to focus, like violence against women at the Vienna Conference. As the Campaign has sought to broaden the agenda of women's human rights issues to more complex problems like the impact of the global economy, it has been more difficult to unite diverse groups around common demands. One of the campaign's other guiding principles has been its commitment to building links among women committed to a common vision of their rights, but diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexual orientation, culture, and geography. While the links have not always reached out as widely as hoped (especially along class lines), the movement has succeeded in creating strong and enduring bonds among diverse groups of women. Networking has also been fostered across professional divisions such as grassroots organizing, service provision, academia, the medical and legal professions, lobbyists and governmental or UN policy makers. This has been an effective way to learn from diversity in the process of planning actions that incorporate a broad spectrum of strategies.

Networking takes place on many levels, but it is also important to have organizations that are able to serve as nodes of information, conveners, and centers of capacity-building and leadership development. The Center for Women's Global Leadership, DAWN, WILDAF, AND WLUML and others all play this role. These nodes not only create time and space for organizations to make plans, but also lay the groundwork for the trust that people need to be able to work globally. Face to face contact, in small meetings, at sessions during the world conferences, or as part of organizing a hearing, was critical to making the movement strong. In this way, women related to each other through their work but also began to know each other across their differences. Finally, maintaining connections and a fluid sense of exchange between local and global activities has been at the heart of the global campaign. A defining feature is that no one group determines or controls the activities. This allows for local definition of the agenda

and of the issues that are important to women in each setting. At the same time, women can use the fact that they are part of an international network to draw on solidarity in enhancing their local organizing. Shaheed (1995) highlights similar themes when she concludes that "positive outcomes are the result of multiple actors working in concert and the [WLUML] network sees itself only as an enabling mechanism for rapidly mobilizing support and activating the right connections as needed." Since local and regional organizations have the flexibility to join whichever activities seem appropriate to them, they retain their own autonomy while also cooperating in a larger global endeavor.

The experiences that women have gained in networking around the UN world conferences have provided the basis of trust from which women now work on common and diverse projects in collaboration on a regular basis. In this process, women's networking has developed a model that affirms the universality of human rights while respecting the diversity of particular experiences. This experience may hold the key to success for other movements in their pursuit of global citizen action.

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¹ The Global Campaign for Women’s Human Rights was coordinated primarily by the Center for Women’s Global Leadership in collaboration with many other organizations and networks around the

world. For further information about the Center or the Global Campaign, contact the Center for Women's Global Leadership, Rutgers University, 160 Ryders Lane, New Brunswick, NJ 08901; phone (1 732) 932-8782; fax (1 732) 932-1080; email cwgl@igc.apc.org.

² Resolution on the Special Rapporteur (Resolution Integrating the Rights of Women into the Human Rights Mechanisms of the United Nations), March 2, 1994, UN Doc. E/CN.4/1994/L.8/Rev.1; Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, Dec. 20, 1993, UN Doc. A/RES/48/104.

³ World Summit on Social Development: Copenhagen Declaration of Social Development and Programme of Action, April 19, 1995, UN Doc. A/CONF.166/9.

⁴ The Founding members were the women who had met in Bangalore. They included Devaki Jain, Gita Sen and Ela Bhatt (India), Hameeda Hossain (Bangladesh), Noeleen Heyzer (Malaysia), Claire Slatter and Vanessa Griffiths (Fiji), Fatima Mernissi (Morocco), Achola Pala Okeyo (Kenya), Marie Angelique Savane (Senegal), Neuma Aguiar and Carmen Barroso (Brazil), and Peggy Antrobus and Lucille Mair (Caribbean).

⁵ These themes were modified in 1996 to sustainable livelihoods, reproductive rights and health, and the political economy of globalization.

⁶ For further information about WiLDAF, contact WiLDAF, P.O. Box 4622, Harare, Zimbabwe; phone (263-4) 752105; fax (263-4) 733670; email wildaf@mango.zw.

⁷ For further information about WLUML, contact Women Living Under Muslim Laws International Solidarity Network: wluml@wluml.org.