

Women's Human Rights: Social Justice in Global Perspective

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Greetings beloved sisters, dear brothers!
Thank you for inviting me to speak at this marvelous conference. I am honored to be with you and appreciate the technology that makes it possible for me to do so [1].

I start with some personal reflections and memories to provide a little historical and political context [2].

My paternal grandmother, an impoverished Jewish woman immigrated to the United States from a small village in Ukraine, fleeing pogroms in the late 1890s. She could not read or write. She died before I was born.

My mother, of blessed memory, born on the Lower East Side of New York City, in 1905, was the impoverished daughter of immigrants and orphaned when she was 4. When she was born women did not have the right to vote anywhere in the world.

When I was born in September 1944 the world was in the last year of a horrific World War in which millions of people had died. Eleven months after my birth the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing hundreds of thousands of people instantaneously. Millions more died in the months and years following from radiation burns and sickness. My generation grew up in the terrifying shadow of that mushroom cloud.

In my childhood refugees from many countries were frequent visitors to my parents' home. Likewise, our home was blessed with the visits of African American scholars, activists and artists including W.E.B. Du Bois, Shirley Graham Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Eslanda Goode Robeson, and the artist Elizabeth Catlett among many others.

My parents were members of the U.S. Communist Party. We were under constant FBI surveillance. And when I entered the

University of California, in Berkeley, in 1962, an FBI agent was assigned to follow me everywhere; he introduced himself to me! He wanted my cooperation. Never, I said.

Struggles against racism, colonialism, and war were how I defined social justice, and they were at the very center of my earliest memories. When I was nine, I circulated a petition called the Stockholm Peace Pledge with my mother to call upon the U.S. and all governments to renounce atomic weapons.

By my mid-20s I was a veteran activist. I had been tear-gassed, shot at, beaten by police, arrested more than once. I also had already served a prison sentence while pregnant with my first child. In my late 20s I was part of the team that led the transnational movement to free Angela Davis, who was a childhood friend. It was as the result of that experience and some of Angela's writings that I started to think about the oppression of women, and especially Black women. Soon afterwards I began reading everything I could find on Women's Liberation. As I encountered the feminist ideas written by the women of my own and earlier generations from all races and ethnicities my life was turned upside down and inside out. My ideas about social justice dramatically expanded to include the liberation of women.

The feminist ideas I encountered were profoundly political and deeply personal. I had been personally affected and devastated by sexual violence, lack of access to reproductive care. I had little sense of personal boundaries, or my right to say "No." For the first time in our history in the United States starting in the late 1960s and 1970s a public discourse began that included sexual and domestic violence and advocated for reproductive freedom including access to contraception and to safe, legal abortion, and for pre-natal and post-natal care as a human right. This women's liberation movement sparked in me a renewed passion for social justice that combined opposition to racism,

colonialism and war that had informed my earliest activism, with women's human rights, and women's full emancipation from all forms of patriarchy. I began to understand how all these systems of domination were intertwined, institutionalized through laws and embedded in centuries-old cultural practices all over the world. The Women's Liberation Movement revolutionized my thinking. It inspired in me a passion for teaching, a passion for justice, and a passion for women.

Among the first writings I encountered was a book by Adrienne Rich. Heralded for her extraordinary poetry Rich also wrote several prose essays and books, among them *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* [3]. In it, Rich drew from her personal experiences as a mother and as a daughter. She delved deeply into contradictory feelings of love, attachment, aversion and anger that framed her experiences of motherhood. She documented the history of childbirth in Western Europe and the United States for white, middle-and-upper class women in which men increasingly took control in the 19th and early 20th centuries outlawing midwifery, and medicalizing pregnancy as if it were an illness requiring constant medical intervention under their supervision and control. Rich showed how a predominantly white male medical profession in the United States jealously guarded its prerogative to control women's bodies, and increasingly depicted us as diseased, deformed, our bodies weak and lacking the privileges of male strength, intelligence and grace. From this detailed historical research, she documented the furtherance of male supremacist ideology that believed women lacked emotional stability and intellectual acuity. Really, in retrospect it is astonishing to see how deeply these ideas were embedded and popularized, myths made into ideological mandates. This was certainly the world of the 1940s and 1950s in the United States in which I grew up. Versions of it, culturally suited up are to be found all over the world. They still hold powerful sway.

Not lost on me is the profound irony that while western white male doctors medicalized childbirth, and contrived to put themselves at the center of it for white, middle and upper class women in the United States, millions upon millions of poor women who live in our Southern states, the Southwest and our rural areas, especially those who are Black or Brown, had and continue to have the highest infant mortality rates in my country, and the least access to affirming pre- and post-natal care. Globally the United States ranked 54th in infant mortality, in 2023, placing it among the highest for any industrialized nation [4]. The reason: racism and poverty. Likewise, in many parts of the non-industrial world, especially in the Global South, infant and maternal mortality rates remain shockingly high. For example, infant mortality in Kenya, in 2022 was 33.7 per 1000 live births; in Nigeria in 2021 it was 57.7 per 1000 live births, and these rates represented a reduction from previous years [5]. One can hardly begin a discussion of women's human rights with such appallingly high infant mortality rates. Mortality rates are even higher if we consider the deaths of children under the age of 5. The pervasive impoverishment within so many African nations is a direct consequence of centuries of the Atlantic slave trade, settler colonialism and post-colonial intrigue and corruption.

Three years after Adrienne Rich published *Of Woman Born* the great Nigerian novelist Buchi Emecheta published her novel, *The Joys of Motherhood*. A powerfully ironic title the novel tells

the story of Nnu Ego, a Nigerian woman whose life was defined by traditional patriarchal customs to bring as many children into the world as possible, especially sons. Ego sacrifices everything for her children struggling interminably with poverty, and yet she is also determined, innovative and resilient. Set in Lagos the story begins in 1934 with Ego's near suicide, despairing over her inability (she thought) to bear children. Layered and complex *Emecheta* shows the ways in which traditional customs are being upended by increasingly urbanized, post-colonial life. Patriarchy remains entrenched but its parameters have changed. Ego is caught between conflicting cultural mandates and in the end, she is left alone and bereft. *Emecheta* also shows us that there are joys in motherhood, just not the ones proclaimed and institutionalized by patriarchy. Although profoundly different from Rich in location, class, race, colonial experience, each work provides us with significant insight into the split between patriarchal inventions of motherhood as woman's so-called highest purpose, and its realities and emotional complexities when women are at the center of our thinking and seen as fully human [6].

Women have the same capacities as men for professional achievement, and careers in every imaginable field from architecture to zoology. *Emecheta* herself held degrees in sociology and worked in London primarily in education for decades. When I met her in 1991, she was a Visiting Professor at my university in Santa Cruz. What a privilege it was to work with her and witness her inspiring our students to aspire to their greatest potential!

In the Afterword to Her Study of Motherhood, Adrienne Rich Wrote

“The repossession by women of our bodies will bring far more essential change to human society than the seizing of the means of production by workers. The female body has been both territory and machine, virgin wilderness to be exploited and assembly line turning out life. We need to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body. In such a world women will truly create new life, bringing forth not only children (if and as we choose) but the visions, and the thinking, necessary to sustain, console and alter human existence- a new relationship to the universe. Sexuality, politics, intelligence, power, work, community, intimacy will develop new meanings; thinking itself will be transformed.

This is Where We Have to Begin

I studied and meditated upon this paragraph for a long time. Having grown up so deeply engaged in Marxist studies where workers were not only privileged but seen as the motive force of revolution, Rich's statement was a radical departure for me indeed. That the world is in desperate need of new thinking there can be no doubt. That women bring forth new life without which humanity cannot be sustained is self-evident. How to bring about a new consciousness of equality, generosity, loving kindness, and compassion, how to develop the material ground for new ways of thinking, remains before us. This was Adrienne Rich's vision. This is a truly global challenge [7].

Can we imagine women as the presiding geniuses of their own lives?

Can we imagine a world in which women have undisputed control over their own bodies?

Can we imagine a world in which sexual and domestic violence against women is not only outlawed but considered a sacrilege?

Can we imagine a world in which women honor ourselves undoing centuries of internalized shame, and feelings of inferiority?

Can we imagine a world in which women have unfettered access to education, to employment, to professional training, to economic independence?

Can we imagine a world in which women are seen in the beauty of dawn?

Imagining is where we are now; it is where we shatter the patriarchal norms that surround us.

The legal scaffolding for beginning such a revolution for women's human rights already exists.

It is to be found in United Nations conventions framing both human rights generally, and more specifically women's human rights. These conventions establish the parameters of international law. There is, of course, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the U.N. General Assembly on December 10, 1948, in the shadow of the horrors of Nazism and world war. Article I, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." And Article 2, "Everyone is entitled to the rights set forth in this Declaration without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status." . . . Thirty articles included the right to personhood, to education, to employment, to freedom of thought. Thirty articles that insisted that no one should be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile. Thirty articles that proclaimed "No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honor and reputation. Everyone has the right to protection of the law against such interference or attacks" [8].

While intended as a "Universal Declaration," the male pronoun is most often used, and decades of subsequent experience demonstrated the need for specific international laws protecting the rights of women. The grounding for much of this law can be found in the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). This was five years after the first World Conference on the Status of Women, convened in Mexico City, 12 June -2 July 1975. Thousands of delegates from all over the world came together, adopting a plethora of resolutions to encourage full gender equality and the elimination of gender discrimination; the integration and full participation of women in development; and an increased contribution by women towards strengthening world peace. Passage of CEDAW was a significant milestone following this extraordinary world gathering [9]. The Convention framed reproductive freedom as a human right, and childbearing itself as a human right, with appropriate pre-natal and post-natal medical care, nutrition, and the general conditions necessary for the safe and successful care

and raising of children. Statistics show that the CEDAW has had a pronounced and positive effect worldwide on reducing maternal and infant mortality. Articles 12-16 affirm women's rights to reproductive health care, "including those relating to family planning." And in Article 16 CEDAW specifically states that women and men shall have "the same rights to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children and to have access to the information, education, and means to be able to exercise these rights." While not explicitly stated, the right to terminate a pregnancy is implied throughout the document. Furthermore, Article 12 affirms that "State Parties shall ensure to women appropriate services in connection with pregnancy, confinement, and the post-natal period, as well as adequate nutrition during pregnancy and lactation."

Other Conventions adopted by the United Nations also provide the legal scaffolding for women's liberation, including the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1954). In addition, there are nine detailed provisions for what are called "Rights of Women in Special Contexts." These are: Armed Conflict, Disabled Women, Education, Employment, Health, Reproduction and Sexuality, Marriage, Refugees and Displaced Persons, Traffic in Persons and Prostitution, and Violence against women in its myriad forms. It is to our shame that the United States is one of only 7 nations that refused to ratify CEDAW [10].

Overall, globally, CEDAW and subsequent conventions improved the lives of millions of women with their many initiatives, for example, in provisions for education, which dramatically reduced women's illiteracy. A broad consciousness of discrimination against women has also been instrumental in overcoming centuries of oppression. For example, Mexico elected its first woman President in June 2024. Claudia Sheinbaum Pardo won a landslide victory. That same year France enshrined into its Constitution women's right to abortion. Colombia and Ireland, their Catholic traditions notwithstanding have also guaranteed women's right to abortion. These rights are not mandates; no one is advocating abortion. Rather, they give women true reproductive freedom to choose whether to have a child, and under what conditions. Women in the Scandinavian countries like Norway, Sweden and Denmark have achieved greater equality with men than in many other parts of the world, although even in these countries there is a persistent gender gap in wages, and domestic violence remains a serious problem. We also see women in high office, for example, in the United States today, with racist and proto-fascist incendiary politics. There is nothing genetic or otherwise that makes women inherently more progressive than men. I refer to the U.S. Attorney General, Pam Bondi, and the head of the Department of Homeland Security, Kristi Noem. But even here, the patriarchy is preserved. They serve entirely at the pleasure of the President. They do his bidding, and he has the power to fire them at will [11].

Despite overall progress women remain largely and stubbornly subordinated to men. This can be shown by their relative levels of education, employment opportunities, ownership of land, and/or industry, and representation in government from the local to the highest level. Everywhere in the world horrific violence against women remains a pressing issue. Women struggle with multiple cultural, social, and religious impediments. The underlying

assumptions of male supremacy and women's inferiority remain stubbornly invested.

And yet . . . and yet . . . here we are gathered in this global forum on the future of women, and here we can imagine together an end to this suffering. We can imagine ourselves into a new way of being.

I Suggest that we use the United Nations Conventions to Help us do so, In at Least Two Ways

First, we may be able to find ways to take further legal actions and sanctions against governments doing violence especially to women and children from Gaza, to Ukraine, from Sudan to Minneapolis. Flashpoints of unfathomable cruelties. And, in a related way, it can help establish legal precedents in our own countries. Second, and perhaps more realistically, we can use the Conventions as educational and organizing tools explaining their mandates, teaching about the reasons for the special provisions for the advancement of women's human rights, popularizing the vision of universal human rights. Teaching community by community, block by block, school by school to learn, to question authority, to work together, to listen deeply to each other's stories and experiences.

Those who hold privilege, whether it be by race, gender and/or class rarely see it. As a result, sometimes white people, for example, may feel that diversity and inclusion discriminate against them; and men, may sometimes feel that special provisions for women's education or employment are "entitlements" that exclude them. The U.N. conventions demonstrate the historic, institutionalized inequalities. They show that by uplifting women, by reducing infant mortality, by guaranteeing the humanity of all refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants, by providing for universal, quality educational opportunity, by ending violence against women all are uplifted. This is so because the very foundation of these conventions is that there are no "us" and "them"; there is no "Other." The foundation of these conventions is that there is one humanity. And compassion has no borders.

Beloved sisters, dear brothers, thank you!

References

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7. Adrienne Rich. *Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. 1976. 285-86.
8. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. In *Women and Human Rights: The Basic Documents*, Center for the Study of Human Rights, Columbia University, New York, 1978. 1-18. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>
9. *United Nations General Assembly resolution. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* New York. 1979.
10. *Convention on the Political Rights of Women*, In *Women and Human Rights: The Basic Documents*, Columbia University. 1954. 69-70.
11. Both Kristi Noem and Pam Bondi were fired by President Trump in March 2026 because each became a liability to his political gain, in different ways. White men were appointed in interim positions to replace them, pending approval in the United States Senate.