

## Women's Rights as Human Rights

### **Recommended Level of Instruction:**

Lesson is designed for use in the latter half of an introduction to human rights course. The lesson assumes that students have been introduced to the concept of human rights, the UN system, as well as other major international actors in the advocacy and implementation of human rights. An understanding of the social construction of gender and other social/political hierarchies is recommended. The lesson could also be of use in a women's/gender studies course and/or in a politics of gender course.

### **Keywords:**

Women; Gender; Feminism; Women's Rights; Transnational Organizations; CEDAW

### **Learning Objectives:**

Students will be able to explain why the explicit assertion that women's rights are, in fact, human rights was historically and politically necessary. Additionally, students will develop an understanding that human rights are always defined and practiced within particular historical and political contexts. Finally, students will consider how transnational feminist/women's organizations as well as nation-states frequently overlook the ways in which other social/political hierarchies and interests impact efforts to counter violence and discrimination against women when using a human rights framework.

### **Reading(s)/ Material(s):**

- Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), 1979
- Bunch, Charlotte. 1990. "Women's Rights as Human Rights: Toward a Re-Vision of Human Rights," *Human Rights Quarterly* 12:4, 486-498
- Grewal, Inderpal. 1998. "On the New Global Feminism and the Family of Nations: Dilemmas of Transnational Feminist Practice" in *Talking Visions*, ed. Ella Shohat, 501-523

### **Synopsis of Material:**

**CEDAW:** United Nations Convention outlines a basic set of rights for women and monitors implementation of its provisions in states that have signed and ratified the Convention.

**Bunch:** Addresses the neglect of gender-related abuses in the field of human rights prior to the 1990s. Bunch first outlines the major reasons why states and human rights organizations were reluctant to consider gender-based violations in their efforts to promote and implement human rights. Bunch then proceeds to outline four different, but related, approaches to linking women's rights issues to human rights discourses and practices. The author notes that human rights advocates need not necessarily abandon other issues to focus on gender-based violations as experiences of such abuse often coincides with violations based on other social/political categories; rather states and human rights organizations can learn to incorporate gender perspectives into consideration of other human rights issues.

**Grewal:** Consideration of the discourses and practices of women's rights as human rights. Grewal examines the role of the UN, US, transnational feminist organizations, and grass-roots community organizations around issues of women's rights. While acknowledging the important contribution of a human rights framework in making visible certain forms of violence and discrimination against women globally, Grewal is critical of the ways in which such discourses simultaneously decontextualize the experiences of many women and give prominence to those violations and solutions prioritized by First World states and feminist groups. In particular, the author points to the ways in which human rights

discourses and practices can create a binary of objects to be rescued and subjects that rescue in ways that reflect problematic distributions of power and resources globally, nationally, and sub-nationally.

**Recommended Background Information:**

An understanding of the social construction of gender and other social/political hierarchies is recommended. Also, it is recommended that the instructor include some information about the UN World Conferences on Women, particularly the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, in any accompanying lecture.

**Discussion Questions/Activity:**

Suggestion for Activity:

Giving students time to talk about the discussion questions in small groups prior to a large group discussion is recommended. This will give students an opportunity to exchange and develop their thoughts on some of the theoretical concepts in the articles before engaging in a discussion with the entire class.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are some of the obstacles to recognizing gender-based abuses as human rights violations?
2. Why is it necessary to assert that women's rights should indeed be considered human rights?
3. Why do some states including the U.S., Iran, Sudan, and Somalia refuse to sign & ratify CEDAW?
4. Why is it important and/or necessary to account for the particular historical and political contexts within which violations occur against women?
5. Why are the discourses and practices of some First World women's rights organizations viewed as problematic when they are advocating for the rights of women from the Third World?

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