

# From Feminism to Women's Human Rights: The Best Way Forward?

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## ABSTRACT

This paper argues that there has been a shift in the strategy of the global women's movement from feminism to women's human rights. The origins and development of the women's human rights approach are traced and some pros and cons of the approach are discussed.

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article dénote qu'il y a un changement dans la stratégie du mouvement de la femme à l'échelle mondiale, du féminisme aux droits de la personnes de la femme. Il retrace les origines de l'évolution de la façon d'aborder les droits de la personne de la femme, et il discute de certains avantages et des désavantages.

Canadian feminist Ariane Brunet, in the video "The Vienna Tribunal," calls the shift of focus in the global women's movement from feminism to women's human rights "a mainstreaming of feminism." For her, such a mainstreaming is regrettable but necessary. Feminism, she says, no longer has the power to be heard.

In this paper, I argue that there has been a shift in strategy from "feminism" to "human rights," beginning after the Nairobi UN Conference on Women in 1985 and increasing in momentum in the early nineties.<sup>1</sup> The approach has been evident at a number of recent UN conferences - e.g. the 1993 Vienna human rights conference and the 1994 Cairo population conference - but attained its greatest prominence at the Beijing women's conference in 1995.

My interest in this topic comes from a number of sources. I attended both the Nairobi and Beijing conferences. At the conferences, I was both a participant and researcher. I was a participant as a woman and as a member of the women's movement in my local, provincial and national communities. I was a researcher as a feminist economist and a teacher of a course on women in the Third World. From these various perspectives, I have sought to understand the changes that have taken place in the global women's movement.<sup>2</sup>

My aim is to evaluate critically the shift in orientation in the global women's movement from feminism to a human rights strategy. I will trace the origins and development of the women's human rights approach, examine its rationale and offer some reflections on it as a strategy. The pros and cons of the adoption of such a strategy have received remarkably little discussion (Charlesworth 1994:61).

## EVIDENCE OF A SHIFT

Because of the fragmented and largely unorganized nature of the global women's movement, the shift in strategy that I identify here is not outlined in any official policy document. In addition, although I refer here to this shift, it was not evident to all who attended the Beijing NGO Forum and World Conference. In some ways, there appears to have been a "disjuncture" between grassroots participants' expectations of Beijing, based on previous experience in Nairobi where the focus was on women's equality, and what was going on at the leadership level in Beijing. Although it was impossible for any participant at Beijing to miss the language of the slogans, newspaper headlines and titles of papers presented - "women's rights are human rights," "reproductive rights are human rights," "violence is a human

rights issue," "protect women's human rights - fight against traffic in women" and "human right to shelter" - many participants did not recognize this as a shift in strategy. However, evidence of such a shift is pervasive in the literature and various documents published in the period leading up to and following the Beijing conference.

First, it is evident in the discourse used. The term "feminism" has all but disappeared not only in official documents but also in other materials prepared by individuals and groups. Instead, throughout this material, there is a pronounced women's human rights discourse. In some of the papers and documents, the "movement for women's human rights" and the "global women's movement" are used almost synonymously (Bunch 1996:203).

Second, the statements that various participants/writers have made, especially after Beijing, demonstrate the shift. Charlotte Bunch, director of the Center for Women's Global Leadership, and possibly the leading spokesperson for the women's human rights strategy, summed up the trends she observed at the conference - "One of the most striking aspects of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing was the way it focused world attention on the human rights of women" (Bunch 1996:7). Previous women's conferences were seen as primarily about women and development or even women's rights, but not about the concept of human rights as it applies to women (Bunch and Fried 1996:200).

Jacqueline Pitanguy, a Brazilian sociologist and political scientist, and founder and director of CEPIA (Citizenship Studies, Information, Action) in a paper leading up to Beijing calls the change from Mexico to Beijing "a new paradigm" in which:

The inclusion of reproductive and sexual rights as a significant sphere of the human rights struggle has been a central platform for feminists in national and international forums. (1995:456)

In the "post-Beijing" issue of the journal *Canadian Woman Studies*, the editorial emphasizes the emergence of human rights as an issue and strategy:

It was during these last few years that the reconceptualization of the relationship between women's rights and human rights began to gain acceptance. The discourse emerged at Vienna, grew over the next two years, and became the dominant theme at Beijing. This reformulation has had a tremendous impact on UN dialogue; it has re-written the language of women's issues, re-directed struggles for equality, and re-focussed debates, discussions, and directions of women's work globally. It was this reformulation of women's rights as human rights that was at the core of the Beijing Conference and that directs the future of women within the United Nations. (Cranney 1996:5)

Third, the numerous recent publications on the issue of women's human rights point to the importance given to this new topic. For example, in the 1997 *Women, INK* catalogue put out by the International Women's Tribune Center, human rights is identified as a new subject heading. There are twenty-three entries listed under human rights (thirty-one if those under law are included) out of a total of 97 items in the catalogue.

Fourth, almost all of the major NGOs are involved in the human rights issue, although some more so than others. In my view, the Center for Women's Global Leadership plays the leading role in this strategy. The International Women's Tribune Center as co-sponsor and executor of the human rights petition campaign and UNIFEM as the co-publisher of the book, *Demanding Accountability* (Bunch and Reilly 1994), are also important players. However, over a thousand local or national organizations sponsored the human rights petition delivered at Beijing which called upon the United Nations to fulfil its commitments and protect women's human rights. This included DAWN (Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era) and WEDO (Women's Environment and Development Organization) which, in general, might be said to have a more structural and, in the latter case, environmental focus.

Last, the language and strategies adopted by specific groups are also consistent with my

argument that a shift to a human rights approach has taken place. As an example, the lesbian caucus, in addition to using the slogan "lesbian rights are human rights," pursued a strategy at Beijing described as follows - "By and large, the organizing strategy emphasized more the ways that sexuality involved human rights than it did development or economic concerns" (Wilson 1996:217).

### THE WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS STRATEGY

Despite declarations at Nairobi that all issues are women's issues and need feminist analysis, participants felt after that conference that the separation and isolation of the movement and women's issues from the centres of global decision-making were still major problems (Bunch 1993: 148). The growing backlash against feminism from conservative forces, described as "the forces of religious fundamentalism and chauvinistic nationalism (seeking) cohesion by returning women to traditional roles," (Bunch 1995a: 449) only exacerbated the situation.

The human rights approach is a post World War II phenomenon which attempts to create and enforce social justice standards at an international level. It started with the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In 1986, the *Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* broadened the potential scope of human rights. In 1979, a document specifically directed to women's human rights, the *Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW), was drawn up.<sup>3</sup> Yet the human rights approach remained androcentric in its conception and its practice. A women's human rights approach sought to correct this.

The women's human rights approach has been defined in the following terms:

The movement for women's human rights comprises women's rights activists' efforts to use the human rights framework to promote the achievement of women's rights in the interrelated areas of political, civil, economic, social, and cultural rights. Such advocates have recognized that the

time has come to move from an exclusive focus on elaborating alternative programs within women's organizations to placing women's issues on mainstream agendas. Women's human rights activists have come to recognize the power of the international human rights framework, which lends legitimacy to political demands, since it is already accepted by most governments and brings with it established protocols.

(Friedman 1995:19).

At Nairobi, human rights had been spoken of - but as an issue rather than as a strategy. For example, such issues as female sexual slavery and forced prostitution were seen as "political and human rights abuses of great magnitude" (Bunch 1987:336). Yet it was pointed out that these were not issues that were being recognized by "the male-defined human rights community" in the same way.

In the late 1980s, several women's human rights initiatives were taken. For example, a human rights campaign took place in the Philippines (Bunch, 1990: 496) and an International Women's Rights Action Watch was established to oversee CEDAW (Friedman, 1995: 24). As a consequence of meetings in Nairobi, an Institute for Women, Law and Development was set up. Margaret Schuler, an American women's rights activist, is the Executive Director. The Institute has three networks: CLADEM in Latin America, APWLD in Asia-Pacific and WiLDAF in Africa.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1990s, many conferences and meetings have been held around the world on these subjects. For example, in 1991 the Center for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University in New Jersey held an Institute where strategies for linking women's rights to human rights were developed. Grassroots activists from twenty countries attended (Bunch 1993:146). Several conferences took place in Canada. In September 1992 in Toronto, the conference, "Linking Hands for Changing Laws: Women's Rights as Human Rights around the World" was held - attended by activists and scholars from the North and South, including both women and men from departments of foreign affairs, aid agencies and foundations

(O'Neil 1993:v). In November 1992, the Faculty of Law at the University of Toronto hosted a Consultation on Women's International Human Rights which was a gathering of international "experts" in the area, the vast majority of whom came from a legal background (Cook 1994: 3).

In 1993, the UN Conference on Human Rights was held in Vienna. It was preceded by many pre-conference meetings, two of the biggest in Latin American and Africa. At the Vienna conference itself, on a floor below the official meeting site, a Women's Tribunal was held where judges heard women's stories of human rights abuses, as defined by women. At the conclusion of the Tribunal's hearings, its findings were presented to the official meeting. As a result of these efforts, for the first time women's rights were explicitly recognized as human rights by the United Nations. In addition, agreement to appoint a special rapporteur on violence against women to monitor women's human rights abuses was achieved.<sup>5</sup>

Although a human rights approach was pursued in Cairo at the UN population conference and at the UN social summit in Copenhagen, its major application was saved for the Beijing conference. At Beijing, the United Nations was "put on trial" to see if global structures of governance could fully include women (Bunch 1995b:1).

### **WHY HAS A HUMAN RIGHTS STRATEGY BEEN ADOPTED?**

Reasons for the adoption of a human rights strategy exist at the theoretical and strategic levels. At the theoretical level, a human rights strategy allows the further building of a movement based on diversity within unity. This is in the tradition of a transformative or integrative feminism where "sisterhood" is a "vision" rather than a description of an existing reality:

The incorporation of women's human rights language and concepts by governments and organizations from all parts of the world and in all manner of ways indicates more than a rhetorical gesture. It represents a shift in analysis that moves beyond single-issue politics or

identity based organization and enhances women's capacity to build global alliances based on collective political goals and a common agenda.

(Bunch and Fried 1996:203)

For Angela Miles, the human rights approach is "in keeping with an integrative approach" (1996: 125) which she defines as:

When diverse women's specificity is named as a strength as well as a source of oppression, differences among women can be understood not only as a division to be overcome but as resources to be celebrated and used in struggle. The apparently contradictory facts of women's commonality and women's diversity thus also become necessary aspects of each other - to be affirmed and transformed together. (1996: xii)

At the strategic level, the human rights strategy is seen first as a way to make women's voices heard outside of the movement. The human rights approach gives a framework for the accountability of governments and international organizations:

Women everywhere are discovering that the human rights method, with its universal language, moral authority and measure of accountability, provides a useful tool for invigorating local struggles and putting additional pressure on governments to end state-sponsored or tolerated abuse of women.

(Thomas 1993:84)

Second, the human rights framework provides an "ethical basis" for women to be at the global policy-making table. An appeal for the recognition of the rights of "half of humanity" seems to hold far greater weight than the appeal for "the rights of women" (Friedman 1995:22):

The human rights framework offers an ethical basis for the inclusion of women

and a gender perspective in the transformation of global policy. Human rights principles contain the indisputable assertion of universal dignity of *all* humankind, and of the rights of all citizens to participate in shaping the social order. (Bunch 1995a: 452)

This recognition that there was a widespread failure to "respect and recognize women as human" (Suarez 1993) caught the attention of those who otherwise might not have thought about women's rights (Friedman 1994:22). This case was won in Vienna where "women succeeded in gaining widespread recognition of women's rights as human rights and advanced the process of creating mechanisms for monitoring and accounting for abuses of women's human rights" (Bunch 1995a: 450).

Third, the human rights strategy is described as an effective "umbrella" under which women can unite to fight the forces of backlash (Bunch, Dutt and Fried 1995:1). At Beijing, under that umbrella, it was felt that all women could work together whether they identified themselves as part of a movement called "feminist," "womanist," "women in development," "women's rights" or "women's human rights" (Bunch 1995b:5). Thus, the women's human rights approach was seen as a way to overcome various divisions that had developed in the movement.

Fourth, the human rights strategy is seen as a means to empower women since under it they are transformed from victims to actors: "The new brand of women's politics no longer presents the perspective of victims, but rather the assumption that women possess rights and can enforce legal claims" (GrieBhaber 1995:5).

Last, the women's human rights approach has brought a certain organizing success. A 1991 petition calling for the World Conference on Human Rights to comprehensively address women's human rights "took off like a rocket," according to Anne S. Walker of the International Women's Tribune Centre which faxed it around the world (Friedman 1995:28). A participant describes

why she believes that the petition got this response: "It was so broad and simple, but so full of meaning that people could relate to it" (Friedman 1995:28).

For those whose concern would be that women are abandoning feminism in favour of a male-defined framework, the response would be that women are intent on transforming human rights. This has been referred to as "mainstreaming human rights" - using feminist analysis to change human rights:

Comprehensive definitions of women's human rights can ... be drawn from women's perceptions of what is central to their basic integrity as human beings. From this starting point, women articulate and work for their human rights, not by asking existing human rights groups for their recognition or trying to twist women into existing human rights categories. Rather we bring the insights and changes in consciousness experienced by women over the last 25 years into the human rights discourse in order to build a perception of what human rights means as viewed from the lives of women.

(Bunch 1995a: 141)

The ultimate goal is to transform not only the human rights framework but also the world itself.

## WEAKNESSES OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS APPROACH

### Lack of a Structural Analysis

The structural problem with the human rights approach stems from the fact that human rights law is defined at the level of the individual. Human rights laws also tend to reinforce the institutional *status quo*. As one critic put it, human rights laws "make contingent structures seem permanent and undermine the possibility of their radical transformation" (Kairys 1982:61).

A structural analysis would focus its critique on the growth models of development. These models emphasize "growth," by which is meant economic growth, to the exclusion of social factors. Such approaches have fed into the drive

towards globalization of the economic system and the search for profits at the expense of any other considerations. Globalization entails a regime of free trade, privatization and austerity policies, the latter taking the form of SAPs (structural adjustment programmes) in the South. These trends are supported by rich industrial states, transnational corporations and players in world financial markets who stand to benefit from them. International institutions such as the World Trade Organization (formerly GATT), the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and even the media play powerful roles in maintaining the system.

This type of analysis plays little role in the human rights discourse. In a 1990 article, Bunch argued that since women's position in former socialist societies remained problematic, despite structural changes in their economies, an approach based on such structural changes alone would hold little promise for women (1990: 495). This position may have had the unfortunate effect of "throwing the baby out with the bathwater." Although structural changes by themselves will not "solve" all women's problems, without structural changes, women's fundamental situation, particularly that of poor women, will never change. It is these worldwide trends to growth models of development and globalization that are the leading cause of inequality, unemployment, poverty, debt, social policy cuts as well as environmental degradation, wars and violence (Isla, Miles and Molloy 1996).

A structural analysis would also address the question of the relations of power which are left out in the human rights approach. Adetoun O. Ilumoka, an African lawyer and activist, points out that the rights approach "...advocates formal equal rights before the law, laying down general, universally applicable rules while often ignoring rather than abolishing real inequalities existing between people (and in effect sometimes intensifying them)" (1994: 310). She explains:

The attempt by asserting rights to impose a new legitimacy and to challenge monopoly of the definition of morality can be revolutionary. However, it often merely challenges existing definitions of morality and monopoly by a particular group that

is seeking to supplant them with its own alternative version. (1994:311)

The experience under SAPs presents a compelling example of the need for structural analysis. SAPs are programs imposed by the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank on countries taking out loans to pay off their debts. SAPs generally involve devaluation of the currency, removal of trade protection, abandonment of price and wage subsidies in favour of an unregulated market, encouragement of export specialization, and austerity programs leading to cuts in state services. The consequences for people in countries experiencing these policies are severe:

The very notion of human rights obligations of the states undergoing structural adjustment is challenged by these conditions because they demand the reduction of expenditure in the social sector and the removal of subsidies so that previously public services have to be paid for by users. This naturally excludes the vulnerable groups unable to pay from access to these essential services, notably health services and education.

(Kuenyehia 1994: 429-30)

What role can human rights policies have when the very institutional framework that imposes the SAPs' claims to be the protector of human rights? The experience of one African activist leads her to answer this way:

The severity of the sociological conditions in African countries undergoing structural adjustment is such that it is questionable whether the whole discourse on rights and international human rights is at all relevant for African women.

(Kuenyehia 1994: 422)

### **Neglect of Economic Justice Issues**

Linked to the lack of structural analysis in the human rights approach and at Beijing is the neglect of economic justice issues. Such issues were more prominent in Nairobi, for instance in the

DAWN analysis. They also played a leading role in the 1991 World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet held in preparation for the UN conference on the environment in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and the work of the women's organizations emanating from the conference such as WEDO.

The Beijing *Platform for Action* does not include a structural analysis and hence does not address the whole area of economic justice. This led various groups to draw up their own documents. When it became obvious at the preparatory meetings that issues of economic justice were going to be neglected, members of the NGO Economic Justice Caucus began work on an "NGO Alternative Declaration" to rectify the situation. The document was drawn up in three intensive days of work in Beijing.<sup>6</sup>

Indigenous women at Beijing also produced their own document because they felt that the *Platform for Action* did not sufficiently question the New World Order. They point out the lack of analysis in the *Platform for Action*, for example with reference to poverty:

...(the *Platform for Action*) does not acknowledge that this poverty is caused by the same powerful nations and interests who have colonized us and are continuing to recolonize, homogenize, and impose their economic growth development model and monocultures on us. It does not present a coherent analysis of why it is that the goals of "equality, development, and peace," become more elusive to women each day in spite of three UN conferences on women since 1975. (*Indigenous Woman* 1995:26)

They declare that the *Platform* document does not challenge economic injustice "if inequality between nations, races, classes and genders are not challenged at the same time" (*Indigenous Woman* 1995:28).

If economic justice issues cannot be tackled at the level of the individual, there has been the suggestion that a "collective rights" approach which rests on a commitment to the welfare of the community over and above the interests of

particular individuals could ameliorate this problem. However, the experience to date with these so-called "third generation rights" is that "the theoretical and practical development of (such) rights has delivered very little to women" (Charlesworth 1994:75) since where they have been invoked, women's rights have taken second place to national rights.<sup>7</sup>

### The Diversity Question Unsolved

For some, the appeal of a women's human rights approach is that human rights are defined as universal, indivisible and inalienable and thus it is an approach that very much fits with the anti-dualistic vision of transformative or integrative feminism. Yet for others, such as Radhika Coomaraswamy of Sri Lanka (named the special rapporteur on violence against women following the Vienna conference), there are fundamental problems with the human rights approach, particularly for women from the South. First, she points out that human rights as defined with their humanistic, enlightenment roots cannot be universal and hence the approach lacks "resonance" in many parts of the world. In the enlightenment view of the human personality, woman is free, independent and endowed with rights and rational agency. Coomaraswamy says that although she herself can subscribe to this view, "...it would be wrong to assume that the values contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are truly universal. Such an assumption would make more than half the world the subject of ridicule" (1994:41).

She also points out that the "arbitrary and ad hoc role" played by the post-colonial state leads to a lack of legitimacy to a human rights approach based as it is on laws and principles implemented by the state (1994:55). Lastly, with regard to the women's human rights approach specifically, she points out the concern that in entering the private sphere, the women's human rights approach ignores community and family values that are positive (1994:40).

Other women from the South object to the "exclusive gender axis" (Romany 1995:551) in the movement and the "underlying presumption of the existence of a binding conflict between monolithic male and female interests" (Ilumoka 1994:312).

This had also been a concern at Nairobi and the earlier conferences.

Some would go further. Celina Romany, for example, calls for a reconceptualization of women's human rights which would "refine and deepen an understanding of multiple oppressions and put on the table the discourse of difference." Such a reconceptualization would also raise questions about the way that "essentialist discourse replicates hierarchial and exclusionary theories and practices" and "the legitimacy of the paradigm-making nature a feminist discourse of human rights law assumes for national consitutional processes and legal reform in general" (Romany 1995:549). To explain this last point, Romany quotes Vasuki Nesiah:

By invoking experience as if it somehow captured the lived realities of all women at some basic level, theorists begin to take gendered individuals for granted. When the experience of gendered oppression is given the authority simply to assume a feminist alliance, it not only obscures other structures of oppression but also renders the operation of gendered oppression too neat, ahistorical and fixed. (1993:201)

This message does seem to have been heard, at least to some extent. In very recent writings, it is realized that "universality cannot be claimed but must be negotiated" (Friedman 1995:20). It is evident that it is no easy task to move beyond the rhetoric of unity in diversity to making that a reality.

### Lack of Effectiveness

While some defend a women's human rights approach based on its "effectiveness" - that women's voices are finally being heard and that the Beijing conference, based on such a strategy, was a success (Bunch, Dutt and Fried 1996:1) - others point to the lack of effectiveness of human rights laws generally, let alone women's human rights laws specifically.

With reference to human rights generally, critics point out that "despite the articulation of

human rights in various international and national legal instruments ... systematic violation appears to be more the rule than the exception in most parts of the world" (Ilumoka 1994:308). Further:

The negative consequences of structural adjustment on the human condition (have) resulted in retrogression, rather than development, in the areas of nutrition, education, employment and social welfare. Human rights to food, education, work and social assistance have been rendered meaningless.

(Tomasevski 1987:95)

There is hypocrisy at the policy making table. A recent editorial from the conservative British financial publication, the *Economist*, admits "it is true that there are elements of inconsistency, even hypocrisy, in the West's attempts to foster the cause of human rights around the world."<sup>8</sup>

The editorial goes on to suggest the "real reasons" for some of the "leading" nations' recent interest in and rhetoric about human rights:

Morality is not the only reason for putting human rights on the West's foreign policy agenda. Self interest also plays a part. Political freedom tends to go hand in hand with economic freedom, which in turn tends to bring international trade and prosperity.

With reference to women's human rights specifically, a similar lack of effectiveness is pointed out - "Examples abound of the non-enforcement of existing legislation protecting women's rights..." (Kandiyoti 1995:22)."

Hilary Charlesworth has summarized the problems that have been experienced with international instruments specific to women. She claims that women's human rights have been marginalized by the creation of a specialized branch of human rights law:

...the structure and institutions of women's international human rights law are more fragile than their apparently more

obligations and procedures; the institutions designed to draft and monitor them are under-resourced and their roles often circumscribed compared to other human rights bodies; the widespread practice of states in making reservations to fundamental provisions in the instruments is apparently tolerated; as is the failure of states generally to fulfill their obligations under the instruments. (1994:59)

The issue of the reservations made to the CEDAW convention is a very troubling one. There have been more reservations to the CEDAW convention than any previous convention (Mayer 1995:105). Furthermore, countries that ratified the convention made reservations to it which disagreed with the very substance of the convention, specifically the equality of women. This is another version of the hypocrisy, referred to by one author as the "new world hypocrisy" (Mayer 1995:127) in which "...governments manipulate women's rights issues in an opportunistic way in order to placate internal constituencies or to posture in international forums" (Kandiyoti 1995:22).

The experience then, particularly of women of the South, is that a human rights approach is not a very "effective" way forward. There is a discrepancy between the "effectiveness" claimed for the women's human rights approach and actual experience.<sup>9</sup>

### THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

One challenge for the global women's movement is the sharing of leadership with, or perhaps even the surrendering of leadership to, women of the South. The other is to truly connect women at the grassroots with women at the policy-making table. These problems are not new for the global women's movement. As mentioned already, they arose at Mexico, Copenhagen and Nairobi. However, the women's human rights approach may have exacerbated problems in both of these areas.

Celina Romany describes the feelings of Southern delegates at the Vienna conference:

Many women felt objectified by Northern

women who conveyed a romanticized solidarity reminiscent of the similar constructions of class and racial struggles of the white or elite left. Press and public relations, the public face of women's efforts at this conference, were controlled by a minority. Most women were left to feel like powerless clients re-presented to the world by the enlightened advocates of the North. Women were once again cast as sinners for the redemption script of missionaries. (Romany 1995:548)

She suggests that "Northern feminist legal scholars and activists still reenact the 'orientalist' dichotomy coined by Edward Said (in which the Orient is defined in opposition to the Occident through an imperialist lens) where the Southern world is 'shackled to brutal chaos' and the North embodies democracy and the rule of law" (Romany 1995:551). She calls on "women leaders of the North" to develop "a protocol for surrendering privileges" (1995:551).

As one participant observed, the human rights strategy involves "hardball politics (that women) have got to learn how to play" (Cook 1993:15). The incredible efficiency with which the global women's movement is operating was evident to anyone who participated in the Beijing conference. Networking, monitoring, tracking, lobbying are all down to a fine art. It is this efficiency that has allowed the movement to achieve the success that it has had at the policy table (Chen 1996:150). In fact, there is the suggestion that women might soon take over the leading role at that table, at least in the human rights area, as a result both of their new ideas and their energy (Bunch 1995a:450).

But is "hardball politics" compatible with feminist process? There can only be a few at the policy-making table and these few need to have access to resources such as fax machines and the Internet and preferably possess a legal background. While a women's human rights strategy may have potential in putting women at the global policy-making table, among its major limitations seems to be the danger of leaving behind so many of the women it is trying to represent.

Perhaps the "best way forward" mentioned in the title of this paper is to continue with the effort to transform human rights but for that to be only one thrust of such efforts by the global women's movement. The more grounded and structurally sensitive approach which reached its peak at Nairobi still has much to offer that the

human rights approach would seem to lack. The women's human rights approach may give the global women's movement "a voice" at the policy-making table but given the hypocrisy that goes on at that table, is it a voice that will make any difference?

## ENDNOTES

1. Thanks to Janet Stoppard for her suggestions and editorial support on various drafts of this paper. Thanks also to Marilyn Porter and the other editors and anonymous referees of the journal for their helpful comments.
2. I am using the term "global women's movement" in an inclusive sense to refer to all women working to effect change at the global level whether they do so as individuals, within NGOs or within institutions and whether at local, national, regional or international levels. The four UN women's world conferences (1975, 1980, 1985 and 1995) have served to galvanize the movement and given the NGOs a leading role in it. Although the movement is democratic, some women unavoidably end up taking leadership roles. At the policy table, the movement can only be represented by a few but there is the expectation that these few will faithfully represent those at the grassroots. See also Chen's slightly different definition (1996:153, n 3).
3. The three major documents specifically relating to women are CEDAW, the Nairobi *Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000* and the Beijing *Platform for Action*. The latter two are the documents agreed to by consensus by the governments attending the official UN conferences on women in 1985 and 1995 respectively. Only CEDAW, once ratified by a UN member country, is binding on that country. The commitments made in the other two documents have only "the moral sanction of a consensus vote by almost all of the countries of the world (Stienstra and Roberts 1995:2)."
4. See Schuler (Ed.), *From Basic Needs to Basic Rights: Women's Claim to Human Rights*. Washington D.C.: Women, Law and Development International, 1995. CLADEM is the Latin American Committee for the Defense of Women's Rights; APWLD is the Asia-Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development; and WILDAF is Women in Law and Development in Africa.
5. Information from the film, "The Vienna Tribunal." The rapporteur was Radhika Coomaraswamy of Sri Lanka.
6. The alternative declaration was posted as an interim document dated September 1995 (mporter@morgan.ucs.mun.ca).
7. Charlesworth cites the examples of the US support for the Afghani resistance movement after the 1979 Soviet invasion and the UN support for Kuwait after Iraq's 1990 invasion of that country. In both cases, she argues that oppression against women was reinforced (1994: 75-6).
8. Editorial reprinted as "Rights are a suitable target for foreign policy," *Globe and Mail*, April 14, 1997.
9. A recent email communique from the Center for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University (May 19, 1997) expresses concern about the fate of the human rights commitments made to women through the UN given that a major restructuring of the organization is presently taking place "without much input from NGOs and especially women." This raises further doubts about the effectiveness of women's efforts to date.

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