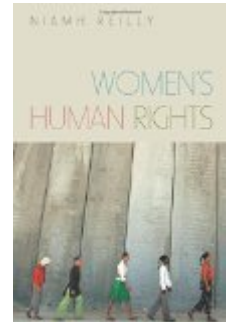


Niamh Reilly. *Women's Human Rights*. Cambridge: Polity, 2008. 224 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7456-3700-6.



Reviewed by Jean Quataert

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Scholars and activists involved in human rights debates cannot help but note the dramatic rise in relevant publications in journal and book form, whether by trained academics or hands-on activists or a salutary mix of the two. Political scientists and international law scholars now share the field with colleagues across the full range of the human and social sciences who bring new perspectives and understandings to the debates. What is less commonly noted is the increasingly complex, nuanced, and troubled arguments that mark this “rise” in interest in human rights themes. Overtaken are the simpler notions of automatic linear progress and human betterment that perhaps fit with the widespread optimism about human rights potentials breaking out in many parts of the globe in the early 1990s. The change reflects not only the critical maturing of the field of inquiry but also a much more troubled climate for human rights activism in the early twenty-first century. The pervasive spread of human rights language since 1945 has also meant its growing co-optation by powerful elites, and de-

clared linkages to neoliberal market forces, humanitarian military intervention, occupation, and war. No wonder that human rights meanings are fluid, highly controversial, and morally contested.

In her new book, Niamh Reilly confronts this climate directly. Hers is an eminently political project designed to examine the deteriorating climate for women’s human rights since its heyday at the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994 and the Fourth Women’s World Conference in Beijing in 1995. These international gatherings proclaimed women’s rights as human rights; condemned all forms of violence against women, including those rooted in religion and custom; and upheld sexual self-determination, particularly in the form of reproductive rights. Since then, at the international and national levels, a range of fundamentalist and conservative forces crisscrossing the globe (led at times by the United States under the George W. Bush administration) have mounted a partially successful countermovement to restrict these principles and prevent advances, particularly in

matters of sexual orientation. Mobilizing transnationally, these forces have used domestic and international law-making processes for their purposes. This strategy turns the law into an increasingly critical site for continuing feminist struggle, in Reilly's view. The book, then, is part of a wider body of literature seeking to make human rights a central focus of contemporary international feminist advocacy. But Reilly also is keenly aware of the skeptical climate for her project--a skepticism that characterizes a wide range of potential readers of this study. Thus, the arguments are carefully constructed to address feminist activists and scholars in different regions of the world concerned with the ease with which human rights language becomes part of imperialist and authoritarian ventures, including ostensibly "humanitarian" projects. As Western great power politics (and the political Right) instrumentalize women's rights for interventionist purposes, the radical potential of women's rights claims must be reasserted. In addition, Reilly speaks to mainstream human rights groups still ambivalent about the validity of women's rights challenges and, innovatively, seeks to bridge the continuing gaps between development activists and the rights community. Relatively short but densely written, Reilly's study offers many innovative ideas for constructive dialogues among global groups that share the goals of gender equality and economic justice but diverge over strategies and priorities.

Reilly brings what she calls "cosmopolitan feminism" to human rights debates. This entails a deliberate distancing from "mainstream" human rights thinking. As a transnational activist in the 1990s, she was part of the historical shift from women's rights to human rights during the U.N. Decade for Women, 1975-85, and experienced firsthand the many ways the coalescence of the global women's movement challenged the human rights orthodoxy. The first two chapters of the book offer the theoretical underpinnings and activist strategies that are needed to sustain the ties between feminism and human rights. She lays out

her propositions for global activism carefully, recognizing the multiple perspectives that now inform a critical feminist theory. She proposes a grassroots, bottom-up approach to transnational feminist activism that takes into account the fluid reality of intersectional vulnerability on the ground. This feminist grounding challenges the mainstream liberal divides between public and private domains, which still inform much of human rights advocacy, and it requires a continuous affirmation of the indivisibility of human rights, which means in practice elevating economic and social rights to a central place in all human rights advocacy. It also entails negotiating a viable position between the poles of Western hegemony and cultural relativism, and rejects both a rigid "legalism" that views law as a set of rules and regulations separate from societal contexts and a state-centric human rights stance. This agenda, indeed, reinvigorates human rights thinking and practice. The remaining five thematic and chronological chapters, focusing on the achievements and shortcomings of women's human rights advocacy, move between a historical account of how this theory worked to effect change over the last sixty years and a prescriptive call to action.

All the chapters are detailed, informative, and conceptually useful. Some are particularly innovative, like chapter 6, which addresses the world of mutual suspicions between women's rights advocates and development experts, including feminist proponents of "gender and development" (GAD). In every case, Reilly seeks to illustrate her major propositions. For example, chapter 3, which examines the first four decades of feminist activism in the United Nations for equality and nondiscrimination in the law, documents the significant role of women from the South in shaping debates, institutions, and laws. Human rights advocacy never was simply a matter of Western impositions. Chapter 4 examines historically the pattern of transnational feminist advocacy that sustained the emerging global women's human rights movements in the 1980s and 1990s: the campaigns

to oppose violence against women and those for reproductive and sexual rights. She provides rich evidence to show how concerns on the ground with women's bodily integrity and the gender-specific patterns of violence sustained new global networks. She also weaves in the necessity to address poverty and global economic inequalities in these mobilizations and acknowledges linkages between reproductive health issues and gender sensitive development policies. In explaining receptivity, Reilly posits that the successful global campaign to challenge gender violence fits into both dominant civil rights norms and traditional individualist perspectives in rights thinking. Sexual and reproductive rights, however, require "an even bigger leap" in assumptions. This claim "introduces ideas of self-determination" into traditional arenas of patriarchal power and requires "proactive understanding of the right to health," an evolving socioeconomic right enjoying less international consensus than a civil right (p. 91). Chapter 7 on fundamentalisms (deliberately plural) in local, national, and international contests draws on examples of anti-fundamentalist feminist praxis that counters the backlash and simultaneously deepens understandings of rights, democracy, and the rule of law. Chapter 5 addresses how women's human rights are used to promote gender justice in post-conflict transitional contexts. A radical feminist perspective regards these transitions as fluid and open moments, opportunities to bring about significant social and economic change. Reilly follows two related campaigns in some detail, the first to include gender protections in the statutes of the International Criminal Court and the second to bring women's voices and perspectives into all phases of peace-building operations, proclaimed in Security Council Resolution 1325 in the year 2000.

Throughout this study, Reilly carefully unpacks the many contradictions and tensions that accompany the global women's human rights project. As she puts it, her book demonstrates the "modest gains and persistent obstacles" in this un-

dertaking (p. 115). While carefully constructed in the main, there are several analytical shortcomings. First, she proposes that cosmopolitan feminism is enriched and sustained by its grassroots mobilizations and receptivity to bottom-up influences. Yet this assertion is not sufficiently developed, neither theoretically nor empirically. Reilly is writing about the many contestations around the global discourses on women's human rights and shows how mobilizations coordinated, for example, by the Global Campaign for Women's Human Rights pushed the debates at the international level. Her focus is on the global discourses, however, and the bottom-up approach is posited. Left unexamined is the texture of meaning at the local level, why and how certain individuals and groups become activists and push for change, and the many triggers for the rise and fall of new networks. Integrating these precise histories into a study of global discourses remains an important agenda for future research. Second, she claims to offer a critique of "state-centered" rights discourses. But here she only restates the feminist challenge to the public/private divide and asserts the principle of "due diligence," that the state must be held accountable also for systemic abuses by private persons in the realm of family and customary law. It appears to me that she fails to address the many questions raised by contemporary feminist scholars and activists confronting nondemocratic and authoritarian state structures. How do cosmopolitan feminists committed to rights agendas understand the role of the state itself in promoting and implementing rights? This is a major issue still to be debated in inter-regional contexts. Importantly, Reilly's study promotes such critical dialogues, especially for feminists, who are skeptical of human rights agendas, and for human rights activists, who need to confront continuously the limitations of their own thinking and activism. This book is essential reading on the ongoing development of a critical human rights practice.

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