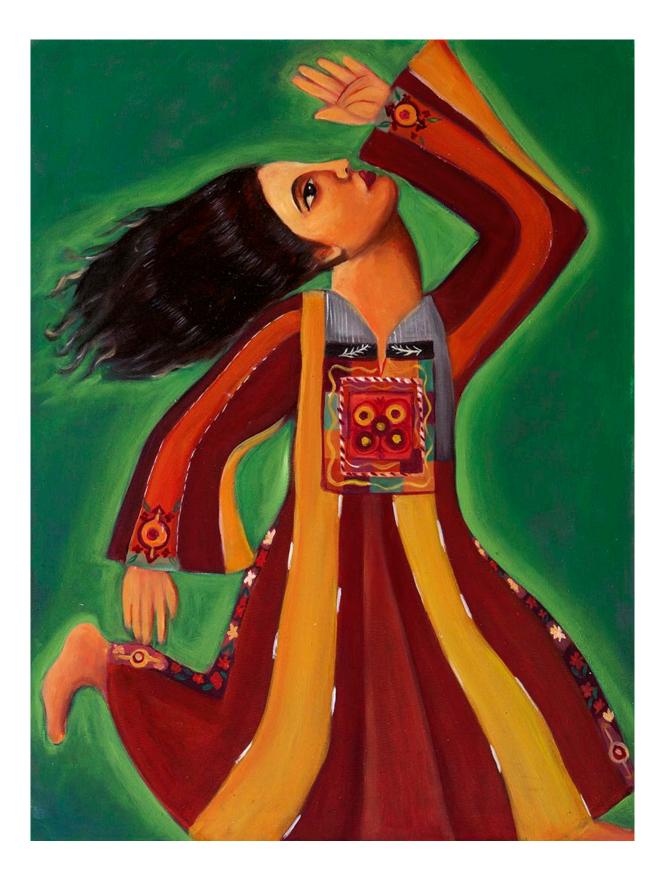Special Issue:

Human Rights in an Age of Populist Authoritarianism

Edited by Stephen Cowden, Jane Gabriel, Gita Sahgal, Amrita Shodhan and Rashmi Varma

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Cover Image: **Rebel like a Woman** (2023) ©

Feminist Dissent

Issue 8

Special Issue: *Human Rights in an Age of Populist Authoritarianism*

Guest edited by Stephen Cowden, Jane Gabriel, Gita Sahgal, Amrita Shodhan and Rashmi Varma

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Cover Image: **Rebel like a Woman** (2023) by Malak Mattar

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Image 1: **Greenbelt** (2018) © <u>Malak Mattar</u> All rights Reserved

Editorial: Human Rights in an Age of Populist Authoritarianism

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With the founding of the United Nations (UN) in 1945 and the adoption of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) by the UN in 1948, it appeared that liberal conceptions of human rights were fundamentally embedded in mainstream politics at a global level. This of course had come on the heels of the devastation of two World Wars that had torn to shreds any notion of civilisational superiority of the West. At the same time, decolonization movements across Africa and Asia were challenging Eurocentric notions of the "human" and "rights" and fought for and won a more universal concept of human rights (Sahgal, 2012; also see Sahgal in this issue).

Today, however, the consensus has frayed. Among the many factors that has brought about this shift has been the re-emergence of radically anti-democratic forms of racist nationalism and misogyny, sometimes religiously inspired, as epitomised by figures such as Narendra Modi, Viktor Orban, Benjamin Netanyahu and Donald Trump. We are now witnessing a blatant attempt to dismantle the rights-based order set up after the Second World War. However inadequately it was practised, and however much there were always double standards and multiple hypocrisies practiced by the most powerful, these could be exposed because they were measured against the same set of standards constructed after the war. What we see now is something far worse than hypocrisy - a blatant contempt for the whole idea of rights on the part of new authoritarian political programmes of the Right. Amongst both state as well as non-state actors, this authoritarianism promotes what the sociologist Chetan Bhatt has referred to as 'cosmic nationalism…[which] seeks to extinguish the entire ground of universal humanism, equality and liberal modernity' (Bhatt, 2023: 3). This has contributed to the creation of 'states of exception' where rights simply cease to exist. We need look no further than the ghastly genocide and destruction in Gaza that is unfolding as this issue goes to press.

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In such a context one might have thought that feminist, Left and anti-racist forces might rally to defend the idea of human rights as one of the vital foundations of a democratic polity, and as a focus of resistance to this. Instead, the concept of human rights has also come under attack from various sections of the Left, particularly in academia, as being part of the West's neo-colonial agenda to impose its values as universal. Yet, faced with the lawless barbarism of authoritarian states across the world, as well as the celebration of identity politics at the expense of issues of class and material realities, where does this attack on the universalism of human rights actually leave us? In this context we feel it is absolutely crucial to ask how the political argument for human rights can be reconstructed on a new basis. In asking this question it is essential to also ask, in the manner of Audre Lorde's formulation, whether the "house of human rights", officially inaugurated in 1948, was indeed solely the Master's house? And whether we need to reinvigorate the universal spirit of human rights to combat the global spread of authoritarianism?

In this special issue on Human Rights in an Age of Populist Authoritarianism, *Feminist Dissent* intervenes in the debate on human rights to make a feminist case for universal human rights. We argue that the "house of human rights", for all its deficiencies, is created in part by the movements that grew out of a radical challenge to imperial powers. In particular, we are interested in how rights can and should be mobilised by a feminist anti-racist left in the face of the rise of the authoritarian Far Right.

A key part of this is understanding the history of how this framework emerged in the first place. Sahgal in this issue draws on a growing body of research (Adami, 2019; Bhagavan, 2012; Rathore, 2021; Waltz, 2002) which reconstructs the history of the development of human rights, showing the ways in which international laws on human rights were not only translated to make them locally relevant but that they grew out of the struggles of anti-colonial movements against fascism and for women's rights. Women in many freedom movements, from Latin America to India and Africa argued for rights for women within universalist frames. Muslims (often Muslim men) also argued for the right to exit religion, thereby protecting apostasy in international law. These groups worldwide have used human rights concepts to imagine and fight for a world order in opposition to colonialism, slavery and segregation.

Women from the Indian freedom movement – notably Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Hansa Mehta and Kamladevi Chattopadhyaya but also Shareefah

Hamid Ali and Lakshmi Menon (see Rathore, 2021)– used their experience of mass organizing, electoral politics and non-violent opposition to British rule – to help create the language of the UN Charter (arguing against the paternalist language of trusteeship, somewhat unsuccessfully), and the UDHR. Their concerns about women's rights used concepts and language developed within the Indian women's movement to create a Women's Charter, which entered the language of the UN Commission on Women. But they also intervened on the partition of Palestine, the Korean war, anti-apartheid resistance in South Africa and were active in anti-nuclear peace work and international women's coalitions such as Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Before apartheid was even fully established, India was the first country to use the principles of universal jurisdiction and international law to condemn South Africa in the UN, actions that were hailed across the world, just as South Africa has brought Israel to the International Court of Justice for charges of genocide. The term genocide itself was developed to describe the Holocaust, and researchers and activists have gone back to Raphael Lemkin and Hersch Lauterpacht's original work on the mass crimes of genocide and crimes against humanity (a discussion of which is reviewed in this issue by Pragna Patel) to explain what is happening in the world in respect of Palestine. In a related vein, many indigenous movements globally have also deployed the concept of 'ecocide' to capture the complete destruction of the environment and of the people who live in that environment.

The Refugee Convention is the only international human rights instrument that ensures the right to flee persecution and settle in another country. Although the refugee 'crisis' in the West receives a lot of attention, there are many areas of the world that are dealing with far larger refugee populations, of which Lebanon is just one example. The European Union and many individual countries such as the UK and the US are undermining the purpose of the Refugee Convention by paying other states to prevent people from reaching Europe or to assist in deporting them, as in Rwanda, Turkey, and Libya. While Trump's notorious deal with El Salvador to detain deportees from the US has received considerable publicity, the EU has had long established policies of keeping refugees out of Europe, while the UK, among others, plans to deport those who do succeed in reaching countries where they can claim asylum. In addition, the narrowing of nationality laws has led to large numbers of people facing impossible odds to prove existing citizenship and having their rights stripped away – India's Citizenship (Amendment)

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Act passed in 2019 and the latest moves by the Trump administration in the US are terrifying examples of where this is taking us.

Do human rights transcend national borders? Modern movements for freedom have sometimes sought to imagine the nation state in other forms than a society based on a single ethnicity. Some of the Kurdish movements for liberation transformed from a military cult to a wider movement of eco-feminism, drawing on anarchism, and building a society from the ground up. In the borderlands of Pakistan and Afghanistan, a mass peace movement with an electoral arm has demanded an end to emergency laws and criticized both the Pakistani state and the Taliban-Mullah-Military Alliance. Sudanese activists led by women succeeded in overthrowing President Omar al-Basheer and demanding a secular state in 2019. Basheer had been charged by the ICC for genocide, but it was a domestic movement that got rid of him. Although Sudan is once again in deep crisis in a state of civil war, this movement and the hope it holds shouldn't be forgotten.

In the arena of reproduction, feminists took the technology of birth control which was used to justify eugenics and Malthusian population control policies and transformed it into a language of reproductive rights and then reproductive justice. As the US goes backwards into Christian nationalism and white supremacy, many Latin American countries are emerging from under the Vatican boot and challenging the role of evangelical Christians who were planted in their countries as a counter-terror measure.

Historical perspective on human rights

Human rights as we know them now are synonymous with rights within the context of state authorities. They are seen as legal limitations on the state, creating space for the flourishing of human freedoms. However, it is important to understand that such conceptions on the limits to a government's powers have existed in many societies and cultures for thousands of years, before the European Enlightenment to which they are typically credited. In her book *A New Theory of Human Rights: New Materialism and Zoroastrianism* (2021) Alison Assiter argues that the Cyrus Cylinders inscribed in 539 BCE, many centuries before the work of Locke, Kant or Rousseau or even Aristotle, could be considered as the world's first charter of human rights (2021: 86). In making this point she is not claiming that the Persian emperor Cyrus had a major influence on modern conceptions of human rights, but that concerns regarding human

flourishing were central to ancient thought in terms that were not as different as we might imagine from modern conceptions (Cowden, 2022: 260-262). In similar ways, Hankins shows how Confucian ideologues in China shared concerns which were very similar to humanist political thinkers of sixteenth century renaissance Italy. They were both concerned with organising governance by virtuous rulers and the importance of recognising *humanitas* as guiding principles (Hankins, 2019: 514). The Italian Renaissance itself grew through the rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman knowledge and forms of government. These only became available in the Renaissance because their knowledge was preserved and built upon by centers of learning in the Islamic world, particularly during the 9th and 10th centuries. This illustrates that conceptions of human rights were never the product of one culture and society but rather arose through the traffic between cultures and societies.

Hankins notes that while humanist thought continued to influence 'education, mores and the arts for three hundred years', but goes on to point out that "its ways of thinking about political power fell out of favour in the seventeenth century' as 'constitutional, rights-based, and contractarian approaches to the justification and ordering of political power took over' (Hankins, 2019: 500). From the sixteenth century, with the growth of empire by corporations and governments, especially in the West, laws and rules along with military power became the means that enabled colonial exploitation. Imperial rule in different parts of the world employed the Roman law foundations of European civil laws. This law established a difference between civic laws and personal laws, which permitted a differentiation and "localisation" of imperial governance (for a longer argument see Shodhan, 2023).

Yet, those who were colonised argued from the earliest period that the universal declarations in the law were not being deployed universally. From the American and French revolutionaries arguing for the liberties necessary for men, Equiano and others writing about the abomination of enslavement, to other anti-colonialists writing about the injustice and poverty suffered as a result of imperial rule, they all sought to broaden and widen the recognition of the need to control established forms of rule. Nothing epitomised this tradition more than the Haitian revolution of 1791-1804, brilliantly captured in the 1938 book *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* by the Trinidadian historian C. L. R. James. The leader of the slaves throughout this revolution, Touissant L'Overture, was directly inspired by the 1798

Revolution in France and led the first successful slave revolt in history on the insistence that the ideals of 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' applied universally. Within this book James quotes a famous letter from Toussaint where he wrote

> *I swear it by all that liberty holds [the] most sacred. My attachment to France, my knowledge of the blacks, make it my duty not to leave you ignorant either of the crimes which they meditate or the oath that we renew, to bury ourselves under the ruins of a country revived by liberty rather than suffer the return of slavery'* (1989:195)

Movements for inclusion within the regime of legal freedom went on to define anti-colonial movements throughout the twentieth century. The experience of war in Europe and devastation in other parts of the world, as well as the participation of colonial troops in the war brought this sense of application of the universal principles to the fore. The idea of building an international order became a stronger concern not just for western powers but the newly decolonising nations as well. It is this movement that generated the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 as discussed by Sahgal in this issue.

The anti-universalist turn

As the above section explores, the end of World War II and the beginnings of decolonisation that signalled the end of empire had heralded an international order with universalism as a key principle based on anti-colonial internationalism. In this new global order, the focus shifted beyond states to include global institutions and practices. Adom Getachew (2020) has referred to it as "worldmaking" that is 'a way of thinking about internationalism that was not anti-national, and or anti-state' (in Malak and Rodrigues, 2021). But even as this new global dispensation was taking root, it was shadowed by the Cold War such that countries such as the Congo which had newly liberated itself from French rule and where they murdered Lumumba, and Cuba, where Castro had brought about a revolution and whom they sought to overthrow or kill, were used as pawns in the hands of the superpowers.

However, it was the 1970s' global economic and political crises that signalled the demise of the political and social order that had structured developments worldwide since 1945. The 'boom' period (roughly, 1945 to 1975) was marked in the West by the historic achievement of the

'welfare state' and a measure of social democracy; but there were also substantial social, political and economic gains in the global South, in newly independent states and peoples in the era immediately following decolonisation. The achievement and maintenance of secular democracy in India; Nasser's stand on Suez in 1956; the popular platforms established by Castro in Cuba and Nkrumah in Ghana, these were all developments which fired the imaginations of millions of people, placing on to the world stage the principle of 'Third World' self-determination as a right. Domestically, many of the newly inaugurated postcolonial regimes undertook ambitious projects intended to improve the livelihood and welfare of their citizenry (see also Lazarus and Varma, 2008).

Yet many of the new regimes in postcolonial states failed to consolidate the momentous social advance represented by decolonisation or to sustain the postcolonial project of democratisation. A savage restructuring of class relations worldwide was set in train, under the sign of 'neoliberalism'. In the West, the practical effects of this restructuring have been to privatise social provision, dismantle the welfare state, force millions of people into structural unemployment, and break the back of trade unionism. In the global South, the effects were analogous, but deeper and worse. Throughout the postcolonial world over the course of the final quarter of the twentieth century, Structural Adjustment Programmes became the favoured means of disciplining postcolonial states, domesticating them and rendering them subservient to the needs of the global market (Lazarus and Varma, 2008).

Academic responses to the economic and social crises referred to above, on the whole, tended to highlight the instrumentalization of rights-based frameworks, the hypocrisy of Western nation states, and offered a trenchant critique of the civilizational, imperialist, and racist presumptions at the heart of the Enlightenment whose legacies were bequeathed within the human rights framework (Dhawan, 2014). The turn to postmodernism and its scepticism of "grand narratives" as inherently oppressive fed into the view that international law and human rights were 'always already captured by imperial power' and thereby doomed to fail. In fact, Karim Malak refers to human rights as 'products of the imperial order' (2021). This turn was influenced by French poststructuralist philosophers like Michel Foucault, among others, and produced critiques of the Enlightenment notions of freedom, showing how governmentality regulated or constructed human culture. This cultural awareness (relativism) was brought into governance questions

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by political commentators like Charles Taylor, in an attempt to grant importance to inclusion and recognition of difference among individuals. Here cultural difference and its recognition were identified as residing in the identities of individuals. Differences of culture were now given credence as ethnicity rather than race and seen to be in conflict with the universal application of democratic principles, especially through the notion of a singular law and secular state. However, as Seyla Benhabib has argued, cultures are complex human practices that can never exist in a 'pure' state (2002) and it makes no sense to preserve or freeze cultural practices, and take it out of deliberative, democratic contestations (p. ix, 70-71).

Postcolonial theory's critique of the Enlightenment as a Eurocentric, coercive, and authoritarian project has become the common sense of the field (Spivak, 1988). While recent attempts to "decolonise Enlightenment" have focused attention on its contradictory and contested legacies, there is nevertheless a sense of discomfort with 'the historical triumph of reason and science' that brought with it 'terror, genocide, slavery, exploitation, and domination" (Dhawan, 2014; 11). That is some historical blame to lay on reason and science!

Ironically or perhaps even causally, the emergence of areas of study such as postcolonial studies coincided with the decisive defeat of anti-capitalist, anti-colonial and liberationist ideologies within the Western (or, Western-based) intelligentsia. But we must note that the field also emerged in close chronological proximity to the end of the 'Bandung era' and the collapse of insurgent 'Third Worldism'. In this vacuum of collapse and defeat, postcolonial studies entered into strategic alliance with the new social movements that swept across university campuses in the US and elsewhere, articulating a politics of identity – with reference to gender, race and ethnicity as against class struggle and universal human rights, and privileging a rhetoric of recognition over one of redistribution and rights even as universities were being brought systematically within the purview of neoliberalism. Thus the emergence of the field can be understood as part of a wider – epochal – shift, heralding, as has often been claimed (and not only within postcolonial studies itself), the demise of the 'modern' forms of political struggle and identification – liberalism, socialism, secularism, nationalism, internationalism, etc. – and of the grand sociological categories associated with them: universalism, revolution, the nation-state, modernity, even imperialism (Lazarus and Varma, 2008).

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Religious fundamentalism and the erosion of human rights

Particularly on the issue of women's rights, prominent feminist theorists seem fascinated by women's immersion in religious identity politics (Mahmood, 2011). They have far been less interested in the impact of fundamentalism on the rights of women and sexual minorities. Much academic work as part of "faiths" literature projects religious groups as important carriers of social capital and providers of welfare support (also see Varma, Dhaliwal and Nagarajan, 2016; Varma, 2019). Sara Farris (2017), for instances, elides the question of women's rights and religious fundamentalism in her study of what she sees as an unholy alliance of right-wing nationalist political parties, neoliberals, and some feminists. In part, this retreat from criticism of religious fundamentalism can be seen as reprising an earlier tendency to treat the ethnic minority subject as particularly fragile and as exemplary victim. Darryl Li in his work on 'transnational jihad actors' characterises them as 'engaged in a pretty radical critique of conventional international legal principles', allowing himself space to 'situate them within the logic of sovereignty in this order, in order to push back against discourses that seek to radically otherize them' (in Matar and Rodrigues, 2021).

In contrast, men and women challenging fundamentalism are placed in what Meredith Tax (2013) referred to as "the double bind" of being burdened by Right-wing assimilationist pressures to challenge fundamentalism within their communities and a simultaneous criticism by Left-wing forces for pandering to state agendas and imperialism when they do so (Bennoune, 2013; Zia, 2019). Karima Bennoune, law professor and daughter of an Algerian exile, writes about the silenced aspect of Muslim resistance with tremendous poignancy in her riveting account of Muslims fighting against fundamentalism all across the globe: "My father's country showed me in those grim years of the 1990s that the struggle waged in Muslim majority societies against extremism is one of the most important—and overlooked—human rights struggles in the world" (3).

What the attack on human rights in academic discourse overlooks is the fact that we need a simultaneous critique of imperial hegemonic power and state abuses on the one hand, and a much needed critique of the power of fundamentalist movements, their perpetuation of terror, violence and the assault on the human rights and civil liberties. These criticisms must be linked to human rights frameworks, and anti-discrimination values that have been fought for and shaped by an array

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of civil society mobilisations and actors across the global South as well as by minorities in Britain and across Europe.

There is of course often justified scepticism as to whether concern for human rights is really the reason for military or diplomatic intervention, with sceptics highlighting human rights violations committed by countries such as the UK and USA themselves and pointing to the inconsistency in their treatment of different countries (see Prashad, 2014; Ayça Çubukçu in Matar and Rodrigues, 2021). The US-led invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan had a devastating impact on the region, one that is still reverberating with ongoing consequences in terms of the numbers of deaths, disability, loss of livelihoods, destruction of economic development and the erosion of human rights. On this view, as Çubukçu contends, 'international law is thoroughly complicit in legitimizing, if not also legalizing, this occupation'. But she also points to the other dimension of international law that is part of an anti-imperial project after World War II. Çubukçu describes the contradictions as a matter of reading and looking differently. This often involves recognition 'that these organizations and frameworks are deeply hierarchical, that they're meant to maintain empire', while also being 'potential sites for internal reconstitution and elaboration and different trajectories that they imagine they weren't necessarily created to enable'. This reading is of course very different from the history of human rights through the UN that Sahgal traces in her essay in this issue, but it at least marks an opening to a rethinking of the possibilities of universal human rights.

The rise of the Far Right: mainstreaming misogyny

While postmodernist and poststructuralist ideas fuelled a scepticism to conceptions of universal human rights, there is a bitter irony to the fact that it has been the growing political power of the Far Right that has sought to enact this, creating the profound crisis we now find ourselves in.   This is epitomised by the governments and political parties of Donald Trump, Viktor Orban, Giorgia Meloni, Marine Le Pen, Narendra Modi and Benjamin Netanyahu. There has been debate within the critical literature on the Far Right as to whether these governments should be characterised as 'right-wing authoritarians' or 'fascists' (Mondon and Winter 2020; Mudde 2019); but a brief consideration of the language and the underlying ideas which guide the politics of these parties and governments, shows there is little which distinguishes them from those who proudly assert their allegiance to Nazism and Fascism. The central

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idea within this reinvigorated political movement is a conception of 'Western Civilisation' as under siege; a process brought about by migration and multiculturalism, particularly involving Muslims (Mondon and Winter 2020), and the 'woke' cultural elites which have promoted those policies within the state. The conspiracy theory known as "White Replacement" theory, or the "Great Replacement" is a key trope, expressing the idea that ethnic "white" populations are being both physically replaced and culturally diluted through the process of migration. While the return of these racially supremacist ideas in government is something new, there is nothing new about the ideas themselves, which go back to the work of anti-Enlightenment ultra-nationalist thought from the 19th century. The French nationalist Maurice Barrès (1862-1923), a noted anti-Semite and advocate of race science, epitomises this. In his novels he wrote that while with immigration 'France can always be called France, its soul will be dead, emptied, destroyed' (Schwartzburg, 2019). In this sense the 'replacement' of white French people by immigrants was not just changing the nature of the French population, but this change was bringing about the 'spiritual death' of France.

These themes of an organic and ethnically exclusive nation have been resuscitated by the contemporary French philosopher Renaud Camus, and indeed the phrase "The Great Replacement" was the title of Camus' 2011 book. Camus is a cosmopolitan intellectual who epitomises the way the far right has mainstreamed itself by shifting from crude assertions of racial supremacy to a narrative of nostalgia, national decline and the destruction of 'cultural identities'. Bhatt has noted that this concept of 'white extinction' is rendered both in 'biological' and 'genetic' terms, 'typically as the decline of white populations or their replacement through genetic 'mixing', [alongside]…'white genocide' also imagined in civilizational terms through which 'culture' and 'biology' are merged' (Bhatt, 2020:6). This merging of biological and cultural metaphors is demonstrated in the way Camus describes the dynamic of the 'replacement' of the 'French race':

> *Replacement is the very essence of modernity… Objects are being replaced, landscapes are being replaced. Everything is being replaced…I would say that this French race, or, if you'd rather, the French people, in all its dimensions – ethnic, cultural, civilizational – is especially under menace: it is fast losing its own territory, where its own culture and civilization is quickly becoming just one among others" (Wildman, 2017).*

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It is crucial to note that this narrative of loss both speaks to and displaces the very real decline of a democratic public sphere, and the public services which sustained this; which have been gutted as a consequence of their takeover by privatised corporate interests. The corporate enclosure of public services and public spaces becomes, in the language of the Far Right, an instance of the way the 'white race' has become the victim of a physical and cultural erasure. This language is at the same time a conscious inversion of claims about 'white privilege' made by anti-racists and liberals.

While the Left, feminist and anti-racist forces have struggled to develop a successful challenge to the neoliberal models that have brought about the devastating levels of poverty and inequality we now see before us, the Far Right's political vision continues to evolve. The most recent development of their narrative is known as the 'Dark Enlightenment'; a vision of technologically based fascism which is both hypercapitalist and hyperconservative: a form of technological fascism which couples, in the words of Jacob Siegel:

> *the classic anti-modern, anti-democratic worldview of 18th-century reactionaries to a post-libertarian ethos that embraced technological capitalism as the proper means for administering society (in Munn, 2025)*

As Luke Munn notes, this is a vision which combines 'reaction and information, Machiavelli and machine learning, aristocracy and artificial intelligence, authoritarianism and technosolutionism' (Munn, 2025). The ideas behind this concept emerged in the late 2000s through blogs and online forums popular among the Silicon Valley set (Goldhill, 2022). The two intellectual leaders of this movement, American software engineer Curtis Yarvin and former Warwick University philosophy lecturer Nick Land (Land, 2023) now repudiate core Enlightenment principles such as democracy, egalitarianism, and universal liberty. In place of democratic government, Dark Enlightenment thinkers demand hierarchical, authoritarian systems of governance, enabled by technological innovation, and led by hybrid CEO-meets-monarch-like figures. In a recent essay, Yarvin has argued that democracies should be replaced with "for-profit sovereign corporations." (Collins, 2025).

It is crucial to recognise that these contemporary manifestations of ethnonationalism, white supremacy, and anti-democratic discourse are misogynist to the core. 'White Replacement' theories are fundamentally about the role of women as producers of the next generation of the

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'white' demographic - influential Far Right figures in the US such as Nick Fuentes are quite open about the fact that women should be removed from the workplace and lose the right to vote (Cowden & Yuval Davis, 2022). Alongside the hypermasculine imagery and overt misogyny of the Far Right, there is a also more subtle appeal about the need to protect the 'white family' from predatory sexual violence, which has gained support beyond their usual base. The revelations in 2013 that around 1,400 girls and young women had been sexually exploited in the northern English city of Rotherham, and in which the perpetrators were primarily Asian men, sent a shock through British society which continues to resonate politically. The official investigation into the extent of these crimes (Jay, 2014) illustrated that figures within the council and police knew as far back as 2005 of sexual exploitation being committed on a wide scale but had failed to act. A situation like this has provided an ideal opportunity for Far-Right activism and recent investigative journalism has revealed the work which networks of Far-Right groups activists, including the UK's leading neo-fascist 'Tommy Robinson' (real name Stephen Yaxley-Lennon) have been doing around this issue in Rotherham and Rochdale:

> *Yaxley-Lennon and other UKIP leaders were the original founders of another far-right group, Hearts of Oak. With the help of UKIP's Lord Malcom Pearson, it recently funded a landmark civil case by a Rochdale abuse survivor against her abuser, as a result of which she was awarded £425,000 in damages (Kersley, 2024)*

The interview with Chetan Bhatt in this issue of *Feminist Dissent* points to the difficulties which Left, feminist and anti-racist groups have had in engaging with the realities of misogynist violence involving men from minority communities, leaving progressive opinion focussed on the way these events have represented Muslim men as an 'inherently dangerous and racialised threat' (Tufail, 2015). This focus, rather than the horrific scale of the abuse of women and girls, and the fact that this took place over a 16-year period in Rotherham, as well as other poor de-industrialised towns, has left the field open politically for the Far Right.

Their growing capacity for political mobilisation around an agenda of protecting 'our girls' against predatory men from Muslim and migrant communities was again demonstrated in the riots the Far Right organised and facilitated in the summer of 2024, which followed the brutal murder of three young girls in Southport by Axel Rudakubana. At the time *Feminist Dissent* argued that:

> *The calls for 'protecting our women and girls', alongside calling out 'degenerate Muslim men who abuse their women', only reinforces the patriarchal view of women as property – this is honour abuse by any other name. While making these calls for protecting women and girls against outsiders, in no way is the far right concerned even slightly about increasing levels of domestic abuse and violence against women and girls (Feminist Dissent Blog, August 2024).*

While we stand fully by this statement, as *Feminist Dissent* we are equally committed to asking ourselves the difficult questions about how it is that the Far Right rather than feminists socialists and anti-racists who have come to be seen as the champions of the vulnerable women who have been so horribly exploited in these contexts.

The rise of the Far Right had made clear the extent to which questions of women's rights are bound to wider questions about the basis of democracy and the importance of universal political rights. The overturning of the Roe v. Wade decision in the US in 2022 was a direct consequence of the way Trump's first period in office involved a process of relentlessly placing ultraconservatives in positions of influence in the courts, the education system and throughout government.   This attack on women's reproductive rights was simultaneously an attack on democratic legal rights themselves and has now created a global context where these sorts of undemocratic attacks on women's reproductive rights have been legitimised and empowered through alliances of political conservatives and religious fundamentalists. It remains to be seen whether the fightback against this will reconnect the attack on women's rights with broader questions about the meaning of democracy. A recent report from the Overseas Development Institute illustrates the extent to which mobilisations by women's organisations have been absolutely central to the defence of democratic systems and the push for democratic governance and inclusion in multiple contexts around the world. Feminist organisations are at the centre of resistance to the increasing authoritarianism we are seeing across the world, which is often bolstered ideologically and organisationally by fundamentalist religious groups and movements (ODI, 2025). This work further emphasises that in the glocal south particularly, demands for rights which are framed as secular and universal are central to feminist activism. A recent report from UN Women pointed to the way that as democratic institutions worldwide have weakened, so have women's rights:

> *The weakening of democratic institutions has gone hand-in-hand with backlash on gender equality. Anti-rights actors are actively undermining long-standing consensus on key issues,*

UN Secretary Antonio Guterres added to this noting that 'Globally, women's human rights are under attack. Instead of mainstreaming equal rights, we're seeing the mainstreaming of misogyny' (Kapoor, 2025).

Overview

This issue is devoted to the way authoritarian political parties and organisations have both attacked but also sought to appropriate human rights discourse. The Far Right has shown itself to be able to act flexibly here; on the one hand attacking human rights but on the other seeking to co-opt the language of rights, particularly by re-framing through religious and other prescriptive or cultural priorities. At the same time, Left academic discourse has tended to question the idea of universal human rights as western and imperialist. Judith Götz's essay in this issue focuses on the attack on human rights by Christian fundamentalist mobilisation in Europe. She looks closely at far-right groups such as *Agenda Europe* and analyzes in detail the policy document *Restoring the Natural Order*. The close reading allows her to identify the range of re-articulation, redefinition and delegitimization tactics which these groups are using. She notes particularly that the human rights agenda is being repurposed as an expression of an unchanging 'natural law', derived from Christian scripture. As with all forms of ultraconservative and fundamentalist political mobilisation, the targets are democratic and feminist groupings and political objectives.

One of the dominant ideas on the Left regarding human rights is that these need to be 'decolonised'. This implies that the very conception and legal definitions of rights are a Western imposition on post-colonial states; a way of controlling governments from the Global South and asserting Western capitalist power. Gita Sahgal's essay movingly documents how historically inaccurate this critique is. Sahgal's work shows how at the very moment of the founding of the United Nations and the framing of the UN declaration of Human Rights, activists who had been directly involved in anti-colonial movements, many of them women, pushed for a human rights language based in universalism, which was specifically concerned with a universal understanding of the basis of human flourishing.

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Phil Mullen's work examines Ireland's care system for institutional care of children and demonstrates how intersections of racialist, class and gender analysis is crucial to an accurate assessment of human rights accountability. Her article eloquently shows the crucial importance of centering racial injustice within a human rights accountability framework in the first world. Yakin Ertürk crucially interrogates the emancipatory possibilities of gender mainstreaming. Evaluating the impact of the COVID -19 and prior crises of the early twenty first century (9/11, 2008 financial collapse), she suggests that the rising anti-gender authoritarianism is not merely a backlash against the success of feminism, but a reflex showing the difficulties of survival in the context of these crises and the need to harness care in the patriarchal capitalist economies. She then proceeds to outline a new vision of feminist possibilities by re-evaluating care work, seen as an essential demand of the 70s which was lost to the gender mainstreaming developments that took over the feminist agenda, without transforming the essentially patriarchal nature of the capitalist mainstream. She advocates for reimagining the welfare state with care as the organising principle of the economy.

We referred above to the interview with Chetan Bhatt, who in this issue has been interviewed by Rashmi Varma and Stephen Cowden from the *Feminist Dissent* collective. The focus of this interview is Bhatt's most recent book *The Revolutionary Road To Me* (2025). Bhatt notes that we often associate the rise of identity politics with the development of the new social movements of the 1970s. Bhatt argues instead that this focus on questions of identity, rather than questions of rights, has always been at the centre of the anti-Enlightenment politics of the ultraconservative political Right. Throughout the 19th and 20th century political Right, it was a discourse of ethnic belonging, not questions of human rights, which they argued from as the basis of the nation state. In this sense, the viciously racist and misogynist forms of ethno-nationalism discussed earlier in this introduction are reversions to the politics which the Far Right have always been based on. Looking then at the predominance of identity politics within the contemporary Left, Bhatt argues that as well as having caused highly destructive divisions within progressive organisations and political parties, the focus on identity has diverted the Left from its own historic universalist foundations, addressing the problems of poverty, social inequality and violence. Bhatt concludes by calling for new political visions on the Left which directly engage with the disillusionment in the politics of the Left felt by many people in working class communities.

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Our Voices of Dissent pieces note our concerns on how heteronormative agendas in social work situations as well as in AI controlled social media are destroying the idea of human flourishing and human rights. A third piece in this section presents the perspective of an Iranian refugee in Greece who reflects on Israel's attacks on Iran. The issue also showcases the evocative art of Palestinian artist Malak Mattar and carries an interview with her.

Finally, through the excavation of hidden histories (Rathore, 2021), we recall the words of Lakshmi Menon, Indian freedom fighter, peace activist and senior diplomat who insisted that in order for real democracy and freedom to be maintained, inequalities had to be removed from the world. She argued insistently for the universality of human rights contrasting it to 'colonial relativism' where people living under colonial rule were denied rights. That is why she and other freedom fighters insisted that women and colonial 'subjects' were specifically mentioned in the UDHR. They had to be made visible in order to demand their rights. She also insisted that while working for peace was crucial, it was not as an end goal of the United Nations; it was to be rather a fertile ground where the "greater ideals of freedom, justice and love would be realized." This vision has been largely disappeared, and the current issue of *Feminist Dissent* is a step towards recovering it. By looking back, we look forward to facing our present crisis.

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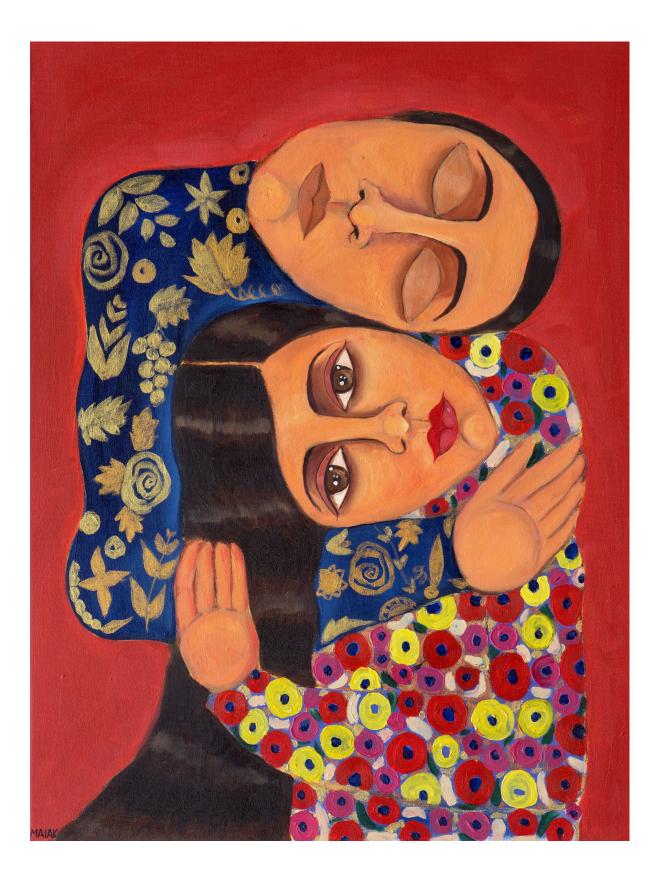
Image 2: **You and I** (2021) © <u>Malak Mattar</u> All rights Reserved

Care Crisis, Anti-Gender Authoritarianism and Feminist Possibilities

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Abstract

'Once we have understood housework, we will understand the economy.'

Claudia von Werlhof, Austrian ecofeminist, political scientist and economist

The care crisis, erupting at the height of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, exposed the female body and care labour as critical sites for system management. Anti-gender authoritarianism, through increased violence and patronage of a traditional patriarchal gender order, is on the rise globally seeking to keep women in 'their place'. How can feminism, which has so far pursued a liberal approach of integrating into mainstream society, confront this transgression? Guided by this question, the article probes into the patriarchal division of labour, which is at the heart of the care crisis and anti-gender authoritarianism; assesses gender mainstreaming for its capacity to deliver equality; and ends with a reflection on feminist possibilities for emancipatory praxis in responding to the new challenges.

Keywords: care crisis; care labour; anti-gender authoritarianism

The Problem

In 1997, the United Nations (UN) Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) adopted the "gender mainstreaming" agreed conclusion (A/52/3, 1997/2), mandating all units of the Organization to take into account the potential impact of policies, programmes and budgets on women and men. İt was expected that gender equality goals would move from the periphery to the center of governance, thus institutionalizing feminist principles in public policymaking. Gender mainstreaming became a major gender equality method, enjoying popularity within and outside of the UN.

Developments in this respect are linked to the transitions from state-led, to market-led, to neo-liberal capitalism that caused ruptures in the struggles of women's movements against oppression along the axis of gender, class and identity, often following a dialectical path. As neoliberal principles institutionalized, feminist demands gained new space, incorporating gender concerns into the mainstream; albeit with diverse and sometimes contradictory outcomes. Direct engagement of feminists with governance systems locked them into the goal of women's representation in public institutions, which became a measure of success. Gender mainstreaming delivered invaluable gains for women within the existing governance structures.[1]

However, the mainstream neoliberal order, increasingly characterized by the north to south migration of capital, flexible working conditions and the unlimited commodification of care work transnationally, nourished irreconcilable hierarchical formations along gender, class, ethnic and national lines; largely defying the epitome of feminist goals. The collapse of the mainstream system during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic sharply changed the political economic landscape and turned the attention to the global system crisis, which unmasked these tendencies.[2] The current crisis had been building up for some time. İt embodies mutually reinforcing economic, political and ecological forces that came to fore with the 9/11 attacks on the twin towers in 2001, intensified with the 2008 financial setback, and in the following decade, the outbreak of care crisis during the pandemic made it all encompassing across space and life chances. The spiral of crisis that marks the first quarter of the 21st

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[1] Women's organizing gained momentum, gender policymaking expanded, women's participation rates in public life increased, international standards guided national level legal and institutional reforms, and the feminist movement collaborated with centers of power and decision-making, which was interpreted as "feminists walking the corridors of power" and "governance feminism" (Halley, 2006).

[2] Notion of a global system crisis is controversial. According to some, there is nothing new as crisis is inherent to capitalism. Others point to a qualitative difference in today's crisis, which has provoked a right-wing reaction, with strongman populist leaders mobilizing disenfranchised masses in support of their authoritarian agenda against liberalism.

century has destabilized hegemonic power and institutions, while also exposing the limits of gender mainstreaming as an equality policy tool.

In the heyday of the pandemic, the stagnation of the market and the shutdown of public institutions increased the demand for both paid and unpaid care labour. The less the state was able to provide, the more services were transferred to the private sphere, hence increasing the burden on households and communities. After years of relative success in 'breaking the glass ceiling', middle-class professional women found themselves once again confined to the home as the primary providers of care. Competing demands, increased workload and exploitation heightened women's vulnerabilities and tensions within the household.

The pandemic revealed that women within the modern family remain the last refuge of care obligations, strikingly divulging that gender inequality is far too deeply rooted a problem to be reckoned with mainstreaming gender into a patriarchal-capitalist order. This realization stirred a new awakening among women, which revived the forgotten battle of feminism, i.e., devaluation of care work.

The global surge of the 2020 care crisis, while erupting during the pandemic, is linked to the history of the devaluation of reproductive activities. Neoliberalism has risen above this devaluation, reshaping and deepening gender inequality (Savran, 2020, p.3).   Sylvia Federici had warned years ago that the devaluation of care work would eventually evolve into a crisis too big to ignore. The pandemic did exactly that, reminding us that social reproductive activities, relying on women's body and labour, are critical for the salvation of the state, the market and patriarchy. In this respect, the rising anti-gender authoritarianism is not merely a backlash against feminist ideals; it is a survival reflex of patriarchy.

The anti-gender stream of the authoritarian right populism is the new shield of patriarchy and capitalism, which challenges women's struggles for rights by negating the enforcement of existing laws, confining space for progressive civic action, appeasing reactionary political movements and discrediting norms and institutions of the liberal world order, including the international human rights system. How can feminism, which has so far followed a liberal line to integrate into mainstream society, confront this authoritarianism?

Driven by this question, the article starts with an examination of the gendered division of labour, which is assumed to be at the heart of both the care crisis and the authoritarian transgressions on women's equality;

proceeds to interrogate the equality capacity of the gender mainstreaming approach, and calls for a new vision of a mainstream society that can unravel the "gender knot" entangled at the core of patriarchal-capitalist organization of production and reproduction; it ends with reflections on feminist possibilities for emancipatory praxis.

Production and Reproduction Divide

With the separation of production and reproduction as two distinct spheres of activity under industrial capitalism, the market model formed the nucleus of the mainstream social order, thus, institutionalizing sexual division of labour as the foundation of modern society.[3] The 'ideal type' modern family institution consisted of the working male head of the household, responsible for family livelihood, and women responsible for reproductive tasks at home.[4] This institutional infrastructure, upheld by classical legal norms, subordinates private sphere to public sphere, reproduction to production and women to men.

Feminist scholars, in their response to these binaries, have advocated for a new conceptualization of care to demystify the hidden exploitation of care labour. The patriarchal division of labour that identifies productive labour with the factory and commits women to a domestic regime of unpaid subordinate labour, not only masks the value produced by women, but denies them of their status as potential revolutionary subjects. Further, it undermines the revolutionary potential of a large portion of the male workforce. According to Federici, "…much class antagonism is deflated by men's ability to recuperate on the home front – at the expense of women – power they lost in the workplace" (2021, p.2). Critique of classical labour exploitation theory that ignores women's labour in social reproduction, has brought new dimensions to moral theories and Marxist debates (Fraser, 2016; Federici, 2021).

The capitalist system, where growth and competition overrides the well-being of humans and the planet, bestows upon the male provider model

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[3] Origins of the gender divide is not the subject of this article; the focus here is on the subordination of care on the male "provider" model.
[4] There are different positions of subordination under systems of colonialism, slavery and forced labor situations, where men of color are also enforced into reproductive labor in the household. For further discussion see Nadasen (2023).

monetary value, productivity, rationality and justice. As such, the male model forms the basis of universal ethics. Reproductive activities, confined to private life are associated with love, self-sacrifice and nature, with no corresponding market value. The philosophical belittling of *care* prompted a feminist *ethics of care*, which in its broadest sense denotes moral, political, social, relational, material and emotional conditions that allow the planet and human beings to flourish individually and collectively (Gilligan, 1983; Pettersen, 2008). Care ethics is based on the understanding that giving and receiving care are fundamentals of life and everyone has the capacity to provide care. *The Care Manifesto* (2017), which proposes a collective and communal way of life towards a "universal care", has galvanized the discussions on care.[5]

The contribution of care ethics perspective to moral philosophy and feminist theory is invaluable. İt has also stimulated transformations in mindsets that boosted the debates on the provide-care binary.[6] The concept, however, is criticized for reinforcing essentialist gender roles and romanticizing care responsibilities (Hutchings, 2000). However, it has been argued that these concerns can be redressed by reinterpreting care ethics within patriarchal power relations (Toronto, 1993; Nadasen, 2023).

Unpaid care labour

Non-market "care work" involves all unpaid physical and emotional activities generally organised as women's domain within the household to reproduce the workforce, future generations and their well-being. İn the course of the separation of production and reproduction, domestication of women has been institutionalised. While, over the decades, women's increased integration into the labour force led to changes in traditional formations, a corresponding transformation in the

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[5] More work is needed to give debt to the notion of universal care that can go beyond aspiration and small-scale living spaces.

[6] Care ethics can be seen as a critique of the dominant growth-oriented economy as well as a way to heal the damage done. The assumption that everyone has the capacity to provide care offers a different conceptual dimension to production-reproduction activities by encouraging new subjectivities for both men and women.

devaluation of care work and the private/public dichotomy has not occurred.

Unpaid care work was one of the most important debates of the feminist movement in the 1970s. In 1972, a group of feminists, demanding recognition and remuneration for all care work in and outside the home, launched the International Wages for Housework Campaign.[7] *The Wages for Housework* manifesto declared: 'The crime against us internationally, from which all other crimes against us flow, is our life sentence of housework at home and outside… in order to produce and reproduce the working class'.

It was observed that women in paid jobs (the vast majority of whom worked in the low-wage "female" sectors of the labour market) after returning home had to resume unpaid domestic care responsibilities. Paid and unpaid care workers were, in fact, the same people, a fact that can potentially unite them as a social force. The campaign aimed to organise women around this potential, end women's dependency, reverse power relations, and make visible the value of unpaid work, thus revolutionize gender relations. Women, as unpaid caregivers, would discover themselves as workers, share the same faith with the working class, enjoy greater personal freedom and the feminizing of reproductive work would also be challenged.

The campaign politicized reproductive activities, paving the way for a series of initiatives; including, adoption of 'time use surveys', inclusion of measurement of unpaid care work into the agenda of the 1985 Nairobi Women's Conference and production of sex-disaggregated statistics by international and national organizations. These invaluable outcomes shed light into the gendered dimensions of social reproductive activities and women's unequal access to the labour market due to their unpaid care responsibilities (Neetha, 2010).[8]

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[7] Care ethics can be seen as a critique of the dominant growth-oriented economy as well as a way to heal the damage done. The assumption that everyone has the capacity to provide care offers a different conceptual dimension to production-reproduction activities by encouraging new subjectivities for both men and women.

[8] Globally, women perform three-quarters of unpaid care work, or more than 75 percent of total hours. On average, women spend 3.2 times more time on unpaid care work than

There is no country where women and men share unpaid care work equally, however, as countries and families become affluent, a general downward trend follows in the hours spent on unpaid domestic work. This can be attributed to advances in time saving technologies on household chores and the commodification of care, making these services available for purchase.

Globally, women also dominate the paid care economy. According to ILO data, the current global care workforce accounts for 381 million workers, or 11.5 percent of total global employment. Two-thirds of this workforce, or 249 million workers, are women, accounting for 19.3 percent of global female employment. This means that nearly 1 in 5 women are employed in the care sector. The quality of working conditions and wage levels in the care sector are highly uneven. 81.2% of all domestic workers are in unregistered employment. İnformal care workers in private homes are exposed to some of the worst conditions, including vulnerability to abuse and exploitation.[9]

'Wages for housework' was an innovative idea for understanding how the capitalist system is reproduced through unpaid care work, how unpaid workers are divided along gender, race and class lines, their place in the hegemonic wage system and means to resist it. This theory provides a historical background for family politics and contemporary debates on care work.

The eventual adoption of gender mainstreaming as the main equality policy framework led to a shift in focus to identity politics, culture

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men. Unpaid care work accounts for between 10 and 39 percent of GDP (UN, E/CN.6/2017/3).

[9] In the process of neoliberal restructuring, the transfer of industries to the global south radically dismantled traditional livelihoods in the respective countries and detached men and women from the land and the traditional family. Labor market demand for unregulated, flexible and cheap labor targeted young women who migrated in unprecedented numbers to work either in free trade zones or in the care/service sector in global cities, a process referred to in the literature as: "feminization of labor force" and "feminization of migration" (Ertürk, 2016: 119-133). These processes varied geographically contingent upon resilience of patriarchy and impact of religion, culture, legislative systems, etc.

differences and women's representation in public life, leaving patriarchal division of labour and the provide-care duality in the margin. This situation more or less prevailed until the eruption of care crisis during the Covid-19 pandemic, which also saw a rise in authoritarianism and pro-family policies.

Family policies

Fiscal restrictions and neoliberal privatization policies since the 1970s weakened state's regulatory and welfare capacity, thus, jeopardizing human security. With the flexibilisation of labour markets, the inability of the male heads of household to provide for their families and the rising feminist movement, labour use patterns, female labour force participation and family structures increasingly became more complex. At the intersection of patriarchy and neoliberal capitalism the tension between production and reproduction intensified, posing a pressure for the reform of family-related laws, including the family wage system. Consequently, towards the last quarter of the 20th century, care work occupied the agenda and family laws gradually liberalized.

Family laws are the political sites where patriarchal interests and the subordination of women are institutionalised; they are critical in the distribution of rights and responsibilities within and outside the home. Feminists perceive the family as a nexus for the violation of rights in private and public life and family laws as the endorsement of relations of domination. Consequently, cleansing laws of patriarchal biases formed a common goal for women's movements and rights-based advocacy became critical for legislative and judicial reform.[10]

The type and scope of legal reform reflects a complex process of competition among patriarchy, the state and social networks across countries (Ertürk, 2019). İn this respect, the European experience, which constitutes a prototype for the legal reform processes of the 1970s, offers insight into care work in law reform.

Policy debates in European countries, during the 1970's, are also reflected in the contemporary debates on the subject. The discussions centered on how care should be organised: should unpaid care work at

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[10] For case studies on family law reform see: Afkhami, et al (2019), for a global perspective see: UN Women (2020).

home be supported or should it be delegated to the public / private sector? Two main policy approaches emerged from these debates: "women-friendly" and "family-friendly".

The "women-friendly" policies that started in the Nordic countries, were two dimensional: (i) strengthening women's labour force participation capacities by transferring care from the home to the public sector; (ii) encouraging fathers to take a greater role in childcare to ensure equal distribution of childcare responsibilities within the family. It was expected that a gradual transition to a "dual-earner" family model would follow.

"Family-friendly policies" prevailed in continental Europe, where religion dominated politics and women's participation in the labour force was assumed to be temporary and a source of secondary income. Accordingly, policy options included support for women's unpaid care work at home through childcare allowances, flexible working hours for women, tax deductions for household heads with non-working wives, etc. In the following years, with the institutionalization of the welfare state and state-led capitalism, women-friendly policies spread across continental Europe, as well other parts of the world.

Today, family-friendly policies are making a comeback as authoritarian right-wing politicians blame the havoc of the global system crisis on a "gender ideology", which they aim to correct by anti-gender, pro-family policies.[11] At the 13th meeting of the World Congress of Families that convened in Italy in 2019, a chilling "culture war" was declared against abortion, contraception, sex education, LGBT+ rights and other issues that allegedly threaten the "natural family". Advocates, alarmed by demographic decline and the immigrant/refugee influx, appealed to native white women to have more babies, thus displaying a 'racism wrapped in a family-friendly blanket'.

There are significant qualitative differences between the pro-family policies promoted today. European neo-conservatives with liberal

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[11] Human Rights Council resolution on "Protection of the Family", first of which adopted in 2014, is based on a traditional and patriarchal interpretation of the family (A/HRC/Res/26/11).

backgrounds, appeal to a wide audience, including women, by adopting policy proposals that take into account feminist concerns.[12] For instance, 'pro-lifers', known for their hardline position on abortion and sexual rights, are encouraged to develop persuasive strategies that do not alienate women, support women who experience unwanted pregnancies and keep the family stable and strong. Such approaches attract a broad-based passionate women supporter. Patriarchy, in the established democracies, has been domesticated. The conservatives in these countries are driven by the need to guard borders against foreigners rather than encounter women.

Conservatives in most underdeveloped countries, on the other hand, often distance themselves from investing in policies that would strengthen the family, such as collective bargaining, access to the health care system and support for reproductive health. İnstead, they choose a more totalitarian strategy of infiltrating into private life by waging an ideological war to reinforce women's dependance on the family.

Irrespective of these variations, the current law reform processes have tended to strengthen the patriarchal family. Even the most women-friendly laws, which have been ineffective in eroding the provide-care divide, have served to reproduce gender inequality in institutional and legal practices. Policies that expand women's public sector employment to reduce employment gender gaps, do so, at the expense of some women as well as the career opportunities of working women.

The critical issue here is that both pro-family and women-friendly policies operate from within a mainstream system built upon patriarchal-capitalist norms. Gender mainstreaming, while benefitting some women, continues to reproduce the patriarchal division of labour, where care work remains marginal to social policy and the market. State withdrawal

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[12] Although equality is a fundamental principle of European Union (EU) law, the changing political conjuncture between 2016-19 deepened the political polarization within EU institutions and increased the presence of right-wing groups, shifting mindset across the political spectrum towards nationalist and conservative discourses. The European radical right does not have a problem with gender equality but their anti-immigration stance aligns them with anti-abortion and pro-natal policies. Given the growing care gap, racism and sexism will continue to be an enduring pair.

from social policies, feminization of the labour force and an aging population has increased the demand for care work, making it increasingly commodified transnationally.

Care, the forgotten battle of feminism, made a comeback with the eruption of care crisis during the pandemic. The declining fertility levels, anti-immigration politics, prevailing demographic wars and women's unyielding stand for rights signal to a chronic care crisis in the near future. Efforts to confront the problem through home-work balance strategies, flexible work arrangements, spousal sharing of care responsibilities, and import of domestic workers etc. may bear little results given the nature of the mainstream social order.[13]

The Mainstream

Efforts to bridge the care gap through gender mainstreaming have merely transferred the problem from rich families to poor women and from the global North to the global South. The idea of spousal sharing of household chores has not yet gone beyond men "helping" women, the real "owners" of the work. While various strategies to achieve work-home balance eased the workload of some women, they have neither changed the production-reproduction divide, nor the commodification and feminization of care work.

Crisis tendency

According to Fraser (2016), 'crisis tendency' of social reproduction is rooted in every form of capitalist production, which is dependent on social reproduction for continued capital accumulation. Without unpaid reproductive activity the functioning of capitalism would not be possible. Conversely, capitalism's unlimited accumulation drive destabilizes social reproduction. Reproductive activities take place not inside capitalist economy proper as suggested by Marx, but on the border that simultaneously separates and connects production and reproduction, making it crisis prone. Therefore, the pressure on care is not coincidental,

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[13] The International Day for Care and Support (29 October), adopted by the UN in 2023 (A/RES/77/317), is a promising step for paving the way towards a social policy environment that can unravel the 'gender knot'.

but inherently bound to the contradictions of capitalism. The logic of women's subordination to patriarchal domination lies herein.[14]

The organization of social reproduction at different stages of capitalism varies in terms of normative frameworks, family structures and gender regimes. The social reforms of capitalism in the late nineteenth century that aimed to make the labour force more productive and family life stable, largely confined women to the domestic sphere and institutionalized housewifery. Male unemployment, moral erosion, family dissolution and social unrests were attributed to women's work in the factory. Consequently, labour laws, "family wage" policies and various other regulations were devised to direct women to the private sphere. Thus, the new working-class family, created on the basis of women's unpaid labour at home and men's wages in the market, became a universal norm surviving well into mid-twentieth century.

The systematic removal of women from the factory was embraced not only by the state and employers, but also by trade unions and male workers. In other words, the interests of the capitalists' and the proletariat overlapped (Federici, 2021, p.97). Historically, promotion of traditional family and gender relations have always accompanied moments of crisis. The current anti-gender approaches with their pro-family politics are reminiscent of such trends in history.

In the 1970s, with growing influence of welfare state reforms and women's rights movements, the "dual-income" family model replaced the "family wage" system; thus, redrawing the boundaries of production and reproduction and shifting the axis of inequalities and conflict from relations of production to relations of reproduction. This process, which Fraser (2016) describes as "border struggle", is as decisive and groundbreaking as Marxist class struggle, suggesting the need to coalesce the two emancipatory projects of Marxism and feminism (Mojab, 2015).

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[14] According to Marxist-feminists, unpaid domestic labor lies within the three-dimensional needs of capitalist exploitation: (a) biological reproduction of the species; (b) the reproduction of labor power; and (c) the satisfaction of care needs. These approaches, by incorporating the invisible care labor in the private sphere into Marxist value theory, provide a broader analytical framework that connects class and gender, and capitalism and patriarchy (Bhattacharya, 2017; Fraser, 2016; Savran, 2020).

Care crisis is not only a matter of justice but also a matter of social transformation; this begs the question: can gender mainstreaming unravel the 'gender knot' that is entangled in the provide-care duality?

Test of gender mainstreaming with equality

The mainstream neoliberal order, by its very nature, embodies structures of inequality with gender cutting across these structures.[15] The gender mainstreaming approach was devised as a response to the marginalization of gender equality initiatives in isolated units disconnected from centers of power. Building on the sameness-based "equal opportunities" of the 1970s and the diversity-based "positive discrimination" of the 1980s, mainstreaming aims to ensure that the different positions and experiences of women and men are given due attention in policymaking processes.

Compared to other approaches for equality, the state centric character and politics of difference of gender mainstreaming confers it a higher status (Rees, 1998) and a strong foundation for feminist solidarity and action (Walby, 2005).

Gender mainstreaming, adopted by intergovernmental organizations, governments and civil society organizations as the main equality policy tool, remained uncontested until recently. The global conferences of the 1990s, Beijing Platform for Action and ECOSOC gender mainstreaming resolution provided the impetus for expanding gendered policy agendas. Significant progress has been made in this area, notably through

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[15] The term 'gender', in contrast to the biological category of sex, is a political, epistemological, and methodological tool coined to analyze the construction of masculinity and femininity, promising radical possibilities for transformative change. As the term gained popularity its political purpose and transformative content declined. In its initial theorizing the strong association of gender with the word 'woman' caused the two to be interchangeably used; "woman became the gender", "man remained the sex". Subsequently, gender came to be used to distinguish male/female differences. In the former usage, gender is a noun –i.e., female category and in the latter, it is an adjective, describing male/female attributes. Both usages are conceptually inconsistent and politically problematic (Ertürk, 2020). According to Butler (1990) gender is performative, not who one is (noun) but what one does (verb).

approaches such as gender budgeting. İrregularities in implementation have generally been attributed to technical problems, necessitating the development of normative criteria and strategies to enhance the equality outcomes of mainstreaming (Staudt, 2003).

Success of gender mainstreaming depends on the presence of a strong women's movement, receptiveness of public actors to feminist demands and collaboration, availability of gender expertise and experience, strong political will and institutional capacity for effective implementation. These conditions are scarce, unsustainable, and normative and conceptual consensus on the subject is weak, resulting in strategies that are dictated by political conjuncture and local dynamics. In practice, mainstreaming is often reduced to a series of technical procedures and a 'to-do' list in the hands of bureaucrats.

Without questioning 'what is mainstreamed into what' anyone can claim to be mainstreaming gender.[16] For market oriented financial institutions and technocrats, feminist goals such as 'empowerment' and 'equality' are often nothing but idealized fantasies. The ex-post exercise of gender analysis they perform serves to sustain hegemony of neoliberal policy parameters (Baachi and Eveline, 2010, p.55).[17] The real issue, then, is the mismatch between gender mainstreaming method and the hegemonic socio-economic order that operates on the logic of the production-reproduction divide, where care remains trivial.

The active and supervisory state role envisioned by gender mainstreaming poses a challenge to the deregulatory policy of neoliberalism, which favors a minimized state role in the delivery of social services (True and Mintrom, 2001). Conversely, according to some, neoliberalism promotes a market-compatible state model that can support sales and market creativity through gender analysis, suggesting

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[16] İn one of my country visits (2008), as UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, I interviewed a police commissioner, who explained that as part of their gender mainstreaming strategy female officers are sent home early to prepare for *iftar* during Ramadan. This is typical of mainstreaming practices, although some may be disguised under more sophisticated attire.

[17] Mainstreaming practices in the field of health and education are relatively less problematic. Significant gains particularly in basic health, maternal and child mortality have occurred globally.

that the bargaining power and economic interests of the competitive market supersedes gender equality concerns (Shields and Evans, 1998).

In the final analysis, gender mainstreaming operates in a conservative manner, distorting feminist principles and reducing gender equality goals to women's quantitative representation. İn the process, in many countries, women's empowerment programmes and national machineries became marginalized. The transfer of the already insufficient resources from these programmes to other areas created gaps in overall coordination and monitoring. While mainstreaming has increased women's visibility and representation in public policymaking, feminist goals have been stripped of their political content and subordinated to other priorities. Women who benefit from the opportunities offered by mainstreaming, often do so only within institutional limitations and at the expense of other women.

Flexible and accessible nature of gender mainstreaming approach, which accounts for its popularity, is also a source of its weakness. As it tries to be a general policy that addresses programmes at all levels gender equality goals become swept away and as mainstreaming becomes everyone's task, it becomes no one's responsibility (Mehra and Gupta, 2006, p.5). Although, these inconsistencies can be altered with enhanced intervention strategies, given the essentially patriarchal-capitalist character of the mainstream system, it is not realistic to expect mainstreaming to deliver gender equality in the long-run.

Transformative Change

In the long run, a renewed understanding of a welfare state that can change the temperament of the mainstream is needed. Welfare state represents an intermediate space between forms of power and different social segments. The welfare state of the mid-twentieth century, premised on industrial capitalism and patriarchal division of labour, while providing women with social protection and security, essentially reinforced male-dominant institutions (Knijin and Kremer, 1997; Ciccia and Sainsbury, 2018). Notion of care as an ethical value and basic right made its way into welfare state debates as insight into areas such as reproductive work, care deficit, provide-care binary, increased.

The Marxist-feminist stream, which rejects the logic of the neoliberal mainstream livelihood model, makes a particularly strong case for moving towards a new welfare state with care as the organising principle of the economy, the state and the international system. Such a notion of

care is a precondition for "inclusive citizenship" that points to a society beyond insecurity and indifference (Kremer, 2007).

So far, the feminist movement has followed a liberal line to achieve its radical goals. Although gender mainstreaming has been instrumental in engendering the public policy enterprise, it has neither been affective in curbing the crises tendencies of capitalism, nor in eroding the patriarchal gender regime. Liberalism and its institutions have largely failed in meeting the challenges of the twenty-first century.

In the long run, unless the production and reproduction divide and its care crisis are resolved once and for all, gender equality will remain only an aspiration. Liberal social reforms need to give way to radical social transformations that respond to structural inequalities and systemic crises. In this respect, a feminist vision that problematizes patriarchal-capitalism and broadens its strategic partnerships with other progressive movements globally is long overdue. Marxist-feminist approaches referred to in this paper provide guidance in this regard.

Furthermore, transformative change is critical for eliminating the carelessness and destruction against both humans and the planet. Given the prevailing political economy, the call for a transition to a care-centered mainstream society may seem utopian. However, feminist demands and practices for radical collective care practices and networks are increasing in different fields and geographies, demonstrating that collective-egalitarian alternatives to the current crisis and authoritarian front are not a dream.

That said, transformative change is a challenging affair: How can power and resources be distributed to absorb the cost of care as a right? How can the market and a universal norm of care be reconciled? What institutional arrangements are needed to accommodate collective reordering of care? Can men, as beneficiaries of patriarchal power, give up their privileges for the higher value of collective welfare? What are the mechanisms for mobilizing a care-centered social welfare state? Do collective solidarity models, such as communal organizations or cooperatives, offer lessons for change? Therefore, the challenge for the feminist movement now is not how to integrate into the mainstream, but rather how to transform it.

Conclusion

This article started with the assumption that patriarchal division of labour, which devalues care work, lies at the heart of the current mainstream social order. Devalued care work reinforces gender inequality and hierarchical structures, thus complicating women's struggles for rights and freedoms. The encroachments upon women's struggles for equality today, a central tenet of authoritarian politics, are also shaking democracy to its foundation.

The populist backlash and conservative gender policies of the new authoritarianism are a response to perceived 'ills' of equality policies and gender ideologies imposed from outside, including by multinational human rights system. As demonstrated by the care crisis, keeping women in their place, by consent or by force, has become imperative for the hard-liners who aim to restore the conventional patriarchal gender order and family institution.

Given declining fertility levels, anti-migration politics and changing demographic dynamics, a chronic shortage of care workforce in the near future seems inevitable, requiring greater pressure on women. Unless the mainstream is democratized, with care at its center, authoritarian populist transgressions on gender equality are likely to intensify. Placing care as the organising principle of the economy, the state and the international system, as advocated here, promises not only to unravel the 'gender knot' but also to restrain anti-gender authoritarianism.

As a starting point, a two-dimensional strategy may lay the ground for affirmative politics that promotes collective welfare over profits and care over exploitation of women: (i) strengthening the capacity of the current gender mainstreaming method to expand its boundaries; (ii) adopting social policies that gradually de-commodify and de-gender social reproduction, which also implies reorganizing work, to pave the way towards a new social state.

The mutually reinforcing crisis environment of the twenty-first century may be an opportune moment for feminist "border struggles" to demand, imagine and develop workable alternatives for a caring world.

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Partnership, 2016); Co-editor, Feminist Advocacy, Family Law and Violence against Women: International Perspectives (New York: Routledge, 2019); and "Political Economy of Peace Processes and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda" in Conflict, Security and Development (2020).

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Antifeminism as a Human Right? On the Reinterpretation of Human Rights Discourse by Conservative and Far-Right Actors

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Abstract

This article examines the strategic appropriation and ideological reframing of human rights discourses by conservative and far-right actors, with a particular focus on Christian fundamentalist networks such as Agenda Europe*. While human rights are commonly understood as a universal normative framework designed to promote equality and protect marginalised groups, recent developments suggest that actors opposed to feminist and LGBTIQA+ rights are increasingly mobilising the language and symbolism of human rights to legitimise exclusionary political agendas. The article is based on a close analysis of the policy document* Restoring the Natural Order*. Its two central aims are as follows. First, it argues that the reinterpretation and appropriation of rights discourses constitute key political strategies within these movements and therefore merit closer scholarly attention. Second, it shows how Christian fundamentalist actors articulate a notion of 'true human rights' that are supposedly derived from an immutable 'natural law.' Within this framework, rights that conflict with this order - such as access to abortion or the legal recognition of same-sex marriage, are systematically portrayed as illegitimate or 'false' rights. The analysis identifies three interrelated tactics used to reframe human rights in this context: delegitimization, reinterpretation and co-optation. These serve not only to undermine specific rights claims, but also to challenge the very foundations of the human rights project by redefining its normative scope along conservative, hierarchical and exclusionary lines. The paper concludes that this ideological reconfiguration poses a significant threat to the inclusive and democratic potential of human rights discourses, particularly feminist achievements.*

Keywords: Antifeminism, Human Rights, Agenda Europe, Christian fundamentalism, far-right

Introduction

The human rights discourse is commonly understood as a universal normative foundation for ensuring equality, dignity, and protection from discrimination against diverse social groups. For decades, civil society actors, institutions of political education, and international organizations have invoked human rights to take a stand against inequality, racism, sexism, and other forms of group-based misanthropy. Feminist movements, too—despite their justified critiques of the Eurocentric and patriarchal tendencies within human rights frameworks—have engaged this discourse as a point of reference to articulate emancipatory demands.

Increasingly, however, this emancipatory human rights discourse is being reinterpreted and appropriated by conservative and far-right actors. These actors draw upon the language and symbolism of human rights to legitimize their own political agendas—for example, the restriction of sexual and reproductive rights, or the re-naturalization of binary gender relations. The central thesis of this paper is that conservative and far-right forces do not merely attack human rights, but deliberately inscribe themselves into their language and argumentative structures in order to roll back equality-oriented progress—particularly with regard to feminist achievements and the rights of LGBTIQA+ persons. This process involves not only a substantive attack on specific rights, but also an ideological shift in the very understanding of what human rights mean.

While far-right appropriations of human rights discourse have received at least some scholarly attention, Christian actors—who have likewise been developing strategies in recent years to co-opt human rights for their own political agendas—have so far been largely overlooked. This paper seeks to build upon and expand the currently sparse research on this topic[i] by focusing on comparable strategies within the conservative and Christian fundamentalist spectrum and the relevance of gender and sexuality issues in this context. This analysis focuses specifically on that development. Taking as its starting point the strategy paper *Restoring the Natural Order* from the Agenda Europe network, it investigates how Christian fundamentalist actors, in particular, seek to strategically reinterpret human rights discourses. Building on analyses conducted with Stefanie Mayer of the strategy paper *Restoring the Natural Order* by the Christian fundamentalist network Agenda Europe (Mayer and Goetz, 2023), this study aims to demonstrate two key points. First, the reinterpretation and appropriation of discourses on rights are central strategies in this context and warrant particular attention. Second, it will

be shown that Christian fundamentalist actors advocate the view that 'true human rights' must be grounded in natural law and portray any rights that contradict this order—such as the right to abortion or same-sex marriage—as illegitimate or false rights.

To do so, the paper first outlines the multifaceted relationship between human rights and ideologies of inequality—ideologies that provide the basis for discrimination and exclusion—and identifies three levels of this relationship. It then introduces the Christian fundamentalist network Agenda Europe and explains the significance of the strategy paper. Based on a close analysis of the document, the main section of the paper identifies three distinct facets of reference to human rights and reveals the strategies of delegitimization, reinterpretation, and appropriation associated with them. The analysis shows that the strategy paper presents human rights, on the one hand, as malleable through political processes, and on the other, positions natural law' as a timeless moral principle that alone can determine the legitimacy of rights. This contribution links theoretical reflections with an empirical analysis of the strategy paper and exposes how appeals to the 'common good' and 'natural law' are used to justify far-reaching exclusions. Particularly striking is the attempt by these actors to relativize human rights by invoking an allegedly superior and objective 'natural law,' in order to draw selective distinctions between 'true' and 'false' rights. Rights such as abortion or same-sex marriage are portrayed as ideological aberrations that contradict the 'natural order' and are therefore deemed illegitimate. In conclusion, the paper aims to demonstrate how this reinterpreted human rights discourse serves to delegitimize feminist achievements— and to highlight the dangers that emerge from this trend.

On the Relationship Between Human Rights and Ideologies of Inequality

Human Rights Against Ideologies of Inequality

For decades, slogans such as 'Human Rights Instead of Right-Wing Hate' have accompanied political discourse and the efforts of diverse actors seeking to counter the spread of far-right ideologies. International human rights instruments, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), enshrine the dignity and equality of all people as universal values. These principles fundamentally conflict with far-right ideologies, which are rooted in the devaluation and exclusion of certain groups through ideologies of

inequality, including racism, antisemitism, sexism, and hostility toward LGBTIQA+ individuals.

Despite feminist critiques—such as those highlighting the Eurocentric and patriarchal nature of these instruments or their neglect of economic, social, and cultural rights (e.g., Bunch, 1993; Leicht et al., 2016; Tönnies, 2011)—human rights continue to serve as a universal framework for exposing far-right narratives of ethnic or male superiority as discriminatory and antidemocratic. In this vein, human rights-oriented political education seeks to instil democratic values such as equality, pluralism, and empathy while promoting the protection of marginalized groups and empowering individuals to advocate for these principles (e.g., Filzmaier and Ingruber, 2019; Fritzsche, 2005; Heldt, 2018; Thyroff et al., 2019; Große-Wächter and Röttger, 2021).

However, the relationship between right-wing and conservative ideologies and human rights is not limited to opposition. This dynamic can be examined on three levels. The first of these involves the aforementioned efforts by various political and civil society groups, organizations, and NGOs, as well as educational institutions, to position human rights as a normative foundation against ideologies of hatred and discrimination, such as far-right extremism.

Attacks on Human Rights, Treaties, and Institutions

Given the historical and political importance of human rights in combating right-wing extremism, it is perhaps not surprising that (2) human rights themselves have increasingly become the focus of right-wing and conservative attacks, challenges and delegitimization. Human rights have served not only as a legal framework - enshrined in international conventions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights - but also as a political and moral language to challenge and expose the exclusionary and discriminatory ideologies of the far right. Through both legal protection and civil society discourse, human rights have provided tools to resist racist, sexist, anti-Semitic and anti-LGBTIQA+ positions and to assert the principles of equality, dignity and non-discrimination. It is precisely this normative and symbolic power that has made them a central target for those who wish to re-establish hierarchical social orders under the guise of 'tradition', 'nature' or 'national identity'. In Austria, for example, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)—a long-established party that has served as a model for many far-right movements across Europe—has repeatedly questioned the validity of human rights,

delegitimized human rights conventions, and attacked the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

In early 2019, then-Minister of the Interior and current FPÖ leader Herbert Kickl criticized the ECHR, arguing that it posed an obstacle to purportedly necessary measures (e.g., in asylum law). Kickl asserted that 'the law must follow politics, not the other way around' (DerStandard, 2019), thereby calling into question Austria's adherence to international agreements and raising the possibility of amendments or withdrawal. While this statement directly contradicts the principle of legality enshrined in Austria's constitution, it opened a discursive space that other far-right politicians continue to exploit.

Other FPÖ leaders joined this discourse: former FPÖ leader Norbert Hofer described the ECHR as 'outdated' (DerStandard, 2024), while Lower Austrian FPÖ leader Udo Landbauer characterized the concept of human rights as too 'vague' (DerStandard, 2023). Former FPÖ parliamentary group leader Johann Gudenus went even further, asserting that 'the Human Rights Convention is not divinely ordained' (DerStandard, 2019).

Although the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), at the time in coalition with the FPÖ, did not fundamentally question the ECHR, it lent support to this discourse. For instance, then-Secretary of State Karoline Edtstadler suggested that the 'interpretation' of the ECHR should be open to debate (DerStandard, 2022). In 2022, ÖVP parliamentary group leader August Wöginger went so far as to demand a revision of the convention, claiming that 'the Human Rights Convention needs to be updated. We now face different circumstances than when these laws were written decades ago' (Kurier, 2022).

The FPÖ is far from unique in this regard. Across Europe, far-right parties and movements pursue similar agendas. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán sought in 2018 to drastically curtail the freedoms of human rights organizations, thereby weakening civil society (Tagesschau, 2018). Similarly, UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak declared that 'border security is more important than membership in international courts,' referring to the ECHR (TRT Global, 2024).

Far-right 'criticism' often focuses on delegitimizing human rights as an ideology that allegedly undermines the West by subordinating so-called autochthonous, national, or European interests to the rights and needs of refugees.

Reinterpretations and Appropriations of Human Rights

In recent years, an additional layer has emerged: (3) right-wing and conservative actors are increasingly attempting to reinterpret the discourse on human rights and appropriate it as a political strategy to advance their ideology and objectives. Among the limited number of publications addressing this development is Andrea Schneiker's paper, *The New Defenders of Human Rights? How Radical Right-Wing TNGOs are Using the Human Rights Discourse to Promote their Ideas* (Schneiker, 2018). As early as 2018, Schneiker highlighted that transnational far-right groups such as *Generation Identity* (GI) were employing the discourse on human rights to legitimize their own positions. GI deliberately replicates elements of transnational NGOs (TNGOs)—such as professional public relations, fundraising campaigns, and networking activities—to establish legitimacy. Additionally, they appropriate the language and symbols of established human rights organizations, such as Amnesty International, to present themselves as ostensibly legitimate civil society actors, while simultaneously promoting a selective understanding of human rights.

Similarly, Kaius Tuori and Iida Karjalainen (2024), in their paper *The European Far Right and Human Rights Language* (Tuori and Karjalainen, 2024), explore the increasing use of human rights language by the European far right in recent years. This shift is particularly noteworthy given that resistance to international influences has long been a defining characteristic of these movements. Based on an analysis of 'European parties, organizations, and activists in the far-right movement mainly in France, Germany, and Finland' (Tuori and Karjalainen, 2024, p.1), the authors demonstrate how these actors exploit human rights discourses. They observe that European far-right groups employ human rights as a 'rhetorical tool' (Tuori and Karjalainen, 2024, p.4) to frame racist ideologies as legitimate demands for rights. For instance, they reinterpret human rights to promote white supremacy, portraying Western human rights as unique to Western, white cultures.

> *What our investigations have found is that the use of human rights language is mainly instrumental: the criticism of Western bias in human rights is turned into an argument for white supremacy, the language of minority protections is repurposed as a way to argue for the protection of the white majority and against the rights of minorities. In a similar way, the criticism of the ideological foundations of human rights is instrumentalized as a tool to attack perceived liberal elites for*

> *their insufficient concern for the health of the nation-state.*
> *(2024, p.14)*

Central to far-right arguments is, on the one hand, a rejection of universal human rights, suggesting that such rights should apply only to specific groups of people, and on the other hand, the theory of 'relative natural law.' This perspective asserts that the rights of migrants and minorities threaten the rights of the white majority population. Such arguments are often deployed in racist rhetoric to defend 'Western' values against the alleged threat posed by other cultures or religions, particularly Islam. The theory of 'relative natural law' also claims that human rights, which may appear universal, are in reality valid only for specific cultures or societies. This view is intertwined with racist and nationalist rhetoric, challenging the applicability of human rights to other cultures and ethnicities. As Tuori and Karjalainen (2024, p.7) note:

> *The notion that human rights or natural law would be*
> *restricted to a single area or group is not new; there is a long-*
> *standing discussion regarding what was known as relative*
> *natural law theory. [...] Natural law is founded not on*
> *legislation, but on things such as humanity, reason, or other*
> *virtues.*

These appropriations, however, extend beyond human rights to include progressive discourses more broadly, which are rhetorically employed to legitimize their own goals. In modernized far-right ideologies, selective references to progressive values, such as equality, women's rights, and LGBTIQA+ rights, are instrumentalized by right-wing actors to depict 'Western' values as superior and to oppose the perceived threats posed by migration, particularly from Muslim-majority countries (e.g., AK Fe.In, 2019; Dietze, 2016, 2019; Drüeke and Klaus, 2019; Duina and Carson, 2020; Jäger et al., 2019; Mense and Goetz, 2024; Wielowiejski, 2018).

Agenda Europe and the Strategy Paper *Restoring the Natural Order*

Agenda Europe is a network established in 2013 that unites some of the most influential European actors involved in recent 'anti-gender' mobilizations (Datta, 2018, 2019, 2021).

> *Far from being the only ultra-conservative network, Agenda Europe*
> *is especially important because it brings together influential anti-*

> *feminist and anti-queer actors, including among others elected parliamentary representatives, former politicians and high-ranking civil servants from the European Commission, who work with campaigners in order to develop political lobbying strategies and professionalise campaigns (Mayer and Goetz, 2023, p.96).*

The actors seek to shape public discourse and political developments on a transnational level through a coordinated strategy, thereby exerting influence on political decision-making processes. While their agenda primarily targets feminist movements and LGBTIQ rights, their actions ultimately undermine the inclusive and democratic foundations of human rights as a whole, and with them, the democratic fabric of society itself.

In summer 2021, leaked documents suggested that the paper had already been discussed at an Agenda Europe summit in 2014. This information is confirmed by the authors in the 2024 republished version, now translated into eleven languages, but they refer to it as a 'handout for a private circle of friends' (RTNO, 2024, p.3). The manifesto comprises six chapters over 180 pages, analyzing legal and political issues from an ultra-conservative Christian perspective, such as sexuality, reproduction, medical questions (beginning and end of life), equality, and (anti-)discrimination.

Notably, the paper does not argue from a religious perspective, as might be expected, but primarily from a legal one, referencing court cases and international legal documents. In doing so, it shifts the discourse on divine order to one on rights, claims, and human dignity (see Mayer and Goetz, 2023, pp.99ff.). A particularly significant aspect is its reliance on the so-called 'natural law,' which, it is argued, applies universally and 'which human reason can discern and understand, but which human will cannot alter' (RTNO, 2024, p.11).

In the context of a frame analysis conducted with Stefanie Mayer (Mayer and Goetz, 2023), we found that the authors of the RTNO document claim exclusive truth by asserting:

> *Genuine moral precepts are not based on subjective 'values' but on objective truth, and this is why it is not only legitimate, but also necessary, to impose them on those who do not accept them: for a society to live in peace and justice, it is necessary that its legal order comply with Natural Law (RTNO, 2024, p.7).*

This objective truth is equated with 'natural law,' presented as the timeless and immutable foundation of moral and legal legitimacy. The authors define 'nature' narrowly: something is considered 'natural'—and

therefore 'normal' and morally correct—only if it serves a specifically predetermined function. For example, homosexuality is rejected as 'not normal' on the grounds that it allegedly does not fulfil the 'purpose of sexuality,' namely reproduction (RTNO, 2024, p.48). Instead, 'nature' is embedded in a teleological framework, serving a higher purpose. This linkage creates bridges to established fields such as law and science, which hold strong legitimacy in modern societies.

Another finding from our previous research, also relevant to this contribution, concerns the importance attributed by the authors to the 'cultural revolution' triggered by the 1968 movements, which they claim destroyed the West. Since this was primarily a sexual revolution that separated sexuality from its original purpose, reproduction, and thereby undermined the fundamental basis of human dignity, it is identified as the greatest threat to humanity and natural law (Mayer and Goetz, 2023, pp.104f.). This, the authors argue, has caused irreparable damage, leaving only a 'narrow time window of ten to twenty years left.' If this window is not utilized to reverse these developments, Western civilization will 'simply not continue at all' (RTNO, 2024, p.9).

Given that the paper attributes a central role to certain interpretations of human rights—particularly regarding the rights of LGBTIQA+ individuals or abortion—in the imagined process of humanity's deformation, it is worthwhile to examine its strategies for reinterpretation.

Human Rights in the Strategy Paper *Restoring the Natural Order*

A closer analysis of the paper reveals three levels of references to human rights: (1) the relationship between human rights and natural law, (2) the delegitimization of modern human rights and accusations of their manipulation by international organizations, and (3) their own conceptions and interpretations of human rights.

Human Rights or Natural Law?

In the section 'Human Rights or Natural Law?' (RTNO, 2024, pp. 12-15), the differences between human rights and natural law are summarized as follows: human rights are codified, positive law developed through political processes (e.g., in the UN or the Council of Europe), while natural law is viewed as a universal, uncodifiable order that exists independently of human will or politics. Human rights consist of isolated rights often presented as absolute principles, which can potentially conflict with each

other, whereas natural law offers flexible solutions based on overarching harmony. Natural law is independent of human will or political processes and forms the foundation of a just legal system. In short, human rights are man-made and changeable, while natural law is portrayed as immutable and pre-political (RTNO, 2024, pp.12f.).

From the fact that contemporary interpretations of human rights are man-made and changeable, the authors of the paper also derive what they see as their inherent danger: 'Given the high importance that is nowadays attached to international human rights treaties, it is no wonder that those treaties have become a primary target for politically motivated manipulation and distortion' (RTNO, 2024, p.13). The authors of the document also express concerns about the institutions responsible for faithfully interpreting human rights instruments. They warn that these institutions have been infiltrated by individuals willing to deliberately manipulate and distort human rights:

> *The post-WWII system of human rights is in a deep crisis today, and to resolve this crisis it is necessary to understand that human rights documents are no absolute truths, but the outcome of a political process, and that their interpretation can be the result of gross and deliberate manipulation (RTNO, 2024, p.15).*

Under the subheading 'Political Ideologies Undermining Natural Law' (RTNO, 2024, p.15), the document analyzes how various political ideologies allegedly undermine natural law and influence the interpretation of human rights. Marxism, Darwinism, feminism, homosexualism, gender theory, relativism, and anti-discrimination ideology are identified as central currents. These ideologies are depicted as tools of manipulation aimed at destabilizing traditional moral values and the 'natural order.'

The paper also offers purported solutions to these identified problems, addressing the question 'Which Solutions Must We Seek?**'** with a clear answer: *'A Legal Order in Conformity with Natural Law'* (RTNO, 2024, p.23):

> *In the first place, there can be no doubt that our aim, and indeed the aim of every decent man, must be to establish a legal order that fully corresponds to Natural Law, which by necessity implies that actions that stand in contradiction to Natural Law must be duly prohibited and, where necessary and appropriate, placed under dissuasive sanctions. This precisely is the purpose of positive legislation: it should implement and enforce Natural Law. It is thus,*

for example, perfectly legitimate to strive for legislation that criminalizes abortion, euthanasia, or sodomy, or that rules out the legal recognition of same-sex marriages', even if there be some citizens who believe abortion, euthanasia, or sodomy to be morally acceptable. In the ideal situation, Natural Law and positive legislation converge (RTNO, 2024, p.23).

The authors make it abundantly clear that human rights must be derived from 'natural law.' In his study on the RTNO Paper, Neil Datta refers to a definition of natural law from the Encyclopædia Britannica, which describes natural law as 'a system of law or justice common to all men and derived from nature rather than from the rules of society or positive law. Agenda Europe members posit that conservative Christian religious positions on sexuality, reproduction and morality are drawn from Natural Law' (Datta, 2018, p.10). Thus, the authors of RTNO define natural law as a universal, objective legal order that exists independently of human will and is closely linked to religious principles, particularly Christian teachings. They assert an absolute claim to this position, arguing that any deviation from the principles of natural law constitutes a threat to the integrity and stability of the entire legal system. All laws, they contend, must strictly adhere to an immutable and universal understanding of natural law in order to safeguard the legal order as a whole: *'Once we have decided that positive laws must comply with Natural Law, we must follow that approach consistently. [...] accepting one single law that disrespects Natural Law means accepting a principle that will ultimately undermine the entire legal order.'* (RTNO, 2024, p.26)

Modern interpretations of human rights, such as the right to abortion or same-sex marriage, are consequently labelled as contradictions to natural law and therefore deemed illegitimate. These 'false rights' are also accused of distorting the true meaning of human rights.

Delegitimization of Modern Human Rights and Allegations of Manipulation

As previously mentioned, the authors of the RTNO document attempt to delegitimize modern human rights—such as the right to abortion or same-sex marriage—by asserting that they contradict natural law and are therefore invalid. Additionally, they portray modern human rights as the product of the purportedly destructive 'Cultural Revolution,' which they claim has eroded society's moral compass:

> *While the 'achievements' of the Cultural Revolution (such as 'legal' abortion, 'legal' euthanasia, or the recognition of same-sex 'marriages') will ultimately defeat themselves, there is reason to fear that before this happens they will inflict irreparable damage on society. If, for example, an entire generation of young people is, due to a false understanding of sexual mores, educated in a way that makes them unable to become good spouses and parents, this will cut off the chain of tradition of the moral values that have built Western civilization.* (RTNO, 2024, p.9)

The right to abortion is not interpreted as an expression of freedom but rather as an attack on the unborn's right to life. Similarly, the legal recognition of same-sex partnerships is criticized as an undermining of traditional marriage concepts. In line with these views, the paper calls for banning abortion, homosexuality, contraceptives, divorce, or extramarital sex due to their purportedly harmful consequences for society as a whole.

Another key aspect involves the authors' allegations that international organizations manipulate human rights to serve their own agendas. They claim that, after failing to explicitly incorporate references to a *'"right to abortion," "a right to euthanasia," a "right to same-sex marriage," or similar desiderata'* (RTNO, 2024, p.13) into relevant documents, advocates shifted their strategy to focus on *'reinterpretation of existing documents, be it through academic writing or through the activities of treaty monitoring bodies (such as the different UN Committees or the European Court of Human Rights).'* (RTNO, 2024, p.13).

The authors further argue that, in recent years, key positions within the EU, the European Court of Human Rights, the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, and academia have been filled by individuals pursuing a *'consistent agenda of judicial activism,'* who *'"discover" new abortion and LGBT rights in internationally agreed texts that, such as the CEDAW or the European Human Rights Convention, in fact do not contain them.'* (RTNO, 2024, p.13).

To substantiate their claims, the authors cite several examples of alleged misinterpretations of human rights treaties by UN treaty-monitoring bodies, including efforts to legalize abortion. They assert that during UN conferences on population and women, attempts were made to introduce a 'right to abortion' surreptitiously:

> *'The strategy was to submit to those conferences texts that contained a multiplicity of vague references to 'sexual and*

> *reproductive health and rights,' with the intention to reveal only after the adoption of those texts that those references were going to be interpreted as containing a right to abortion.'* (RTNO, 2024, p.13)

The paper also highlights strategic agenda-setting meetings (e.g., between the EU and lobby groups) (RTNO, 2024, pp.20ff.), institutional control, and ideological influence by individuals allegedly pursuing a specific agenda. These individuals, according to the authors, have *'slowly but systematically infiltrated the judicial systems since the 1960s and are now, in many countries, well placed to exert influence on the recruitment of new judges and "academic experts"'* (RTNO, 2024, p.131). Many members of such organizations, they argue, are therefore not qualified to hold their positions, and their political successes are *'not the success of their arguments, but of their cadre policies.'* (RTNO, 2024, p.131).

In summary, the authors accuse international organizations of reinterpreting human rights for political purposes, exercising political control, and engaging in manipulation that undermines the 'true' meaning of human rights. Strategically, their primary goal seems to be to discredit organizations like the UN, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), or NGOs, and to call their credibility into question. Ironically, the strategies they criticize are the very ones they themselves employ—namely, reinterpreting human rights through the lens of natural law, staffing institutions with like-minded individuals, and embedding their ultraconservative values into laws and institutions.

The RTNO's concepts and interpretations of human rights

In the RTNO paper, a highly restricted, conservative concept of human rights is formulated, one that emphasizes traditional moral and societal values. While human rights are acknowledged, they are recognized only insofar as they align with natural law. The authors make it clear that human rights, as they are formulated in international treaties, represent positive laws and cannot be equated with natural law. They argue, as mentioned earlier, that 'true' human rights must be derived from natural law, which is portrayed as an objective, immutable order. (RTNO, 2024, pp.9, 22, 36) Rights that would contradict natural law, such as abortion or rights for LGBTIQA+ individuals, are consequently labelled as illegitimate. (RTNO, 2024, pp.43, 69) Therefore, the authors criticize current, modern conceptions of human rights, such as sexual and reproductive rights and gender issues, as part of a threatening 'Cultural Revolution' that

undermines traditional values and is also politically motivated and harmful to society. (RTNO, 2024, pp.7ff., 36, 101) One example of such arguments can be seen in the section that addresses the question *'Is divorce a human right?'* The authors claim that there is no international jurisprudence suggesting that international human rights obligate states to allow divorce. Regulation of divorce, they argue, falls under national legislative authority, with a crucial limit: divorce laws must not render marriage a 'hollow shell.' A law that fully prohibits divorce, they assert, could be consistent with international human rights, while overly lenient divorce laws might violate the right to marriage: *'Arguably, therefore, a marriage law that does not allow for divorce would be in line with international human rights standards, whereas legislation allowing a person to obtain a divorce too easily could be seen as violating the right to marriage.'* (RTNO, 2024, p.40) Similar arguments are found concerning same-sex marriage, abortion, and other reproductive rights.

In this framework, the 'common good' takes precedence over individual rights and freedoms, which are only considered legitimate when they align with the 'natural order.' In the strategy paper, the concept of the common good is not understood in a communitarian sense—as grounded in shared values and mutual social responsibility—but is framed in a conservative and exclusionary manner. The authors claim that only heterosexual, married couples with children contribute meaningfully to the common good, as they 'not only provide social security for both partners on the basis of a binding commitment, but they also rear the children that will work to sustain the currently active generation when it reaches retirement age' (p. 45). Homosexual couples, by contrast,

> *typically do not make such a contribution, given that by nature they do not have children. They neither bear the expenses nor the loss of income possibilities that is normally associated with rearing children; instead, they normally have two salaries and less expenses. Their pensions are paid by the work of children other persons have raised (p.53).*

This line of reasoning reduces the common good to biological reproduction and economic utility, thereby contradicting key communitarian principles of solidarity and pluralism. Rather than invoking the common good to foster inclusion and shared responsibility, the argument here instrumentalises it to legitimise traditional gender and family norms.

Thus, natural law serves not primarily to protect individual rights, as modern concepts of rational natural law would suggest, but rather to legitimize the existing social order as an expression of divine will. This perspective serves to limit and constrain rights such as those for LGBTIQA+ individuals or reproductive freedoms. Human rights are consequently not understood as dynamic, adaptable principles but as fixed, divinely or naturally grounded orders that should transcend democratic processes. This concept stands in opposition to modern views of human rights, which are aimed at pluralism, equality, and individual self-determination.

Delegitimization of Feminist Achievements in the Reinterpreted Human Rights Discourse

In the context of the reinterpretation of the human rights discourse within the RTNO paper, feminist achievements play a central role insofar as the reinterpreted human rights discourse is used to delegitimize feminist progress, such as reproductive rights and gender equality. In this context, for example, abortion rights and other reproductive rights are presented as 'false human rights,' and the right to abortion is framed as a severe violation of the 'right to life,' positioned in stark contrast to natural law, which would protect the life of the unborn child.

The authors of the paper also use the reinterpreted human rights discourse to reinforce traditional gender roles and depict the demand for gender equality as a 'Cultural Revolution' driven by ideological forces, one that would disturb the natural order. This, they claim, represents an attempt to undermine natural law, which dictates a 'proper' division of roles between men and women.

The modern human rights discourse, based on individual freedom and equality, is also portrayed as subjective and manipulable. The authors argue that feminist advances, such as abortion rights and LGBTIQA+ rights, are artificial and harmful, as they are based on a supposedly 'false' interpretation of human rights. Abortion and other feminist rights, such as the recognition of LGBTIQA+ marriages, are described as unjust and destructive to society. The inverted human rights discourse attempts to present these achievements as violations of universal, 'natural' principles.

Thus, the reinterpreted human rights discourse serves to delegitimize feminist struggles for self-determination and equality by portraying them as 'unnatural' and in conflict with a traditional, natural law-based order.

Conclusion

To summarise, the strategy paper *Restoring the Natural Order* undertakes an ideological reconfiguration of human rights discourse that not only delegitimises specific rights—such as sexual and reproductive freedom or gender equality—but also challenges the democratic and inclusive foundations of the human rights framework as a whole. One of the most important strategies employed by the authors of the RTNO document to reinterpret and co-opt the discourse surrounding human rights is the use of secularized language, the adaptation of specific terminology, and a legal rhetoric. In essence, this is not a new endeavor, as Christian actors have been attempting for some time to frame their objectives within a secularized language (Datta, 2018; Goetz and Mayer, 2023; Hennig and Weiberg-Salzmann, 2021; Kuhar, 2017; Kuru, 2009; Paternotte, 2015; Stambolis-Ruhstorfer and Tricou, 2017; Strube et al., 2021). The authors themselves make no secret of this, as they explicitly call in their paper for the active adoption of certain terms— even if they were coined by their opponents— but with a conservative meaning attached. Through consistent use, these terms could be 'corrected' so that opponents would no longer be able to employ them effectively:

> *It therefore seems to be a much better strategy to use all those words, including neologisms such as 'reproductive rights', but at the same time making clear what meaning those words have for us. If that is done consistently, we might even succeed in 'contaminating' (or in fact, rectifying) the vocabulary that our opponents have crafted, so that they cannot use them anymore.* (RTNO, 2024, p.139)

The selective re-interpretation of existing concepts bears striking parallels to the accusations made against their opponents. The authors accuse international organizations of reinterpreting human rights terms to legitimize rights such as abortion or same-sex marriage. At the same time, they themselves utilize a narrow definition of 'natural law' to present it as the universal foundation for all positive laws. They conceptualize natural law teleologically (i.e., goal-oriented) and religiously, dismissing alternative interpretations as illegitimate. However, their definition of natural law is not a neutral framework but is closely tied to medieval Christian principles. In doing so, they ultimately engage in the very practice they accuse their opponents of: the selective use of legal concepts to promote a specific political agenda. Neil Datta describes

this strategy as *'what the progressive community has labelled the 'colonization of human rights' — namely, the contortion of religiously-inspired positions on sexuality and reproduction to artificially resemble classical human rights language.'* (Datta, 2018, p.16)

Through the juxtaposition of 'true' and 'false' rights, as well as the dichotomy between 'objective truth' and 'subjective value,' the authors employ another strategy to create a moral superiority of their own position. They accuse their opponents of subjectivism and political manipulation, yet themselves use moralizing rhetoric to bolster their stance. Their strategies also include the discrediting of human rights activists and institutions, as they accuse organizations such as the UN, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), and NGOs of being controlled by ideologically motivated individuals. At the same time, they articulate explicit political demands and strategies aimed at reforming or dismantling institutions to impose their own agenda. While denouncing the alleged ideological influence within human rights organizations, they promote their own political agenda, grounded in the enforcement of religious values.

Furthermore, the authors criticize the manipulative use of language, yet they themselves employ moralizing terms such as 'culture of death' or 'false rights' to delegitimize their opponents and present their own perspective as universally valid. They also accuse their opponents of using human rights to pursue economic or ideological interests (e.g., the 'abortion industry'). In contrast, the authors pursue a political strategy aimed at integrating their ultraconservative values into laws and institutions.

Ultimately, the *Restoring the Natural Order* (RTNO) document employs the reinterpretation of human rights discourse as a strategic tool to legitimise a totalitarian political order. This order is grounded in an understanding of natural law as an ahistorical and immutable principle that stands above democratic processes. In doing so, it undermines the core human rights commitments to universality, equality, and protection from discrimination.

The notion that 'true' human rights must be exclusively derived from an allegedly objective natural law systematically excludes all those whose lived realities do not conform to this conservative ideal. This development poses a significant threat, particularly to feminist and LGBTIQA+ movements. As recent political regressions in countries such as Poland, Hungary, and Italy demonstrate, it is above all the achievements

in the realm of reproductive rights, gender equality policies, and gender-sensitive education that are being strategically dismantled. Moreover, the dismantling of feminist infrastructures—through the closure of counselling centres, the withdrawal of public funding, or the delegitimisation of gender studies—is no longer a theoretical risk but an unfolding reality in many places.

The reframing of human rights through the lens of conservative natural law thus threatens not only individual rights but the pluralistic and democratic fabric of society as a whole. By replacing democratic and rational processes with appeals to divine truth and universal moral principles, this ideological shift risks not only reversing decades of social progress regarding sexual and reproductive rights but also undermining the very foundations of democratic governance itself. All the more urgent, then, is the need to critically analyse and expose the strategies and political agendas of right-wing and conservative actors—to decipher their language, reveal the undemocratic logic underpinning their claims, and develop effective counter-strategies in response.

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[i] The limited number of studies addressing this phenomenon of reinterpretations and appropriations of Human Rights primarily focus on far-right groups and parties, as well as the instrumentalization of human rights in racist discourses. One of the few works examining similar strategies within the Christian fundamentalist spectrum is Neil Datta's analysis, *Restoring the Natural Order: The Religious Extremists' Vision to Mobilize European Societies Against Human Rights on Sexuality and Reproduction* (Datta, 2018), published by the *European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development*. While Datta's analysis addresses the appropriation of the human rights discourse, this is not its central focus. Rather, the study emphasizes the ideological construction and enforcement of a conservative, natural law-based worldview, which seeks to restructure societal norms regarding gender, sexuality, and family. In this context, human rights are understood as a strategic instrument to present conservative values within a universal, legally and morally legitimized framework. The analysis is less concerned with a comprehensive engagement with the human rights discourse itself and more with how this discourse is embedded within conservative narratives to advance political and social objectives.

Image 4: **Two Gazan Girls Dreaming of Peace** (2020) © **Malak Mattar** All rights Reserved

Presence of Absence: Black Children and Erased Histories of Abuse in Ireland's Institutional Record

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Abstract

This article examines the erasure of Black children from public discourse on 20th-century Irish institutional abuse, situating their exclusion within a racial logic that marked them as morally and biologically other. It interrogates the epistemic and testimonial injustices embedded within Ireland's historical and contemporary treatment of Black children, with particular focus on the 2021 Mother and Baby Homes Commission. It critiques the reliance on institutional records over survivor testimonies, revealing how these children's racialisation intersected with gender and class to marginalise them within both care institutions and national memory. By employing an intersectional and feminist framework, it explores the implications of these omissions for transitional justice and human rights accountability, calling for the inclusion of racialised narratives in Ireland's reckoning with its institutional past. This study advances a critical understanding of racial injustice within Ireland's care system, advocating for reparatory justice and the centring of Black survivors' voices in processes of historical redress and collective memory formation.

Keywords: Blackness in Ireland, Racialised Erasure, Institutional abuse, Epistemic silencing, Testimonial injustice

Introduction

The erasure of children of African and Irish descent from Ireland's record of historical institutional abuse in the 20th century represents a failure to confront the racialised dimensions of systemic violence within the state. Framed as both moral and racial threats, these children were positioned as monoracially Black (in keeping with their fathers' blackness[i]) and faced

decades of epistemic silencing, a deleterious process evident even in the most recent 2021 report into institutional abuse (MBH, 2021). In discussing the erasure of the on-going Gazan genocide, Francesca Albanese, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian Territory occupied since 1967, observed that '[e]pistemic violence comes in many, often subliminal and surreptitious, forms' (Albanese, 2024). The Albanese quote highlights the subtle and pervasive nature of epistemic violence that operates not only through overt denial but also through omission and selective silencing. This dynamic is evident in the Irish context, where the presence of Black children in care institutions has been systematically omitted from public consciousness and historical narratives, reinforcing the myth of a racially homogeneous nation. This erasure is not incidental but reflects a deliberate mechanism of marginalisation that has left even survivors questioning the legitimacy of their own lived experiences. One of the consistent responses to my research and public engagement on my own experiences in the institutional care system is the inevitable comment along the lines of, 'I never knew there were any Black children in the institutions'. As a child made visible through race over sixteen years, spent in two industrial schools, I find myself reflecting on how my story, and those of multiple others like me, have disappeared 'down some collective black hole' (Cohen, 2001, p.13).

While survivors marked by race can be glimpsed in public documentaries and multiple official reports on the institutional care system (e.g., CICA, 2009), it was not until the publication of the Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and Certain Related Matters (henceforth MBH) published in January 2021 (MBH, 2021), that the scale of this cohort's presence became clear. Records from just two institutions, Pelletstown and Bessborough[ii], revealed that 275 children were classified as Black or 'mixed' race[iii] (MBH, 2021, p.74). This figure, drawn from a small sample of 18 institutions within the Commission's remit, confirmed a substantial Black presence across the institutional sector, one that remains largely unacknowledged in public discourse. As with so many matters relating to the institutions, it would be an easy task to determine accurate numbers for the Black and 'mixed' individuals who lived and died in these institutions. When I received my heavily redacted personal files, I discovered that, in addition to the term 'illeg(itimate)' after my name, the word 'coloured' had been scrawled as addendum across the page as a marker for any staff within the system, a clear signifier of my racialised identity (see Figure 1). My research among other Black survivors confirms that such racialised labelling was a

common practice (Mullen, 2021a), and that we were stamped from the beginning, to use Ibram X. Kendi's (2016) phrase. Given this context, it would seem a straightforward task, with the allocation of even limited resources, to identify the total number of Black and racialised as Other[iv] adults and children who were incarcerated, provided the religious orders that ran these institutions were minded to open their archives to scrutiny.

Figure 1: Early racialisation within the institutions. Note the handwritten word 'coloured' which is in another hand than the official one used elsewhere on the form.

Yet, despite the evidence of significant numbers, these narratives of racialisation in an Irish context remain largely absent from public discourse on the institutions. Interestingly, from a Black feminist perspective, one of the rare mentions of 'coloured' children which appears in a government report, the 2000-2009 Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (CICA), adopts a disturbing gendered approach. Reporting on a Dr. Lysaght who lamented the plight of 'coloured' girls during the course of his visit to an industrial school in 1966, it quotes from his observations:

> *their future especially in the case of girls presented a problem difficult of any satisfactory solution. Their prospects of marriage especially in this country are practically nil and their future happiness and welfare can only be assured in a country with a fair multi-racial population, since they are not well received by either 'black or white' …these unfortunate children who are frequently found hot tempered and difficult to control. The coloured boys do not present quite the same problem. (CICA, 2009, at Vol. IV para 4.94)*

These racialised girls were marked as Other in ways that rendered them hypervisible and as problems to be managed, while their lived realities were systematically erased from collective memory. This dual process of hypervisibility and erasure aligns with Audrey Rousseau's concept of the 'presence of absence' (2016, p.309) which characterises the

contradictory ways in which survivors appear in institutional narratives— as objects of bureaucratic concern but never as subjects of their own stories.

Viewing the institutions through an intersectional lens, where intersectionality is understood not as an additive process but as a mutually constitutive framework in which systems of oppression and identity categories co-produce one another, reveals the mechanisms behind this erasure. This erasure stems not only from the racialised hierarchies within Ireland's institutional care system (Mullen, 2023) but also the patriarchal logics of control that shaped the intersections of gender and class to sustain their operation (Gleeson, 2020). These institutions operated within a patriarchal Ireland, where, as Clara Fischer observes, 'women's sexuality and social behaviour were subjected to intense scrutiny, as visible transgressions of purity, especially, were met with opprobrium and punishment' in the early twentieth century (2016, p.823). Engaging with feminist critiques of power and human rights frameworks, this article foregrounds these hidden narratives as a challenge to both Ireland's self-concept and its international commitments to justice. It examines the mechanisms of their marginalisation and the implications for transitional justice, collective memory and Irish identity, calling for an intersectional approach to reckon with these abuses within a historical redress and ongoing human rights accountability framework.

In relation to terminology, it is germane to note that in the Irish context, the 'racial definers' (Moriarty, 2020, p.1) used to describe individuals of 'mixed' backgrounds have been the subject of extensive and critical debate (e.g., Mullen, 2024) reflecting the problematic conceptualisation of 'Irish as same and other/mixed as different' (Moriarty, 2020, p. 11). For the purposes of this discussion, I will employ the term Black (capitalised) in describing these children of African and Irish descent to acknowledge the socio-political significance of the construct of being racialised as Black. This usage aligns with critical frameworks that centre blackness as a site of both resistance and marginalisation, while simultaneously recognising the limitations and contested nature of racial terminology. By doing so, I foreground the lived experiences and structural conditions that render blackness a crucial analytical category within the Irish context, particularly for individuals racialised as such.

Background to the institutional care system

From the mid-19th century to the late 20th century, a nationwide network of industrial, residential and reformatory schools, children's homes, Mother and Baby homes, Magdalene laundries and orphanages were used to incarcerate those deemed morally deviant or socially undesirable, including the poor, unmarried mothers, and their children (Earner-Byrne, 2007). This 'architecture of containment' (Smith, 2007, p.1) was State-sponsored and Church-administered (Gleeson, 2020), supported by various institutions such as the medical profession, the courts, the police, politicians, social workers, families, and voluntary organisations (Garrett, 2003). It was designed to contain those perceived as threats to the moral order, particularly by disciplining and punishing women and children who transgressed conventional gender and moral expectations (Garrett, 2016). The primary function of homes for unmarried mothers was to regulate women's sexuality and way of life. Protestant institutions, mirroring Catholic ones, confirm that this was a nationwide phenomenon rooted in an entrenched social governance that treated poverty as a moral failing (Buckley, 2016).

Neglect was used as a blanket term to justify institutionalisation, encompassing a wide array of conditions tied to poverty and family dysfunction. Raftery and O'Sullivan (1999) contend that poverty was the root cause of institutionalisation:

> *Approximately eighty per cent of all children committed, and over ninety per cent of girls, came under the category 'lack of proper guardianship'. In practice, this was a catch-all heading, which included children of unmarried mothers not eligible for adoption, children who had lost one or both parents, those whose parents were incapacitated through illness, or whose families were unable to look after them due to poverty. Homeless children came within this category, as did those whose families had been broken up because of desertion or the imprisonment of one parent. However, in all these cases, the language and procedure of the courts was to place the onus of guilt on the child. And the State, rather than attempting to address the poverty that existed in these families, chose instead to fund religious orders to effectively incarcerate these children (Raftery & O'Sullivan, 1999, p. 22).*

Rooted in a 'culture of honour towards the Church and its agents' (Richards, 2012, p. 395) this approach reshaped the social roots of

poverty into moral issues (Finnane, 2001). Viewed through the lens of Catholic social teaching, poverty became then not a structural issue but a reflection of individual or familial shortcomings, necessitating control and reform rather than support (Fahey 1998). The family was seen as central to Irish identity, but only within a narrowly defined, patriarchal model that excluded unmarried mothers and their children (Brennan, 2013). This system also reflected 20th century Ireland's wider coercive confinement strategy, which targeted the surplus, deviant, and undesirable elements of society (O'Sullivan & O'Donnell, 2012) resulting in approximately one per cent of the population of the state being incarcerated in state institutions. Along with mass emigration, this institutionalisation 'absorbed the surplus, deviant and 'undesirable' in society' (Buckley & McGregor, 2019, p.4).

The institutional care regime continued as an entrenched feature of Irish everyday life, operating well into the late 20th century. This longevity reflects a pernicious economic reality about the institutions, namely that they relied on the labour of the incarcerated, where this labour was exploited under the guise of care and required a steady supply of new inmates to remain financially viable according to state capitation grant mechanisms (CICA, 2009; MBH, 2021). To take a particularly trenchant critique of one form of institution, the Magdalen Laundries, Frances Finnegan makes a case that the gradual closure of these abusive institutions from the late 1970s owed less to reforming legislation, public concern, or liberal debate within a modernising Irish society, and more to a Gradgrindian utilitarianism on the part of the nuns driven by the increasing adoption of domestic washing machines beyond the institutions' walls (2002, p.113).

Blackness in Ireland

Though Ireland's self-construction as a monocultural and monoracial society is riddled with contradictions, particularly given its dual identity as both colonised and coloniser within the British imperial matrix of power (McMahon et al. 2017), this dynamic has historically erased Black people from Ireland's national narrative. As a colonised nation, Ireland was racialised as 'other' within British colonial discourse, often portrayed as inherently inferior and likened to racialised groups within the empire (Garner, 2004). Yet, as a nation engaged in missionary activities in Africa, Ireland simultaneously adopted the role of 'soft coloniser' (Mullen, 2024) disseminating Catholicism and Irish cultural values while participating in

the racial hierarchies of empire. This duality complicates Ireland's victim narrative and highlights its role in the racialisation of others, particularly Black people, through its involvement in racial-colonial projects.

The paradox of Ireland's racial positioning becomes evident in the ways blackness has been constructed within Irish society. Connolly and Khaoury (2008) argue that whiteness has historically been a foundational element of Irishness which reinforces the racialised inscription of space. Far from being a mere product of external colonial forces, the racialisation of Black people in Ireland reflects internalised colonial logics that sought to secure Irish whiteness as normative. This dynamic has not only excluded Black individuals from the imagined Irish community but also framed their presence as incompatible with Irishness, which is equated with whiteness to the point of metonymy. This exclusion, as O'Malley (2020, p.935) observes, is rooted in this 'normative whiteness,' which situates whiteness as the essential marker of belonging within the Irish nation. Blackness, by contrast, is relegated to a position of otherness, often perceived as foreign or uncanny. This uncanny quality reflects Freud's concept of unsettling familiarity, where blackness disrupts the presumed homogeneity of Irish identity and operates as a mechanism for reinforcing Irish whiteness while simultaneously constructing blackness as invisible in the national narrative (Mullen, 2024).

This invisibility leads to a prevalent misconception that there were no Black people in Ireland during this period in question. Such a belief is especially striking given that from the 1930s onwards, hundreds of colonial students and professionals such as doctors and engineers from several African states came to work and study in Irish institutions of higher education. A project I am leading, for example, has identified over 700 African students in Trinity College Dublin alone during this time period. This community of scholars, male and female, played a significant role on the Irish social scene and global political stage, as reflected in newspaper reports of the time, yet their contributions and experiences remain largely absent from the historical record. An enduring legacy of the arrival of these students was the hundreds of Black children born to white Irish mothers and these African or Caribbean fathers. 'The children born of relationships between African men and Irish women experienced not just the stigma experienced by other unmarried mothers but also extreme racism' (Fanning, 2018), and the double stigma of being an unmarried mother with a Black child meant many of these mothers were compelled to hand their children to the care of the Irish State for

adoption or fostering. There were, of course, women who refused to sign away their children for adoption and managed to bring up their child, but with huge difficulties. The African and Caribbean fathers also faced the risk of being expelled from employment or educational institutions if it was discovered they had fathered an illegitimate child with a white woman. This was, in turn, compounded by cultural and societal expectations from their countries of origin, which could include condemnation or estrangement from their families.

Despite the contestation of blackness in Ireland during this time period, what is incontestable is the antiblackness. In 1964, *The Irish Times* newspaper ran a series of articles on African students in Ireland, in which the severe racism faced by these students in Dublin was described, putting a spotlight on the pervasive antiblackness they were obliged to endure, especially from landlords. In a letter responding to the series, an African student studying in Dublin, E.C.D. Ekanem, suggested that the root of the problem lay in the fact that in Ireland, 'one is bound to admit that the general attitude is that of suspicion and dislike, for no apparent reason than that they are black, as if black were an unpopular colour' (The Irish Times, 1964). By the time the sociologist, Fr Micheál Mac Gréil, conducted his 1972 survey of attitudes to racial and ethnic difference, his 3,000 Dublin participants revealed 'a high and severe degree' of animosity regarding Black people (Mac Gréil, 1977, p.244) confirming this pervasive antiblackness decades before Ireland's Celtic Tiger-era large scale inward migration of Africans in the mid-1990s.

Racialisation within the institutions

It is against this background of a prevalent antiblackness that the racialisation of Black children within the care institutions and their erasure from the record must be situated. Black children, as embodied disruptions to this monoracial identity, were systematically excluded from the national imaginary and its ethno-racial rigidity of Irishness. Unlike the overt segregation practised in settler-colonial contexts, Ireland's approach was more insidious, involving the geographic isolation of Black children in rural institutions and their removal from public consciousness[v]. A 1970s report by the Child Care Advisor in the Department of Education, Graham Granville, states: 'It would appear upon examination of the files etc. that in the past many of the children admitted to Clifden [in the 1970s an isolated region in the West of Ireland] were received into care to be removed 'out of sight out of mind'

(CICA, 2009, at 9.23-24). This policy in his opinion was applied especially to children of different racial backgrounds and ensured that no visible community of Black children could challenge the narrative of Ireland as a racially homogeneous nation.

The racialisation of Black children was inscribed in their records and the language of these institutions[vi]. Recording of a child's race in institutional records was not innocuous as I have outlined in my instance above, and served no purpose other than to draw attention to the phenotype of the child, resulting in their stigmatisation (Mullen, 2021b). I have argued that the language used in Ireland in the mid-later 20th century was reminiscent of Jim Crow America and U.S. segregation, as the Black and 'mixed' child was recorded as 'coloured,' 'half caste,' 'negro,' 'half negro,' 'dark skinned,' and 'African' (ibid., p.55). Such practices were not isolated but systematic, reflecting the racial hierarchies codified in institutional discourse. These descriptors reduced children to racialised categories, framing their bodies as defective, which appear to have hindered their chances of adoption. Of the 275 children who were in Pelletstown and Bessborough, where race is noted on their records over the period in question, only 56% were placed for adoption (Mullen, 2021b, p.55). There is clear evidence that these children would have been placed for adoption if they had been white: 'Coloured child. Healthy. Medically fit for adoption but owing to colour this would be difficult.' 'Healthy. Half caste child. On account of above will be unfit for adoption.' 'Healthy. Coloured child. Unfit for adoption on account of colour only' (ibid., p.56).

Children who were not adopted were likely to remain in institutions since they were devalued in this commodified marketisation of adoption. Deprived of the potential lucrative value of adoption, the remaining value of the Black child came from the capitation fee (a fee provided by the State to the industrial schools for the maintenance of the child), from whatever the mother was paying to the institution for the child's upkeep, and from being used as a labourer, both within and outside the institution. One form of this commodification of the Black child is evident by the disproportionate number of mixed-race children subjected to non-consensual vaccine trials during the mid-20th century. Despite the ethical standards established by the Nuremberg Code in 1947, which mandated informed consent and safeguards against the exploitation of vulnerable populations, Ireland's institutions targeted children labelled as illegitimate (Dwyer, 2018) or marked as racially other for these trials (Mullen, 2021a). These actions not only violated international ethical guidelines but also highlighted the racialised disregard for the dignity and

personhood of Black children within the institutional system. Black children were unwitting participants in both the vaccine trials recorded in Pelletstown (2 out of 14 children in the 1960/61 Quadrivax quadruple and 1 out of 20 in the Quintuple vaccine trial). A remarkable 23% (13 out of 56) children who received a course of oral polio vaccine in Pelletstown were described as 'half-caste' or 'coloured child' (Mullen, 2021b, p.56) This strongly suggests a policy of selection of racialised children and constitutes an abuse of human rights.

The devaluation of the Black child within the institutions is poignantly illustrated in Caelainn Hogan's 2019 *Republic of Shame: How Ireland Punished 'Fallen Women' and Their Children*. Hogan recounts an incident that exposes the racialised neglect inherent in these institutions:

> *When Liz was still a child, Betty took her and her sister (who was also adopted) to the orphanage in Blackrock, hoping to adopt another child. While the nun was showing Betty the babies in their cots, the kids wandered off to another room, where they followed the sound of crying to a closed closet. Inside they found a baby. 'A black baby crying on its own in the dark,' Jess remembered Liz telling her. The nun told Betty that the baby was sick and probably wouldn't make it. Betty decided that if the baby was going to die, she was going to die with a family. The baby girl lived and grew up to be her youngest aunt, Ana. (2019, p.173)*

The 1967 killing of Mary Josephine Stephenson, a six-year-old Black girl and industrial school inmate, epitomised this devaluation of Black children even after being placed in foster care. In a story that made front-page news (Waterford News and Star, 1968) Mary was killed by her foster father, Vincent Dunphy, who was drunk at the time, and who justified his violent behaviour by claiming she was 'difficult' and told lies. Neighbours had seen Mary with bruises and black eyes on a regular basis, evidence of sustained abuse, yet during the trial in 1968, the judge absolved Dunphy of full responsibility, suggesting that the child's death was an unintended consequence of disciplinary actions Dunphy believed appropriate. The defence counsel further diminished Mary's humanity, describing her as a 'waif and a stray, and a coloured one at that' (Irish Independent, 1968). This framing secured a verdict of manslaughter rather than murder and resulted in a lenient sentence of just 12 months in prison, demonstrating the systemic disregard for the dignity and value of Black children even beyond the walls of the institution.

Testimonial injustice and the Epistemic Silencing of Black Survivors

The exclusion of Black children from Ireland's institutional history, coupled with the moralistic punishment of unmarried mothers, was a sustained violation of human rights that exposes the influence of Church and state power embedded in shaping social governance in 20th century Ireland. This punitive structure portrayed unmarried mothers and their children as socially deviant (Gleeson, 2020), a framework in which exclusion functioned as sites of moral and, in the case of these Black children, racial containment and control, designed to isolate and punish those deemed transgressive to Irish racial imaginaries (read: white). This racialised dehumanisation is located in the acts of epistemic and testimonial injustice that rendered Black children invisible within institutional records and national memory. The refusal to name Black children in institutional documents, the prevention of burial rites for those who died in care, and their erasure from public discourse function as calculated denials of humanity. This pattern of exclusion presents an amplified politicisation of human rights, in which racialisation and moral governance worked in tandem to determine who was deemed worthy of recognition, belonging, and even life. By constructing Black children and their mothers as undeserving of memory or mourning, these practices not only violated principles of dignity and equality but normalised Ireland's racial modernity enmeshed in logics of whiteness and heteronormativity. The struggle to uncover these suppressed histories is not merely an act of historical recovery but an urgent human rights demand, one that insists on acknowledging the role of racism in the systemic pattern of institutional abuse through which state and Church colluded to deny Black children and their mothers the right to be seen, remembered, and valued as full members of Irish society.

The MBH commission established in 2015 to examine systemic abuses within these institutions, was tasked with uncovering the truth about the treatment of unmarried mothers and their children, including addressing questions of racial abuse as part of its terms of reference. This inclusion of race within the terms of reference was due solely to the advocacy of the Association of Mixed Race Irish (AMRI). Representing survivors racialised as Black and 'mixed' in Ireland's institutional care system, AMRI filed formal submissions to the MBH Commission during its scoping phase, with critical evidence of systemic racial abuse and discrimination arising from the testimonies of its network of survivors and through documentation that revealed racialisation within institutional records

and practices (AMRI 2019). This activism involved engagement with politicians to press for the inclusion of race and the leveraging of international human rights frameworks, particularly the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) to pressure the state to address its failure to include the racialised dimensions of institutional abuses in its initial analysis (ibid.).

Despite this inclusion, the MBH commission failed in its final report to identify race as a critical axis of analysis, treating it as peripheral rather than a systemic process shaping Black children's institutional experiences (Mullen, 2021b). The commission's approach and findings make public inherent methodological and interpretative biases that undermined its ability to confront the racialised dimensions of harm that characterise the epistemic violence entrenched within Ireland's institutional inquiries. Instead of framing racialisation as a manifestation of institutional racism, the MBH characterised it as both an isolated issue and simply a product of the societal context of the time, thereby neutralising its significance as a structural dynamic of the institutions. This is confounding, as leaked findings from survivors' testimonies that appeared in national newspapers in February 2020 directly contradicted the MBH's final conclusions, and exposed systemic racialisation and the centrality of race in shaping institutional practices (Sheehan, 2020). The religious orders running the institutions engaged in eugenic practices, assessing children based on perceived 'negroid' features and the supposed intelligence of their mothers to determine their suitability for adoption (O'Sullivan, 2020). This racial profiling maintained a narrative of blackness as subhuman and incompatible with Irish norms, effectively barring these children from adoption or fostering and relegating them to lifelong institutionalisation. The racialised human rights abuses extended to physical segregation within the institutions, with survivors recounting the existence of spaces like the 'reject ward' at St Patrick's Mother and Baby Home, where mixed-race and disabled children were grouped and subjected to abhorrent mistreatment (Maloney, 2020). One survivor described nuns dragging these children 'like rag dolls,' noting a grim pattern of disappearing cots as children died from neglect (ibid.), in a manner reminiscent of Ana's fate in Caelainn Hogan's account above. The findings also highlighted the deliberate erasure of children's ethnic identities, with the institutions using 'African' as a catch-all label. This lack of recognition denied the children their individuality and any cultural or familial connection, further isolating them within the institutional system as 'hidden aberrations to the norm' (AMRI, 2019, p.11), whose

very presence was suppressed to maintain the illusion of a racially homogeneous Ireland.

This methodological and interpretative bias was brought to light when Mary Daly, a historian and one of the MBH's three members, addressed an academic seminar at Oxford University in June 2021, five months after its report was published, and six years since the investigation began. This marked Daly's first public commentary since the publication and provoked widespread outrage among survivors, including AMRI and its members. Her decision to speak outside Ireland in a closed academic setting was seen as emblematic of the MBH's disregard for survivors, especially given the Commissioners' refusal to appear before the Oireachtas Committee, the parliamentary body tasked with oversight and accountability for their findings. The Oxford seminar offered a rare insight into the MBH's internal processes and exposed critical methodological flaws. Daly acknowledged that the testimonies of 550 survivors who gave evidence were excluded from the final report, citing legal and evidentiary constraints (Clann, 2021). Her remarks brought into focus the overreliance on institutional records over oral evidence and revealed a prioritisation of bureaucratic and legal standards that dismissed the lived experiences of those racialised while incarcerated (ibid.), evidence of an ontological refusal to confront the structural violence embedded in these institutions. Survivor testimony was dismissed as inherently unreliable, being frequently characterised as anecdotal or contaminated, while documentary evidence—generated by the very institutions accused of the racialised abuse—was treated as objective and definitive.

This dismissal aligns with Fricker's concept of testimonial injustice, where structural and institutional power systematically discredits marginalised voices, denying them credibility within dominant epistemic frameworks (Fricker 2007, 2025, 2017). The rejection of survivor accounts not only perpetuates the racial and patriarchal logics embedded within the institutions but also denies survivors the epistemic recognition necessary for justice. For Black survivors, this constitutes the injustice of their lived experiences of racialisation and harm being simultaneously erased from history and invalidated in the processes designed to redress those harms.

Conclusion

In light of Irish antiblackness detailed throughout this paper, the exclusion of race from Ireland's institutional abuse inquiries does not signal a failure of oversight but suggests a deliberate intentionality to obscure the intersecting oppression of race, along with gender and class, which shaped abuses within the system. Viewed in this light, the reduction of institutional harms to issues of class or societal norms, thus erasing the central role of racialisation in shaping the lives of Black children, is not incidental but a deliberate mechanism of silencing that sustains Irish racial hierarchies and human rights issues. Such epistemic silencing reflects a motivation to maintain Ireland's national imaginary as racially homogeneous by ensuring that racialised narratives remain absent from the collective memory of the nation.

Storrie (2014) argues that collective national memory operates in a 'shadow land of nuance and subtlety,' moulded by present-day social and political imperatives. Such selective historical framing aligns with other patterns of elite-driven memory construction, as theorised by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), where collective national memory is tailored to serve contemporary political needs. By framing institutional abuses as discrete historical episodes divorced from their structural dimensions, the state continues to marginalise Black survivors, who are rendered invisible, their lived experiences excluded from public discourse and state reparatory frameworks (Bryan, 2024). The disproportionate targeting of Black children for vaccine trials, the racialised categorisation that denied them adoption opportunities, and their segregation within institutions amplifies the racialised devaluation of their lives. Without confronting the conjoined epistemic and testimonial injustices that continue to silence Black survivors, the state's mechanisms for redressing human rights abuses will remain fundamentally inadequate.

The implications of this erasure extend beyond collective national memory to Ireland's obligations under international human rights frameworks. Despite its ratification of ICERD in 2000 and its constitutional commitments to equality, the state has failed to align its domestic practices with its international obligations. Although race was eventually included as an analytical category, the MBH report failed to address systemic abuses, especially the racialised exclusion of Black children from adoption and their racialisation within institutions. This erasure perpetuates epistemic injustice, denying the lived realities of

survivors, while enabling the state to evade accountability for its complicity in racialised abuses.

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[i] I am guided by Kwame Anthony Appiah as to capitalising the word 'Black' but using lowercase for 'blackness': ''Black' in upper case signals respect and parity with other racial categories, emphasising the importance of recognising Black people's unique identity and experiences. It acknowledges their distinct history, culture, and struggles. On the other hand, 'blackness' in lowercase suggests a more fluid and less determined concept, allowing for diversity within the Black community, acknowledging individual identities, and emphasising the spectrum of experiences that may not fit a single mold.' Appiah K.A (2020) The Case for Capitalizing the B in Black. Available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/time-to-capitalize-blackand-white/613159/.

[ii] Two institutions selected by the MBH members based on their size and how long they had been in operation.

[iii] Though the de-privileging of race must remain 'both an important critical theoretical and research objective (Ifekwunigwe 2001, p. 44) I will use both the term 'mixed' (with single quotation marks) and race as they are 'culturally comprehensible' (Azoulay 2003, p. 234) for the current discussion.

[iv] In addition to a number of Black children like me, there was a child who I believe was Hawaiian-Irish, another who was Cypriot-Irish and another of Maltese-Irish descent in the institution in which I was incarcerated during the 1970s.

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^v For example, though born in a Dublin hospital to a Wicklow mother, I was shipped down an isolated industrial school in Loughrea, Co. Galway within two weeks of my birth.
^{vi} This process was not unique to Black children and similar discrimatory processes were applied to racialised as Other, disabled and Traveller children.
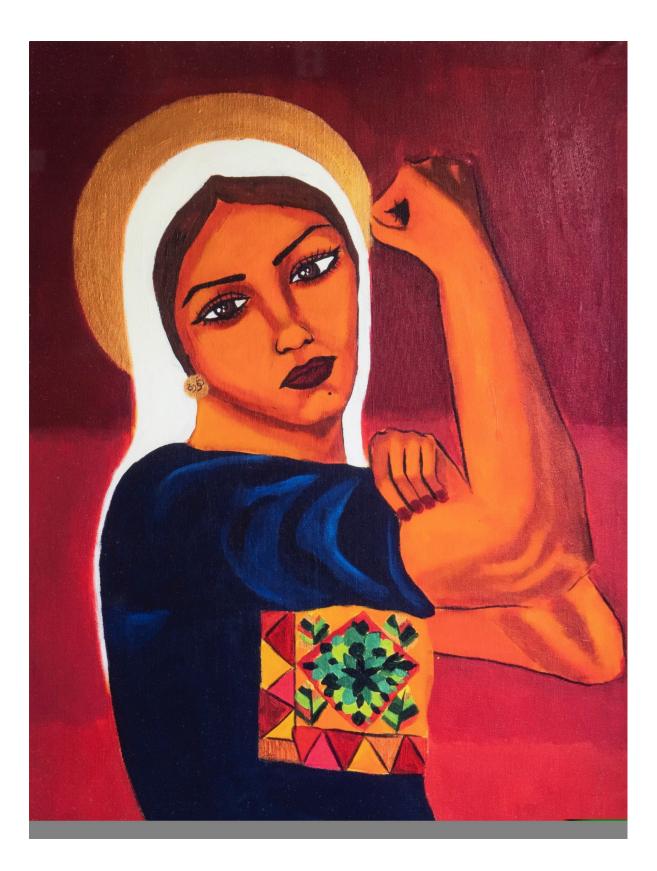
Image 5: **Thawra** (2023) © <u>Malak Mattar</u> All rights Reserved

'A Circus of Sound Shaped From Many Tongues': Rethinking Human Rights as a Decolonisation Project

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Abstract

This essay will examine some of the ways in which the principles of universality and anti-colonialism informed the drafting of the UN Charter and the UDHR. My examples are mainly from India and Pakistan, but it is clear that women from many countries - some of whom had won battles against colonial powers in earlier decades, particularly women from Latin America who formed a strong contingent – were deeply invested in making women's rights an explicit part of the human rights system. Many of the Asian women active in this early phase were also concerned with ending racism and colonial rule and creating enforceable norms that would assist this process. There was no contradiction for them between challenging their own patriarchs and the patriarchal forces of empire.

Introduction

Universality is under threat on a scale that has not been seen since the United Nations (UN) was founded in the aftermath of World War II. While the UN system as a whole is under attack with the abrupt withdrawal of funding by the Trump administration, the paralysis of its Security Council in dealing with genocide in Palestine has caused disgust and despair in people who would support it. The attack on the UN comes from right wing movements and leaders who, more often than not, have won the consent of their electorates for dismantling the institutions that formed the post-world war consensus. But it also comes from academics and movements which think of themselves as 'progressive' or 'leftwing.' A whole range of post-structuralist and postcolonial theory, including decolonial theory, has declared that 'grand narratives' are dead, that interests are based on identities, that no common cause can be made

between groups where one is inherently privileged (as in white privilege) and the others are permanent victims.

One of the effects of the undermining of universalism in academic discourse has been the creation of alliances between the left and anti-war movements such as Stop the War coalition with Islamists during the campaigns against the War on Terror, while attacking often secular women's movements as inauthentic. At the same time, Britain and the US have strengthening links with Islamists to control terrorists - a policy that culminated with jihadist forces being the West's negotiating partner and guarantor of security in Afghanistan and Syria.

Airbrushed from the record of much 'progressive' writing as well as in neo-imperialist work is the complex history of not only the freedom movement led by Gandhi and Nehru in India but the histories of thousands of women who had fought the British Empire, gone on to establish major public institutions, and continued to fight for democratic rights in the postcolonial period. Several of those women played key roles at the UN, where they won crucial battles for rights which are usually thought to be 'western'. They also fought for decolonisation and rallied against cultural relativism. Fortunately, some of their stories are now being told. In this essay, I shall draw upon recent scholarship to argue that far from being a stitch-up by the victors of the Second World War, the influence of freedom movements and decolonised states was crucial to the language of the UN and to spreading the idea of universal human rights to millions across the world (see also Sahgal, 2014).

Origins of the UN and the Influence of Anti-Colonial Movements

In 2018, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, made an extraordinarily frank farewell address to the 38th Session of the Human Rights Council UN General Assembly in which he asked, "Why is the Universal Declaration, and the whole body of human rights law that followed it, the object of so much attack now?" Al Hussein identifies a whole range of sources from where the attack is emanating, "not only from the violent extremists, like the *Takfiris*, but also from authoritarian leaders, populists, demagogues, cultural relativists, some Western academics, and even some UN officials." He is worth quoting at some length:

> *I heard recently a UN official telling others there is really no such thing as universal human rights, musing that they were picked from a Western imagination. I remember thinking to myself that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – the most translated document in the world – was negotiated by the same political leaders who poured universal values into the Charter, creating the United Nations. Is the UN also then somehow not universal? Were its values sourced only from a Western tradition – unrepresentative of the rest of the world? (Al Hussein, 2018)*

For Al Hussein, "a clear rejection of this comes from a look at the negotiating record itself", starting with the San Francisco Conference which established the UN, that he characterises vividly as "a circus of sound shaped from many tongues; its result was not a solo tune from a Western instrument" (Al Hussein, 2018).

The UN Charter and the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) were debated at a time of devastation and insecurity with millions of refugees across Europe in the aftermath of war, the Indian subcontinent's Partition, and the devastation of the genocidal war visited on China and huge swathes of Asia by the Japanese empire. The Holocaust was not mentioned explicitly in either the Charter or the Declaration but was in the minds of the delegates and frequently alluded to in their debates. So too would have been the movements that fought for independence from colonial rule and their need for a comprehensive and enforceable legal framework to dismantle colonialism. They were acutely aware of the results of dispossession and famine under colonial rule as well as a lack of 'classical' rights such as freedom of speech and freedom of association. But they also had a fierce determination to build a new world based on the many struggles that they had fought - for equality and against bigotry within their own societies, as well as ending foreign rule and imperial domination.

Below I examine some of the ways in which the principles of universality and anti-colonialism informed the drafting of the UN Charter and the UDHR. My examples are mainly from India and Pakistan, but it is clear that women from many countries - some of whom had won battles against colonial powers in earlier decades, particularly women from Latin America who formed a strong contingent – were deeply invested in making women's rights an explicit part of the human rights system. Many of the Asian women active in this early phase were also, perhaps even

more concerned, with ending racism and colonial rule and creating enforceable norms that would assist this process. There was no contradiction for them between challenging their own patriarchs and the patriarchal forces of empire. Whatever claims imperial powers made for their civilising mission, including ending atrocities against women committed within their own societies, they were extremely reluctant to grant women explicit access to the same rights as men, nor were they willing to ensure that issues that affected women more than men - such as marriage - were included in human rights documents. Gayatri Spivak's analysis of reformist colonial policy as being about 'white men saving brown women from brown men' did not really hold water for the colonial period when male social reformers in the 19th century such as Ram Mohan Roy and Jytotiba Phule campaigned against sati and caste discrimination and for the education of girls. But it was even less relevant where women were supported by male comrades in freedom struggles to advance their cause. Conversely, women participants from the UK and US were reluctant to mention women's rights specifically and frequently obstructed attempts by Latin American and Asian women to put them on the agenda. The commentaries that do defend the principle of universality and the drafting of the UDHR point somewhat defensively to the diverse cultures and philosophical positions of the participants (Johnson and Simonides, 1998). But a critical human rights theory is developing using archives and the drafting history of the UN to create a counter-narrative (see Adami and Plesch, 2022).

In an overview of the drafting of International Bill of Rights (the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), and the two treaties that followed it on civil and political rights, the ICCPR and the economic and social rights, the IESCR, Susan Waltz points to the role of small states or countries from what are now called the 'Third World' or 'Global South'. She argues that human rights was a political project and while 'the great powers deployed human rights as a rhetorical weapon in the Cold War, many small states seized opportunity to use human rights projects to advance the cause of independence and self-determination' (Walz, 2004). In short, in fighting for universal human rights, they were doing the international work of decolonisation - creating legal norms by which people could imagine, argue, struggle and enforce their rights against colonial and imperial powers. But the idea of freedom which animated their struggles was not an atavistic attempt to restore the old order, nor simply a seat at the table as an independent power; it was nothing less

than the creation of a new world - One World - which was interdependent and waging peace rather than war (Bhagavan, 2012).

What is universality?

> *'The concept of universalism is filtered like light through a prism and breaks up in many hues' (Bennetta, 1998, p.328).*

The universality of human rights is the beautifully simple idea that people are endowed with rights simply by virtue of being human. Human beings everywhere, regardless of their status or any particular characteristics are endowed with rights. Universality is both an overarching concept of human rights and the skeleton which constitutes the framework of rights. It is the test against which respect for rights, the enjoyment of rights and the indivisibility of rights can be measured. From the beginnings of the debates to establish an international governing body such as the United Nations, freedom fighters who were also feminist advocates used the concept to advance human rights into new areas. Challenging an imperial and male-centric vision of human rights by arguing that rights applied to all, regardless of whether they were citizens of sovereign nations or subjects of an empire, they also fought for equality between races and between the sexes by explicitly naming women and people who were not citizens as rights bearers. They prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex, race, religion and other characteristics (Article 2 of the UDHR).

International law had hitherto been the law governing relations between states. The Geneva Conventions or laws of war were about the conduct of war between states. In a situation of war, rules of conduct had been laid down under which civilians were to be protected from disproportionate and targeted attack. But where the Geneva Conventions did not apply there was no recourse for people who did not have citizenship, or whose citizenship was stripped from them, and who were being attacked by legal means by the governments under whose jurisdiction they lived. There was no higher law governing relations between individual human beings, states and empires. Starvation, for instance, was justified as political necessity by Churchill, worsening and prolonging the Bengal famine of 1943. The Holocaust, with its precursor of legal restrictions on Jews and the targeting of Jews, Roma and the disabled, produced mass murder, and other groups who had experienced slavery and forced labour had no legal remedy or even an agreed ethical

response from the world powers. Segregation and land dispossession were commonplace in settler societies such as the United States and Australia, and throughout the colonised world. In defending South Africa's laws, General Smuts, who had inserted mention of human rights in the UN Charter, also claimed that South Africa had broken no law as there was no enumeration of human rights by which any violations could be measured (Dubow, 2008). As history would show, some of the world's most eminent legal minds and philosophers agreed with him. There was, further, no recourse to tackle injustice other than by rebellion. And even rebellions need guiding principles to overthrow unjust rule. What world do they want to bring into being?

For women who were both freedom fighters and peace activists the question of a document enshrining universal human rights was not simply a philosophical discussion but a practical necessity which could be widely understood and even enforced. Long after the names and contributions of the women who influenced the UN Charter and the UDHR had been largely forgotten, the solid foundations that they had laid were used to construct the edifice of human rights. This was achieved by networks of feminists who worked to advance the idea of universality as a way of challenging atrocities and injustices in the 'private' sphere of the family, and the collective area of 'community.' They applied human rights to violence against women from the state and also community and family. They insisted that domestic violence was a human rights issue for which states were responsible. The issue of reproductive rights was snatched away from a coercive discourse of population control to give women the right to make decisions by which they could limit their families and control their own reproduction. Feminist economists worked with activists to challenge dominant paradigms of development and argue for alternatives (DAWN network; Jain, 1985). For them, human rights were not simply civil and political in nature but were also social and economic.

It is not surprising that the hard work of creating substantial bodies of knowledge derived from a view of human rights as indivisible and came largely from global South networks. Even if the memory of origins of the UDHR had faded, the urgency of seeing human rights universally applied continued to resonate. No freedom movement, no anti-colonial struggle believed that social and economic rights were unimportant. They needed to find ways to tackle poverty, challenge unfair trade rules, and question the debt inflicted by western powers during and after decolonisation. And in order to assist the decolonisation process, they also proposed

language on national self-determination. These principles, even if not always articulated as such, were foundational to feminist thinking which was secular and plural.

Feminists did this work in parallel with, and often at odds with, human rights organisations in the West. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch ignored social and economic rights for decades and were latecomers to defending reproductive rights and indeed any form of women's rights. Even where the state was committing violations such as systematic rape, international human rights organisations failed to investigate and report or develop a theory of systematic violence which was aimed at subjugating and humiliating communities as well as attacking individual women's bodies. For instance, as late as the 1990s Amnesty International failed to report on the mass rape of women in former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda; indeed, they did not recognise genocide had taken place. Often treated as guardians of the human rights framework, they in fact helped to narrow definitions of human rights and acted as watchdogs not only against oppressive states but also against vast social movements whose work they alternately ignored and attacked.

Finally, going full circle, women who had been subjected to violence by armed groups and religious fundamentalists and had begun to mobilise against them faced hostile human rights organisations who often saw their murderers as innocent victims subject to persecution and torture. In opening up a front about armed conflict and its impact on women and civilians generally, women entered another arena which their forebears in the movement would have recognised - violent political movements which used religion to control women's minds and bodies, murdering and maiming those who would not conform, or who were designated an enemy 'other'. These movements typically used rape and violence against women as instruments for subjugation and control, as well as the destruction of a population.

Human rights organisations were at best highly selective about which kinds of fundamentalists they were opposed to and reluctant to look at the ideological underpinnings of their violence, and it was left to feminist human rights advocates to carefully distinguish between universal principles and cultural rights. To mark the seventieth anniversary of the UDHR in 2018, the UN tasked the Special Rapporteur to examine issues of cultural rights in the context of the universality of human rights. The mandate was probably intended by some states to be a critique of universality; a hope that the experts would critique its 'western' bias. But

the first two experts of the mandate, Farida Shaheed and Karima Bennoune came from a tradition of global South, universalist feminist organising and they affirmed universality as a basis for their investigation and defence of cultural diversity. Bennoune produced reports on religious fundamentalism and threats and challenges to universality. Much of the material of this paper was researched in order to put on record the origins of the human rights framework. In her report to the UN, Bennoune argued 'We need a foundational renewal of universality, and one which looks back to key standards, histories and achievements, but also forward to sustaining and reinvigorating itself in the future with a broad youth constituency that can nourish the tradition of the UDHR for the next 70 years.'

Race, Empire and Universalism

> *So long as … colonial vested interests remain, … there can be no peace, there can be no security. So long as there is no security or peace, we shall go on destroying all that generations of and centuries of human effort have built up… We cannot rejoice over the end of fascism in Europe when imperialism, its twin brother, is permitted to function in the colonies.*
>
> *Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit (quoted in Bhagavan, 2023, p.244)*

If the great powers were engaged in creating an international security body which maintained the colonial systems of government and the Mandate which divided large parts of the world into different categories of readiness for self-government, the peoples of the world were determined that they should be able to remake the world in entirely new ways, based on equality between nations and equality between human beings. Systems of domination had to be destroyed, or the promise of a just peace and security would remain unfulfilled.

The Pan-African Peoples' Congress which had met in 1927 in the US and in 1945 in Manchester in Britain was one of the forces tying the issue of racial discrimination and colonial oppression to human rights. African-American women were active in this movement as well as were many people who later led their countries to freedom. Many of the activists in the movement were Black ex-servicemen who had fought fascism while experiencing severe racial discrimination themselves. The Manchester Congress 'demanded an end to colonial rule and an end to racial

discrimination', while it carried forward the broad struggle against imperialism, for human rights and equality of economic opportunity. The Pan-African Congress manifesto positioned the political and economic demands of the Congress within a new world context of international co-operation, arising from `the grim ordeal of the war of liberation against Fascism' (Katzenellenbogen, 1995).

The Indian freedom struggle was a profoundly broad movement of 'anticolonial internationalism' (Reeves, 2021) that was acutely aware of the suffering of China and much of East Asia under Japanese occupation, racism and antisemitism in western countries, colonial loot all over Africa. The Indian National Congress had raised the plight of the Jews and called for them to be given refuge after Kristallnacht, sent a medical mission to China and supported the Republicans in Spain. In turn, their struggle attracted international solidarity too. Manu Bhagavan (2023) describes how Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit's arrival in the US to advocate for Indian independence was seen as an opportunity for Indian exiles, representatives of African nationalism and the National Association of Colored People - the NAACP – to advance their common agenda at the UN's founding conference in San Francisco.

Rebels Against Empire

By the time Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit arrived in the US, she had already had a lifetime of experience in anti-colonial politics. Asked to describe herself at a women's lunch in California, she said simply, 'a rebel against the British Empire'. She had served three prison sentences and lost her husband, also a freedom fighter, whose health had collapsed after repeated imprisonments. Unlike the founder of Hindutva, known as 'Veer' (Brave) Savarkar, he had not asked for mercy or pledged to stop anti-Empire activities to gain his personal freedom. During her mourning period as a widow, when she was systematically stripped of her husband's wealth by her in-laws, she mobilised Congress women volunteers in a relief effort during the Bengal famine, establishing the first Indian chapter of Save the Children. She had also served as the first woman cabinet minister during the colonial period, after she was elected to the United Provinces Legislature during a period when the Congress fought elections.

British historians such as the Namierites (named after the 19th century historian Louis Namier) held that the Indian national struggle was not a heroic struggle in opposition to Empire but a grubby business where

nationalists often worked with the British jockeying for local and regional power. The national struggle, contended the Cambridge School of revisionist historians, provided no heroic narrative, hence their focus on petty local politics and self-advancement of nationalist leaders. But the achievements of women like Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Hansa Mehta, Kamladevi Chattopadhyaya and others shows very clearly that periods in office gave them valuable administrative and negotiating experience which they used skilfully when they deliberately gave up power in order to continue to challenge empire through non-violent mass movements and boycott campaigns. Most of them had also been rebellious women in their personal lives.

Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit argued repeatedly that a just world could not be built as long as imperialism thrived, and that only sovereign nations could decide for themselves what kind of unity and interdependence they sought. Her biographer Manu Bhagavan says that while arguing for India's freedom, Pandit developed a distinct theory of anti-imperialism and the need for one world and expressed it as such: 'It is necessary to build up a new world with ties of cultural contact and commercial contact and contacts of every sort… Before we can talk about interdependence…we must realise that it is only through independence that we can achieve such interdependence' (Bhagavan, 2023).

Challenging imperialism - the Mandate system and the language of trusteeship

Pandit had no official position at the United Nations Conference on International Organization that took place in 1945 in San Francisco as India was represented by men chosen by the British. But her allies included Indian exiles, Africans and African Americans, and they decided that the conference was the perfect opportunity to press the case for India's freedom and the freedom of all colonised peoples. Other anti-colonial nationalists such as Carlos Romulo also attended the conference (Reeves, 2021). The US was the only country to take up the offer to have non-government consultants and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People as part of the discussions. They had helped Pandit organise meetings in hotels where British government representatives were staying. In fact, the NAACP was instrumental in getting Wendell Wilkie, a Republican, to promote Roosevelt's Four Freedoms across the Indian subcontinent. The NAACP also convened a conference in Baltimore with Indians, black Americans and other

colonised people in New York City and prepared a memorandum condemning colonialism and the system of trusteeship (Bhagavan, 2012, pp. 51-52), with Walter White and W E B DuBois, one of the founders of the Pan African Congress. Du Bois, conscious of the momentous nature of the occasion, said he was travelling to San Francisco 'to help save the world'. Paul Robeson of the Council on African Affairs was also consulted.

In San Francisco, Pandit succeeded in disrupting the British Indian delegation, one of whose members resigned. She fought a good fight to demand India's freedom from Churchill and to call out the double speak of the British government. The language of 'trusteeship', promoted by the British, was not true independence, she argued. She challenged the powers to go back to the language of the Atlantic Charter. She also referred to the language of an earlier conference at Dumbarton Oaks as a better precedent than the current colonial language, arguing that 'the British government was using an ancient weasel word…to offer the shadow but never the substance of independence to subject peoples' . In a memorandum released to all UN delegates she argued: 'The continuance of such a situation (as colonialism) affecting the honour, liberty, peace and progress of one-fifth of mankind is irreconcilable, alike with the concepts that have inspired the United Nations Conference and with the new world order which, it is hoped will be ushered in…'. She said that 'those who have usurped' the' birth-right of freedom' of 600 million people 'may cynically claim to speak for them; but there will be no real peace on this earth so long as they are denied justice'.

Although the British government was quite rattled by Pandit's speeches, Churchill refused to come up with an offer of independence and persuaded the US to maintain the language of self-government although both China and the Soviet Union lobbied for India's 'independence'. Pandit had asked: 'Should the aim of trusteeship be defined as "independence" or "self-government" for the peoples of these areas? If independence, what about areas too small ever to stand on their own legs for defence?' It was finally recommended that the promotion of the progressive development of the peoples of trust territories should be directed toward "independence or self-government." But the language of the UN Charter maintained the colonial language of trusteeship and 'self-government' alongside 'independence' demanded by freedom fighters. Some human rights guarantees were also inserted into the Charter, but the change in wording may have had something to do with the intense campaign waged by Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, in the teeth of Churchill's disdain and spitting opposition.

South Africa: from racial discrimination to apartheid

The battle against racial discrimination continued when Gandhi and Nehru decided to challenge South Africa's racial policies towards Indians. India was still not independent, but Congress was in office in provincial legislatures and this time, with the concurrence of the Viceroy Lord Wavell, it was decided that Pandit should go to the General Assembly to test the principles of the newly founded UN in 1946. From a country which was not yet fully independent this was a remarkable legal as well as political and ethical challenge at the UN. It involved using the principles of human rights to test the limits of Article 2 (7) which prohibited interference in the internal affairs of member states (Bhagavan, 2012, pp.72-74), and that was being debated during the drafting of the UDHR as well. India had a particularly expansive interpretation of this clause.

South Africa and the struggle against racial discrimination became an extensive area of UN work, with UNESCO convening scientific conferences to combat race theory. Racial discrimination acquired the status of a 'jus cogens' norm, which sex discrimination had not. Pandit's task was to present complex legal arguments in compelling terms before the General Assembly. But first, India had to overcome the manoeuvres of General Smuts with his British and other allies who were trying to avoid the case coming to the General Assembly. Through a combination of legal principles and appeals to support in the wider world, the case was finally brought to the Assembly and Pandit won a resolution for India on behalf of South African Asians. The resolution did not stop racial discrimination becoming more entrenched in South Africa, but it was an important legal victory as well as an ethical challenge to stay true to the principles of the Charter. Eviscerating her South African opponents on the issue of 'the Christianising mission of the white man', Pandit pointed out that 'according to the Immigration Act of 1913, Jesus Christ himself, if he were in our midst today, would be a prohibited immigrant' (Bhagavan, 2012, p.79). South Africa, she argued, stood in violation of the Charter and was of concern to all the world's people. Bhagavan writes, 'Brilliantly, she wove together a narrative of tragedy that was sure to strike a chord with peoples from all communities: those embittered by racism, those subject to imperialism, and those devastated by Nazism and fascism'. On this view, 'the assault on the dignity of one group was an assault on all groups' (2012, p.74).

Some years later, Pandit spoke before the Security Council to argue for a boycott of South Africa, supporting a resolution from Norway. In her speech on the issue of boycott to the Security Council, she argued that the struggle for racial equality in South Africa was associated with the name of Mahatma Gandhi and reiterated the presence of 'a moral law which must be recognised and obeyed if mankind is to continue its onward march towards a brave new world'. Reiterating independent India's belief in "the promise of justice and equality enshrined in all democratic constitutions" and 'into the life of every citizen', Pandit underscored the tireless striving for 'the elimination of discrimination and the breaking down of all artificial barriers which separate men from each other'. She eloquently argued that apartheid was bad not only for its victims 'but also for those who preach and practice it for 'no group of human beings can, for any length of time, act unjustly and inhumanly towards their fellows without disastrous consequences for themselves…' The idea was to expose the "double standard" in order to ensure that 'freedom and justice must have the same meaning for all men and women'. Ultimately, she warned, 'civilisation itself stands in jeopardy' for 'what use is it for us to talk of one world, to speak about freedom from want and from fear if, side by side, we contribute, actively or by our silent acquiescence to the building up of a situation which must erupt, and, erupting, lead to horrible consequences'. Here there was also a practical dimension to her arguments as she pointed out that 'nothing can take the place of the feeling of equality between man and man which must exist if the world is to survive in peace… While the smallest shadow or discrimination remains between people on grounds of race and colour, other benefits will be meaningless for all else stems from this feeling of oneness, the knowledge that we are equal and are equally entitled to all the rights and privileges which man has made possible for man'.

Pandit blasted South Africa's unyielding commitment to white domination, the 'brutal mandate which the South African racists have awarded themselves'. For her, 'the comparison with Nazi Germany is inescapable. To destroy the house that Hitler built, a terrible world war had to be fought. Must another war we fought before South Africa mends its ways?' Ultimately, what explained why 'the brave sons of South Africa like Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Ahmed Kathrada, to name only a few are condemned to long terms of imprisonment and solitary confinement' is 'for daring to ask that the ideals of the Charter of the United Nations be put into practice'. As the apartheid regime continued over the years, Pandit called for an economic boycott of South

Africa, particularly targeting trade that benefited the country's defence capabilities.

As Bhagavan notes, 'beneath the poetic imagery of these words lies the hard scientific truth, unless people live in amity and have a sense of higher purpose nothing of enduring values can be constructed'. Just a few days later, a resolution authored by Norway passed unanimously and the UN Security Council explicitly called on all states to cease forthwith the sale and shipment of arms and ammunition in South Africa (Bhagavan, 2012).

Challenging racism and discrimination in the US

A year before the UDHR was adopted, W E DuBois authored the introduction to the NAACP document 'An Appeal to the World: A Statement of Denial of Rights to Minorities presented to the UN in October 1947'. The petition presented a carefully researched, path-breaking document on widespread and systemic human rights violations against people of black descent. Although the petition never reached the General Assembly, after extensive lobbying of member states, it was finally accepted in a private meeting with John Humphrey, the Director of the UN Division for Human Rights. At the meeting, Walter White of the NAACP described how 'injustice against black men in America' had repercussions for the 'brown men of India, yellow men of China, and black men of Africa'.

The 96-page petition was a well-researched account of the systemic effects of racism on the lives of blacks in America, including discrimination and segregation in housing, health care, and education. It also included a reflection on India's stand on South Africa. Importantly, it referred to the language of the UN Charter to make its legal case and could be read as a proto-human rights document, although it would take several decades for international human rights organisations to recognise social, economic and political rights as matters of human rights. It was a work of deep scholarship and could be read as the first organised challenge to racism in the United States via the principle of human rights.

UDHR - the triple challenge: Decolonisation, peace, and patriarchy

Had the UDHR indeed been a document dreamed up by 'the west', it would have been a very different kind. It would very likely have been called an 'international' bill or declaration rather than a 'universal' one. It would not have had explicit language that guaranteed all peoples rights regardless of whether they were still colonial subjects or citizens of sovereign nations. It would not have had any specific reference to women's rights such as the clause on the right to choice in marriage. It would have been drafted by fewer people with no written commentaries, and it would have had no mechanism for individuals to approach the United Nations or for states to intervene to support human rights in other states.

Narrative accounts such as Rebecca Adami and Bhagavan go a long way to undermine the 'Western' narrative that so frustrated Al Hussain, the High Commissioner for Human Rights quoted in an earlier section. The drafting process was so public and the engagement of governments and peoples so intense that any one account is bound to be selective. Indeed, even as official UN documents begin to recognise the role of women who contributed to the UN Charter as well as to the UDHR, they tend to concentrate on what they said about women. For instance, Minerva Bernadino is recognised for her role in inserting women rights into the Charter. And Hansa Mehta is mentioned for her language 'all human beings' instead of 'all men'. In fact, Hansa Mehta's contribution is typically underplayed and dismissed in most accounts (Rathore, 2021). One account says that she had a soft voice. Another mentions her name to make an inter-cultural point but then concentrates on male philosophers and their arcane debates. But Mehta's success lay in making women visible as bearers of human rights and dignity, both as part of humanity but also as individuals challenging religion and patriarchy. Importantly, she also pushed for an anti-colonial model of accessible and enforceable human rights. Mehta, who wanted a document that would be understood by ordinary people, and for the rights to be enforceable, also raised the issue of South Africa in the Human Rights Commission. She noted:

> *Where these rights are flagrantly violated it is the duty of the United Nations to step in for their protection. If a State accepts a policy of discrimination on the ground of race or colour that State must explain and justify its policy before the bar of the world. It cannot excuse itself by saying that it is a matter of domestic policy. . . . If human beings are to be shut out from the world and not even*

allowed to complain against their State on the plea that such complaints are domestic concerns, then the United Nations will fail in their duty to protect and promote the human rights to which they are bound by the Charter.

During the UDHR drafting, domestic jurisdiction was discussed too at some length. The difficulty of reconciling the apparent conflict between the Charter's mandate to promote human rights and its prohibition on interference in the internal affairs of member states occasioned a good deal of discussion. René Cassin pointed to the exception to the non-intervention rule which was explicitly written into the Charter, namely that threats to international peace and security under Chapter VII could not be shielded by claims of domestic jurisdiction. When 'repeated or systematic violation of human rights by a given State within its borders results in a threat to international peace (as was the case of the Third Reich after 1933)', he argued, 'the Security Council has a right to intervene and a duty to act'. Mehta, too, had argued that 'in accepting an international organization like the United Nations . . . the Member States agreed to surrender a part of their sovereignty'.

Genocide

The Genocide Convention and the UDHR were adopted on successive days in 1948, and while some scholars see them as completely different models of international law, others see them as two sides of the same coin: each addressing the issues of peace and security in the UN Charter. Since genocide involves collective rights on the one hand and intent or 'mens rea' which is sometimes hard to prove, charges of genocide have seldom been laid by international human rights organisations. To do this they would have to look at the ideology behind the violations and the history of the violations. Nimer Sultany has argued that Palestine offers a 'litmus test' for international law and human rights (Sultany, 2022). He examines' the limits of the search for root causes and the full context in which systematic human rights violations occur'. It distinguishes between approaches to root causes that 'centralise occupation, discrimination, or colonialism' and argues that although the apartheid reports provide better context than has hitherto been offered in mainstream human rights discourse, they do not go far enough. This is because they 'de-politicise and de-historicise the Question of Palestine when they omit colonialism as a relevant framework to understand Zionist practices, as evident in the exclusion of Palestinian self-determination from the crime

of apartheid's application'. He goes on to argue that 'equally consequential is the omission of imperialism as a root cause, in particular United States (US) support for Zionist colonialism'. Ultimately, 'foregrounding colonialism and imperialism as root causes uncovers law's complicity in the infliction of injustice on the Palestinians' (2-3). For Sultany, then, the main failings of human rights organisations are 'structural' because 'they reflect the limitations, assumptions and legitimating effects of the human rights discourse and the international legal tools they deploy.'

The reports of Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese on the Palestine territories, connecting occupation and apartheid and applying the genocide convention to a policy of colonial erasure and the economy of genocide, are firmly in the tradition of the women freedom fighters who established the framework of human rights and supported the passing of the Genocide Act.[1] For them dismantling imperialism was a primary aim of human rights and using law to help end war and violence and build a new world was its ultimate object.

Embedding the UDHR into hundreds of treaties and constitutions has been the work of freedom fighters and human rights defenders the world over. Technically it is discussed as 'customary international law' but what this arcane legal discussion conceals is the extent to which this has happened because millions were willing to fight for those rights. And it should remain a beacon for us. What is urgently needed is to bring back the language of anti-colonial activism of the UDHR (Abeysekera, 2014: 121). For it is high time that the origins of human rights as a decolonising project are recognised.

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Image 6: **Women of Palestine** (2020) ©

A Feminist Social Work Perspective on Misogyny and the function of Empathy

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The social work profession strongly aligns with the concept of human rights being inherent, for all people. This article considers hostile attitudes towards women (misogyny) alongside the function of empathy. When misogyny is normalised in societies, women are more frequently, more severely dehumanised. I argue that the curtailed development of empathy, contributes towards the perception of women as less human, rather than women as inherently holding rights. This is particularly relevant to the social work profession as whilst all women are affected by misogyny, those already in the margins, are most at risk of being treated as sub-human. Although my professional experience is in the UK, concerns regarding the degradation of human rights are international. Many countries deny women the same rights and freedoms as men, leading to acute struggles against human rights violations. These are prevalent in African, Islamic and Western nations. For instance, easy access to abortion in the United States has been removed, whilst in the United Kingdom migrant women and their children are frequently stripped of their humanity by hostile immigration controls. The rise in domestic and extremist violence, runs parallel with a reluctance to understand the links between male violence and control of women. Wherever there are hostile attitudes towards woman, there are increasing restrictions on women's liberty, bodily autonomy, and freedom of expression. These increasingly hostile attitudes influence both political opinion and popular culture. This article comments on the cyclical escalation of harmful narratives that perpetuate misogyny consequently reducing empathy.

Lorde (1984) called for new ways of offering redemptive nurturing to address the harms caused by misogynistic attitudes and behaviours. Key

contributions from interpersonal neurobiology entwinned with knowledge held in the social work profession increases awareness of the pervasive nature of misogyny. Infringements on women's human rights are present in personal and structural relationships, as a direct result of women not being viewed with empathy. This knowledge developed in part, due to relational work with women and girls brave enough to talk with me about the possibility of recovery from trauma. This allowed me to understand the function of mirror neurons and empathy. The women and girls I worked with had experiences of physical, sexual and psychological violence, racism, sex trafficking and everyday misogyny. I maintain that active engagement with empathy could be a method of sharing knowledge and understanding, not only an expression of compassion. There is an interplay between the function of empathy and the sociological backdrop of entrenched hostile attitudes towards women. Whether in a personal or political context, reduced empathy can translate into intentional harm, attitudinally, physically, or otherwise.

As a social work professional with a background in child and adolescent mental health, I understand violence against women and girls (VAWG) as global, rather than a collection of individual incidents. I also understand that children tend to recover emotional wellbeing more robustly alongside healthy relationships, whereas those undermined by misogyny or ongoing violence do not. These insights were consolidated through the systemic analysis of feminist thinkers such as Lorde (1984), Mies and Shiva, (1993) and Herman, (1994). When supporting women and girls to understand the sociological context of VAWG, the phrase *'it was not your fault'* became meaningful, as violence could be located externally from the woman. When offered a systemic perspective, in an accessible way, women better understood that traumatic responses happened *'within'* the body because of what happened *'to'* them rather than because of who they were, Herman (1992).

Locating harm as external to women, helps social workers recognise patterns of patriarchal control in societies, and consequently understand the pervasive nature of VAWG. Higher prevalence of control over women, including within extremist social groups, leads to greater prevalence of violence. This is a consequence of the normalisation of misogynistic attitudes and violent behaviours towards women, (Federici, 2004; Mies and Shiva, 1993; Van Veen et al, 2018). Systemic analysis of VAWG includes the restrictions of women's rights, as a symptom of a broader problem, rather than primarily a domestic issue. Translating this insight into relational work with women and girls alongside active use of empathy, can effectively support trauma recovery. There are many ways to describe the key aspect of relational work, Rogers (1951) defined *'congruent empathy'* as a core condition of therapeutic work; Močnik and

Ghouri, (2024) frames being alongside as *'bearing witness'*; whilst Badenoch (2018) uses the term *'accompaniment'* to describe the process of *being present* in relational work. I assert that accompaniment and systemic analysis are both needed in any form of trauma recovery work.

The research on mirror neurons is a profound finding in neurology, providing insight into the function of empathy for understanding social dynamics. Considering violence, including extremist violence and misogyny, through the lens of interpersonal neurobiology, specifically the function of mirror neurons when hostility is present, deepens existing understanding of the curtailed development of empathy. Badenoch (2018) explains how mirror neurons connect our ability to hold empathy for others. Mirror neurons activate when we observe or listen to an account of a behaviour or experience of another, helping human beings recognise emotions and intent in others. However, the skills developed through the mother and infant relationship (the attachment process) are intricately connected to the culture they are embedded in. When human babies have their physical, emotional and social needs met in a warm, in-tune way they are more capable of and skilled at regulating emotions, thereby increasing their capacity to form and maintain healthy social relationships, (Hrdy 2009; Krznaric, 2014; Jones, 2024). When we consider the development of empathy, during matrescence, mothers have an enhanced ability to recognise and empathise with their baby's emotions. This helps women to react rapidly, to meet baby's needs in a precise manner, especially in threatening situations (Jones, 2024). When human babies develop in a culture steeped in misogyny this can undermine the safety provided within the mother child relationship. Crittenden and Claussen, (2000) asserted that societal culture deeply influences the attachment process and resulting relationship behaviours.

Early experiences in primary relationships create the opportunity for infants to internalise their mother's way of responding to threat within the social landscape. Spending time with other people not only increases social bonds but also the awareness of intent, what constitutes friendly, neutral, or hostile behaviours (Hrdy, 2009, Crittenden and Claussen, 2000). This is true for all humans, we understand what is intended, from a smile or a clenched fist, by how our body would feel if we were making the same motion. Healthy infant attachment allows human beings to feel safe and respond reliably with the activation of the neurological protection system if the social context contains threat; the function of mirror neurons helps humans work out if it is safe to show empathy. (Hrdy, 2009; Badenoch, 2018; Jones, 2024, Crittenden and Claussen, 2000). Neither society, nor social work are adequately set up to safeguard and support women and mothers when misogyny and/or

violence is present; at times replicating hostile attitudes of blame and coercion towards women (Fleckinger, 2020).

When we perceive others as similar enough to ourselves to be human, we more easily hold empathy. If we have placed (consciously or unconsciously) another person in a category that is different from us, we hold less empathy. When empathy is present it can prevent people from inflicting harm on others including replicating hostile attitudes, because what we do to others, to a lesser degree, we do to ourselves, neurologically speaking. Observing a person experiencing physical harm generates a neurological response in us unless mirror neurons are not engaged. The less mirror neuron cells one has the less empathy we can generate, (Krznaric, 2014). The absence of empathy facilitates the ability to enact harm precisely because the *'other'* is seen as less than human, the perpetrator being in a position of superiority. Cultural/social contexts that do not regard women's safety, or freedom of expression as essential, do not fully recognise women as human, (MacKinnon 2006; de Beauvoir, 1949). Regardless of the cultural context, Jankowiak-Siuda et al (2011) explain that people generally express less empathy towards women than men.

The ability to locate VAWG as a systemic problem, can generate a profound shift in political awareness enhancing the capacity to recognise misogyny (Lorde, 1984; Herman, 1992). Pervasive misogynistic attitudes in society affirmed in media outputs often undermine concepts of equality, separating people into hierarchies of worth. This removes the notion that all people inherently hold rights, repositioning harmful narratives to indicate traditional values, (Bhatt, 2020). Unless identified, this duplicity increases the risk of social workers inadvertently contributing to misogyny in their communication, decision making and risk analysis. Of course, replicating harmful narratives can be avoided with a willingness to critically reflect, especially when foregrounding human rights legislation and professional values.

Social conditioning around dominant narratives that perpetuate the view of certain groups of people being superior can result in embedded hostility. Unsurprisingly, Ulloa and Hammett, (2016) provide strong evidence that men who hold less empathy for women are more likely to be violent. In these cases, mirror neurons are not engaged in relation to women, resulting in both the inability to generate empathy or consider *their* behaviour as harmful. This is a key point when considering the inability of some world leaders to reflect on their attitudes and conduct, noticeably when their behaviours contribute to harm. Jankowiak-Siuda et al's (2011) findings confirm evidence that adolescent's presenting as aggressive struggle to implement moral reasoning in *relation to their own*

behaviour. The inference here is that an adult inability to self-reflect is an indication of immature psychological development. Social workers understand this as an especially important development in humans. The capacity to see the humanity in others **and** take responsibility to prevent or reflect on harmful actions can act as protective factors against hostile attitudes and behaviours, (Krznaric, 2014).

Political divides of left and right can be problematic as this duality holds the danger of perceiving another group as inferior. This contributes to hostility, as meeting anger or disdain with the same simply generates more conflict. That said, Zebarjadi et. al. (2023) assert that those on the political right have lower levels of empathy than those with left leaning social values. Those with right leaning political values strive towards maintaining hierarchy (superiors versus subordinates) within society. Predictably, these social hierarchies result is higher levels of negative bias towards people outside their group, which result in curtailed empathy and moral reasoning. Those with left leaning political views hold less bias, therefore more empathy towards people outside their group. Those striving towards an egalitarian as opposed to hierarchical social structure, more easily comprehend the notion that women are human, therefore have the same human rights as men; to live free from torture, inhuman, or degrading treatment. Wagaman and Segal, (2014) argue further, that stronger empathic insight motivates people to support egalitarian policies and contribute to improving the welfare of others.

The absence of empathy, towards women affects all parts of society, including the social work profession, particularly the complex ethical space of working with women around safeguarding children. MacKinnon (2006) rightly asserts that hostile attitudes are pervasive because structural inequalities within legal, social, and cultural frameworks consistently undermine women's humanity. Social workers are not immune to this; Fleckinger (2020) provides insight into women's experiences of domestic violence, explaining that their relationships with social workers are more challenging when harmful attitudes are present. The rise in political hostility floods popular culture with negative bias towards women. Without awareness of the need to consciously maintain empathy, barriers to achieving safety are more challenging. An absence of professional empathy can indicate that a person has positioned the *'other'* as inferior, unconsciously positioning the self as superior. It is a very human thing to do, especially in the context of societal pressure. However, with fluctuations in empathy detectable in communication, this increases the possibility of a person feeling the need to defend themselves, as Koprowska (2024) explains. In psychodynamic terms, defensiveness is an unconscious mechanism, designed to protect a

person from perceived threat, or feelings of 'wrongness' (Freud, 2018). With defensiveness or hostility present, addressing misogyny is tricky.

Patterns of behaviours from politicians in the current political atmosphere, are a strong indication of a profound lack of empathy and a significant inability to recognise the humanity in others. These maladaptive behaviours, alongside the arrogance of superiority signifies that a person has not progressed past puberty developmentally. Coupled with the profound influence of growing up in a culture that maintains hostility towards women, it is unsurprising that political leaders gravitate towards those who agree with them, it is less threatening to their underdeveloped ability to critically reflect.

Lavenne-Collot et al (2022) make the distinction that those with extremist views may have heightened empathy due to the strength of social identification with their group, rather than a prominence of poor empathy for the out-group. Whilst empathy for the in-group may well exist, those perpetrating violence against others must, given all we know, have less empathy for those being harmed. On a societal level, we see these behaviours manifest in groups that defend their political and religious views as absolute with any perceived difference or open challenge experienced as an attack. Stronger perceptions of superiority in social groups, result in a reduced ability to comprehend or empathise with the 'other's' pain. This results in a pernicious, interactive cycle of social conditioning and mirror neurons not activating empathy. Perceiving hostility whilst feeling empathy debilitates the ability to defend, avoid or de-escalate in response to threat (Badenoch, 2018). Empathy switches off to enable a quick and effective response to hostility, perceived or otherwise (Porges, 2011). Knowledge of these processes deepens understanding of how tyranny replicates itself in the social context of domesticity, politics and extremism.

Foregrounding the human rights act (HRA) in direct practice enables social workers to consider all people, including women, as inherently holding rights. The HRA is non-discriminatory (it applies to all) and protects people from misuse of power from the state, (Dennler, 2018). Knowledge of how mirror neurons' function to enhance or curtail empathy could contribute towards personal and political change, a redemptive tool if you will, that increases the ability to see woman and girls as inherently human. Those in social work education continue to share knowledge, that enhances the application of empathy and solidarity into practice, thereby supporting women and girls to simultaneously understand ongoing trauma and consider their own right to live free from harm as a human being (Graham, 1995). Whilst many are clear about the importance of generating empathy within therapeutic

relationships (Hanmer and Statham, 1999; Koprowska, 2024; Badenoch, 2018), it is to Lorde's concept of redemptive nurturing that I return. Whilst the underlying causes of conflict are many, I seek to demonstrate possibilities for ameliorating if not resolving complex social problems. As Fleckinger's (2020) work demonstrates, seeing women as inherently worthy of value, not only allows us to demonstrate the need for empathy but creates a pathway for others to do the same. In this way, when social workers foreground the HRA in relation to women we not only generate empathy we nurture empathy in others. This, alongside understanding how empathy functions in the context of personal, social and structural relationships could generate opportunities needed for redemptive nurturing.

Akomolafe's (2020) articulation regarding the need to recognise urgency and slow down to meet it, shows insight into a strategy that could avoid professionals replicating harmful narratives and behaviours. The ability to slow down in relational work help social workers consciously consider the perspective of the 'other,' without asserting superiority, because the aim is to generate understanding, not achieve dominance, (Badenoch, 2018). This article did not have the scope to address how the commodification of women is dehumanising. Suffice to say that the human neurological processes occurring in relation to VAWG, in domestic settings and from those who hold extremist views is present and functions in the same way. The consequences of these socialised norms result in 'others' being seen (consciously or otherwise) as less human. Combining these dominant views, with a sense of correctness or an assumption of entitlement in the social or religious contexts of misogyny leads, as de Beauvoir (1949) and Mackinnon (2006) explained, to an encumbered ability to recognise women's humanity.

Human rights legislation provides a layer of protection to those whose humanity is at risk of annihilation. Although it may feel insubstantial as strategy, I maintain that demonstrating empathy and solidarity with women in the face of rising authoritarianism, provides a pathway for others to do the same. To summarise, the normalisation of misogynistic conduct and attitudes can be challenged using knowledge of interpersonal neurobiology and a feminist, systemic analysis. The social work profession, interact with people situated in the most complex of circumstances. For this reason, understanding human rights whilst actively holding women's humanity in mind is vital, especially with hostile attitudes and curtailments of woman's liberties being normalised in the mainstream.

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Queer-ing single-hood intimacy(ies): resisting populist heteronormative imaginations

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Dear friend-lover-partner…

There is an intimacy in belonging to these different relationships, hyphenated together. (un)belong you must, (un)break we would, love (distance and loneliness) may find me, you and us.

I have written letters to friends, lovers, partners, to relationships that have now become distant and lost. The letter gave space to feel, write, articulate, emote intimate love, **the ambiguity of feelings**, of absented needs, and somewhat held a safe articulable space to find expression for feelings, bodies and of embodying the affect.

I write this letter, as an expression, as a desire to find a language of intimacy and connection with the diverse relationships that have held me, kept me safe, gave me love, care, kisses. I write this to make sense of their significance **beyond the limits of hetero-normative imaginations of love, intimacy, connection in a digitized, capitalized world**. I write this to be able to accept genuine love that I hold and receive, across a spectrum of relationships and attempt to articulate this experience that refuses to hold borders across these relating spaces. I write this to **acknowledge movement** across fragmented queer spaces and relationalities.

I remember the friend (including many women friends), whom I have crushed upon at some point or other, confessed too, and some who got married and moved on, from a close deep friendship to now only a birthday wishing polite one;

one whom I found on a dating app and befriended on a video call because that builds on intimacy, they said, and now I only like their social media posts because after the call they 'ghosted' me;

the friend with whom I learnt about queerness, struggles around dating scenes, practiced sharing spaces together as queer bodies and now live in

different continents in the nostalgia of our shared lives, unable to make sense of distance and changes that come with it;

the lover/partner met through a dating app, with whom bodies were unknotted sexually and intimately and now share an undefined intimate relationship, even as the lover keeps bringing up the hastiness of the normative and I continue to resist the monotony of it, with the desire to embrace the tenderness of all of it.

I also remember the sister who is a friend, sibling, confidante holding a relationship of awareness of our difficult familial patterns with efforts to move beyond them;

that one writer friend (among many) whom I e-meet occasionally and connect over processes of creating, making art and writing poems and

some of the many momentary, transient relationships; either lived through temporary shared spaces or social media lives, that have come to exist and have begun to belong, without necessarily the expectation of loss in the relationship and yet a connection.

Intimacy through these diverse relationships seemed to have brought a **different language** of relating, sharing and embodying. A movement is found in these connections of the intersecting, clashing branches and roots of the trees, pouring into and through each other, adapting, shifting, competing and evolving across different seasons and changes in climate.

Would it be okay to say that **there is belonging in each one of them**, even if some lines of relating have shifted, changed or hold sadness in un-belonging; even if some have begun to mean creative friendships albeit momentarily; even as queer bodies who are neither just friends with benefits, nor partners but somewhere in-between.

Would it be important to say that **there is 'romance' in these relationships**, resisting them from definitions of romantic love **VS** friendships? Not seeing romance in the sense of what pop culture or Bollywood songs have served us, unilaterally and uniformly, but through an expansion of imaginations of intimate selves.

Belonging, then, in ways **where queer intimacy takes us towards**,

in ways of holding related-ness across diverse relational spaces;

in ways of **flattening relationship hierarchy** (romantic **over** friendship; sexual **over** platonic);

and carrying around the messiness, multiple-ness of experiences, lives with belonging together, even if, temporarily and adjacently.

This is not easy or simple, at all.

There is a grandness to the capacious-ness of it all but there is also a single queer self that navigates through digital dating realms, continuing to un-define the question 'what are you looking for', refusing to be defined by the respectability of the hetero-normative conventions, holding refusal towards (un)neatly packaged anti-minority bumble profiles.

It **also comes with un-belongingness**, with feelings of loneliness, isolation, fatigue, disillusionment in a raging, dying, collapsing and an increasingly demanding 'capitalist productive' world. In a world that is ready to kill, invisibilize, and erase bodies that don't deem fit, that are minority, that do not fulfill the binary systems, that are queer, immigrant, disabled bodies.

An Instagram story by Vikramaditya Sahai (Vqueer) also tells us that queerness and loneliness are deeply tied together, because of the "inventiveness" of this work- of creating, building, sustaining diverse relational spaces. They add that like any other work, it produces alienation, disassociation, of existing in a capitalist, majoritarian world. But at the same time, it also holds joy and love of making these spaces for each other.

This is what makes sense, and this letter as if, wishes to become witness to an articulation of a 'coming OUT' story

what do ideas of intimacy, really mean

in existing,

     doing rounds in my body,

of confusion, grief, exhaustion, desire too, unable in

   making sense, of needs that did Not fit A box

romantic or friendship, sexual or platonic, only sexual or only non-sexual

what does the body need, what do you desire, what do you want – 'I want them all and none'

how is that even possible?

     questions are haunting

     add to this muddle, social media asks

     oh what about the friendship breakup? they need attention too,

yet the binary- partner vs friend, sexual vs platonic, still exist,

because the majoritarian agendas remain the same,

intimacy, that is, joyous, grieving, pleasurable, saddening,

> inconsistent, constantly changing, drifting, evolving,

doesn't hold me tight, or bound me in a box.

find joy in multiple spaces, networks, journeys

> continues to be a desire

> existing as a fantasy of make and break at tandem

The questions, words, thoughts have been visiting in encounters with separations, anxieties, in break-ups and patch ups, in relationship changes, in experiences with loneliness and singleness.

I have wanted to write on **contemplations around queer, singlehood intimacies found in diverse relationships and spaces**, with and sometimes without, the experiences of connections and freedoms, and trapped within the unchanging tight frameworks.

Yet, this also felt like a loop and I kept looping. Because my story doesn't decide to sit in a non-single, monogamous, heteronormative, neurotypical desire's neat container. It wanted to explode and yet be quiet, it was raging and also grieving, it **wanted to be everywhere and also nowhere**, and hold on to hope in hopelessness, sadness and death.

I began reading literature, articles, and more and more stories, letters, personal essays, visual narratives/maps across varied forms, art works. I surrounded myself with finished and unfinished thoughts, contemplations and struggles around meaning-making for pleasure, desire, intimacy, kink, friendships, partnerships. All of this seemed to open a gamut of **co-existing narratives of playfulness and joy**, of discovery and learnings around being and being present, in bodies, in in-betweens, in confusions, in grief. Attempts at co-existing amidst violation of desires, erasure of bodies and solidification of norms.

Nevertheless, I feel they were presenting to me **an *archive* of intimacy-ies**. The archive allowing meanings to exist with limitations, boundaries and yet promises, in taking queer chances, risks and making resistances. However, existing in **a world that is digital-hybrid-fascist**, continuing to be within the trope of the heteronormative and patriarchal possibilities, binaries, controls. With the tech-world being increasingly aligned with far-

right politics (the alliance of Donald Trump with Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg etc. to name a few), the illusion of digital intimate choices only proliferates desires based on the normative and binary fixated ideals (anti-trans, anti-queer, anti-immigrant narratives significantly run this digital show).

So in this archive, I opened up with the ideas around **techno-intimacy** (Geeta Patel) or/and **techno-sociality** (Escobar). In her book Risky Bodies & Techno-Intimacy: Reflections on Sexuality, Media, Science, Finance (2016), Patel explores the concept of "techno-intimacy", examining how science and technology shape our daily intimate experiences. Similarly, techno-sociality (Escobar, 2018) also as an idea contends that technology is a social phenomenon, in a social-political context, in which technology shapes and manifests itself, leaning towards a debunking of the online VS offline existence.

This helped in **unpacking the neutrality** accorded to the tech and digital world and how it continues to shape our lives systemically, intimately and violently. The human connection that can now be deemed 'intelligible' with intermediations via layers of tech, colored with societal gendered norms and biases, are embedded in ways our intimacies are formed. I remember this one time; I had matched with a man on Bumble (a dating app) and just by looking at my digital photos on my profile (which are nowhere close to me as a person, my body, and my infinite desires, dreams, hopes) had said that "you look heavily busted, it must hurt your back, no". In his apparent concern for my back, I could gauge the limited perception around a fat woman's body that became embedded in this virtual encounter.

This was established when meeting with **digital intimacy** seemed to be taking away the binary between the online and the offline, the physical and the digital, through an intimate connection with the phone, laptop, internet, social media, apps etc. Bishakha Datta (2023) calls this blurring of the physical and digital as the "phygital", something which has deliberated love across Indo-Pak borders, through social media or gaming platforms, landing people in prisons amid cross-border fundamentalist enmities.

But Smita V. (2022), also asks the question, "**who is afforded this intimacy**". The question of access is significant, when the boundaries and norms of digital intimacy are laid out, on the terms of who can afford internet access, smartphone, data packs, or access to dating apps. Even with similar access norms, it can mean different things for different bodies. There is also presence of regulation, surveillance and violence that comes

from society, state, law especially for women, queer, trans bodies. The EROTICS study (2010) highlighted how women were negotiating risks to be on the internet, allowing themselves sexual expression but with self-imposed limits mediated through social and legal scrutiny.

Smita V. also highlights the tussle between intimacy and privacy, especially because of the amount of data being collected and therefore a constant negotiation of intimacy. For instance, on dating apps, there is an incessant negotiation of safety, of desires, of choices, that is conjured through the ticking of boxes (as if desires could so easily be boxed) and giving access to one's own data.

At the same time, talking about **reconfigurations**, an Inter-Asia research project across 4 metropolitan cities in Asia, tries to understand young women's experiences of intimacy amidst rapid expansion of digital technology. It talks about making of "zones of intimacy" and the digitally mediated rearrangement of relationships with public-private, inner-outer, self-social. Intimacies are being redefined across language, heteronormative institutions, expressions, with a recognition of diverse spectrum of intimacy (Niranjana, T. 2022). In the sharing of one or ten memes throughout the day, me and my friend(s) heart each other, laugh out loud, also cry and share our love and sadness with each other, all in emoji's and GIFs.

In other news, a campaign by Tinder (another dating app) called the "Single, Not Sorry", in Western countries (across several European countries, UK, USA) along with various initiatives in India, engaged with contemporary gender politics. Morris & Dobson (2023) analysis showed how these campaigns promote narratives of women's empowerment and autonomy, **tailoring it to different cultural contexts**. In Western contexts, the emphasis is on individualism and the celebration of single life, especially for women, whereas in India, the focus is on navigating traditional norms and embracing modern dating practices, keeping the patriarchal and heteronormative consensus in order.

This is quite clear by the **internet romance scandals** in India that have often involved emotional and financial scams, sextortion, and even murder, with women and queer individuals most at risk. This has only fueled further protectionist control and surveillance, especially by right-wing groups. Meanwhile the digital incel spaces, including Currycels (a subgroup of Indian and South Asian incels), perpetuated on the belief that men have sexual rights over women's bodies, have become thriving grounds for misogyny, hate crimes, racial and caste oppression, and

extremist views. This is the **dark populist reality of the digital intimate world**.

But then, love and desire are also ambiguously sought, **packaged in sanitized black and white boxes**. I should have my best sexy photos because attraction is a marketplace, where self-worth is measured by calculated engagement and accountability trends like 'ghosting' or 'breadcrumbing' are a hit. Imaginations of love relationships follow social media generated algorithm-ized standards, shadowing biases, limits, insecurities. A dating profile is apt capitalist technology to restrain and shrink spaces for art, protest, resistances, because why do you need to fight for rights, when you can find love by swiping right and left.

And also, the **status quo remains preserved**. Even as a queer person when I choose to see only women and non-binary folx on my Bumble account (the dating app that seemingly gives an option of choice, a representative illusion of the gender diverse spectrum), continues to show me only men and sometimes hetero couples except a few otherwise. The plot is clear- market the gender diverse in the name of inclusion, but the script continues to remain same-old.

Even if matches are found, and after deep conversations on Whatsapp and Instagram profile stalking, questions around a queer monogamous future ('Are you not looking for anything serious?') would be raised and then 'let's call it a day, we are on very different paths'. And a match is un-matched. Freedom found is betrayed in **the systemic and brahminical-patriarchal scheme** of 'one partner, one marriage, one love, one caste, one class'. And then "A Tinder Fatigue" follows, as named in #100 Tinder Tales, a curated crowd sourced project by artist Indu Harikumar, collecting Tinder stories through Facebook and Instagram.

So then, **how are digital/techno intimacies being queer-ed**. What is allowed and not allowed. What promises could hold potential and what are false and violent promises. What is being pushed and controlled by the systemic, radical forces. What queer representations in the digital/tech world serve primarily as marketing gimmicks and what would really help in finding dates and navigating desires. What adjustments, "affordances" and curations that we would do as queer folx to create "Queer publics", as Lauren Berlant (1995) would tell us. "Amalgamating politics and feeling", Berlant had said. In creating **'affective architectures'** as radically common and part of our everyday lives, queer lives, queer methodologies are attempting to shift the heteronormative narrative.

Sangya Project, based in India, might be one of the examples, for **opening up safe, creative, intimate dialogues** in the Indian and South Asian context, to build queer infrastructures of holding diversity, emotions, and complexity. It is founded by a queer and poly family, aiming to create destigmatized, trauma-informed, kink-affirmative education, conversations, and also products.

Is something/anything making sense? Do you think? Where do we go from here? I have been thinking about letters and how do we close letters. Do we close them at all? What do we leave behind, lingering? Maybe **a promise to write and receive again**. Maybe with the love of imagining futures and dreams together. In thinking of these, I thought, could we envision new scripts, **honoring learnings from existing systems of knowledge** and intentions that we would like to hold, towards freedom, pleasure and intimate forms of existence.

So as Anne Philpott and Paromita Vohra share in "Finding the cosmos of intimacies…" (2024) and the Pleasure manifesto by 'Agents of Ishq' (a multi-media platform on sex, love and desire), do you think we could **visualize a *manifesto***, of sorts, to radically remember, record learnings; to imagine, create, curate visions; to hope, desire, name multiplicity and difference; and to curiously fall in love with varied maps of vulnerabilities and mediums of intimacies.

⚘ Michel Foucault in 'Friendship as a way of life' (1997), talks about friendship as that inventive relationship that still continues to be **formless and without codes**, even though carrying unease. Doesn't this sum up it all? The promise and love of friendship intimacies. Disclaimer: no need to 'romanticize' it though; it is not fix-it-all, just one-of-many and many.

⚘ Anna Maria, in Queerbeat media (March 2024), shares about queer-disabled imaginations of intimacy, which is conceptualized as **'access intimacy'**. The phrase 'access intimacy' was coined by Mia Mingus, a queer disabled writer and educator, as an "elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else gets your access needs." Creating suitable, comfortable environments, without a person laboring to explain and justify inclusion of their needs. Can this be possible to hope with thoughts of creating space across, digital mediated spaces and encounters? Important to remember this.

⚘ In queer friendships, Shruti Sunderraman (May 2024) says, the blurring of the gender binary leaves room to **democratize care**. Also very importantly, the author recognizes the exclusions created by caste, on who you can and cannot love, desire, or be friend. Learning to **subvert**, dialogue, learn and

unlearn in friendships. Learning to create space, share space and take space.

⚘ The epistolary work of 'The Breaks' (2021) by Julietta Singh, gives us forms of **radical dwelling**. The 'architecture' of a domestic space is flung to its head, in inhabiting a heterosexual nuclear queer platonic parenting model to her daughter, with a significant reorganizing and redefining of what could be the familial, inclusive of play, queerness and experimentation. 'The Breaks' is trying to teach us and **learn other modes of living**, diverse forms of expression and respecting different possibilities and futures. Alternate utopias continue to be a promising spatial reality.

⚘ Ramazi Fawaz, in the book 'Queer Forms' (2022), is helping weave **the practices of 'forming'**, pushing us to find the courage of interpreting, reinventing and taking risks in "the continual practice of forming that leads to the constitution of new kinds of collectivity". Fluidity in forms and forming teaches us to move towards receiving, negotiating and responding to the world's diversity.

⚘ The AOI's (Agents of Ishq) Manifesto on the **political power of pleasure** has become my most favorite. It is rooting for the **'sensual as knowledge'**; keeping space for ambivalences and maybes- across spaces, mediums, messages; questioning hierarchies and assumptions; opening the language of love, curiosity, art, seduction; recognizing difference; trusting kindness, being many and spontaneous things at one time and a non-linear slate. Could we learn to move towards non- hierarchical, sensual, emotional, experiential communications.

⚘ And the promise of queering singlehood intimacies, offered by Tan Qian Hui's thesis (2021) on **queer artfulness** as a "liminal and promiscuous assembly of ideas/places/subjects/objects may serve to subvert such dichotomous alignments". They contend that it offers opportunity for elements/entities to be dis/re-assembled and be found in the interstitial spaces, encounters between, across and beyond the binaries. Let us find intimacy in the in-betweens.

I started writing this letter, when I have been lonely, when I have dreamt of our proximity, when I needed articulation. I have wanted to find expression to my messy, confused moments; of the conflictual sadnesses and of my changing, ambivalent relationships. I want to keep moving, signposting learnings and knowledges of our histories and decentering uniform intimacies, on my way. I want to desire, wish, embrace our love and care for each other. I want to embody our unsure feelings and emotions. I want the 'erotic' and raging movement to guide us to stand

against singular homogenized populist narratives and towards practices of love, play and difference.

This hope is my gift for you, for us.

with love always, g

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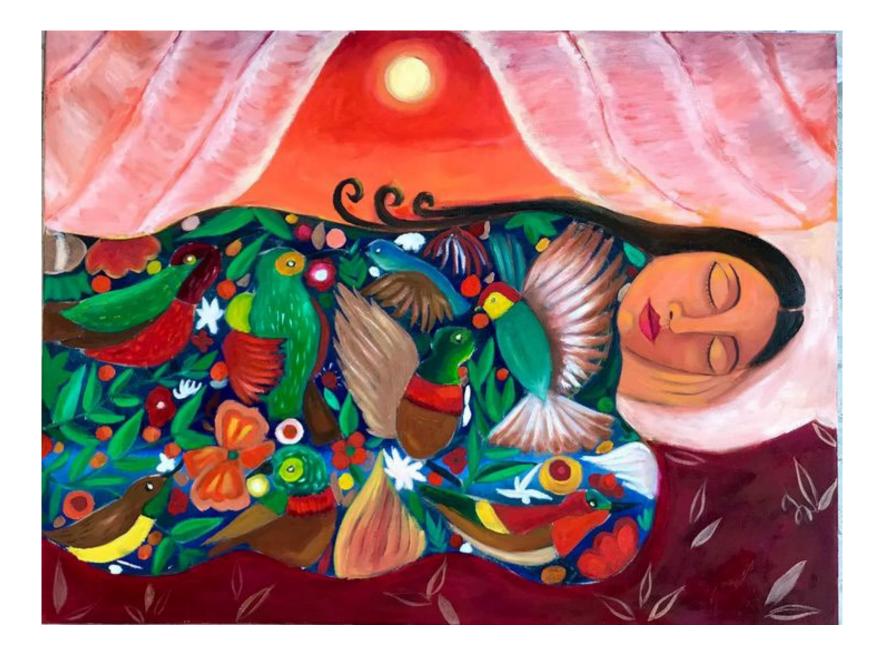
Image 8: **Last Night in Gaza** (2021) © <u>Malak Mattar</u> All rights Reserved

I am a Refugee, but I am Not Silent: Some Musings on Israel's Attacks on Iran

Siyâvash Shahabi*

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July 1, 2025

A very generous friend invited me to the ancient theater of Epidaurus to watch a performance of Antigone. And in this heat and isolation of Athens, why should I have said no? Two hours of driving with an old friend, seeing the beautiful view of the sea and forest, cleared my mind from all thoughts of war and conflict. When we arrived, walking the path and sitting on the same stones where people sat 2500 years ago, away from the modern world, just to watch music and theater, was magical.

While the half-moon was slowly crossing the sky above me, I found myself sitting on the steps of the ancient amphitheater of Epidaurus. The stage was breathtaking. In the middle of the play, down there, between the stones and the wind, Antigone, with a shaky but strong voice, declared her refusal to obey power. She said, "There is a law that existed before you, Creon. A human, divine, unwritten law. I follow that one."

I am a refugee. I am Iranian. I am an exile, someone who escaped prison, torture, and repression. But that night in Epidaurus, I was more than just a spectator. I saw Antigone, but I heard her voice through the women who shouted in the streets of Sanandaj and Tehran: "Woman, Life, Freedom." She was no longer a character in a Greek tragedy. She was a Baluch girl, a Kurdish mother, a student from Evin prison, an exile in Athens, a journalist under pressure, or maybe even me.

In Sophocles' story, Antigone stands against a law that divides the dead. One deserves a grave. The other is left for the dogs. She does not do this for honor or rebellion. She does it for something she calls justice. Her justice is not legal or official. It comes from conscience.

Today, we are still in a world where dead bodies are treated differently depending on their political side. The Israeli attack on Iran reminded us of this brutal truth. In the eyes of power, even death has levels and propaganda use. Israel bombed houses in Tehran, Kermanshah, and Ilam.

At the same time, the Islamic Republic, using the same excuse of "national security," arrested and deported Afghan migrants, detained women and labor activists, silenced political prisoners, and crushed public mourning.

Now we have two Creons. One in Tel Aviv, with accurate and merciless missiles. The other in Tehran, with the sword of ideology. Both want to keep the people as hostages in the name of security. And once again, like always, Antigone is the weakest one, but also the only one who tells the truth.

When I left the amphitheater, the cool night wind touched my face. But my thoughts were burning in Tehran. In the ruins of people's homes. In the cries of mothers. In the quiet eyes of girls who no longer know which is more dangerous: Israel or the regime that has held them hostage for years. Where am I in this situation? I am a refugee, but I am not silent. I do not support bombings. I do not support religious fascism. I do not see Zionism as salvation, and I do not call the Islamic Republic a resistance. Like Antigone, I stand over the dead body of truth, with empty hands and a heart full of rage and sorrow.

Many of us are an Antigone without a homeland. I live in a foreign land, where some people who call themselves leftists take pictures with the flag of Islamic fascism. And the right-wing dreams of the blood of migrants. But I still have my voice. I still write. In the heat and tiredness of Athens, I still believe in human conscience. I believe that no power, neither religious nor military, can stop a human being from mourning the truth.

If Sophocles were alive today, maybe he would write Antigone in the clothes of a prisoner in a women's ward. Or as a migrant without papers, standing in the asylum line. But the meaning of the tragedy would still be the same. A struggle without surrender, without heroes, but also without lies. I saw that tragedy in Epidaurus, but its voice was coming from the soil of Iran.

30 June 2025

Zionism, from the beginning, was not based on the right of return, but on exclusion, occupation, and domination. Today, while the people of Iran are being crushed from both sides, from inside by the Islamic Republic, and from outside by states that send bombs in the name of "human rights", we must not believe the lie that freedom can be delivered by foreign attacks. No nation has ever been liberated by bombs. No regime has truly fallen unless the people inside that country created the conditions for change.

We Iranians come from a much older history than the birth certificate of Israel. On our land, they killed Siyavash, and people mourned him. They killed Hussein in Karbala, and for centuries people kept his memory alive as a symbol of ethical resistance. In Bukhara, Khorasan, Tabriz, and Ahvaz, our people did not fight with tanks and missiles, but with poetry, mourning rituals, civil disobedience, and local uprisings against tyranny. These roots go deeper than the foundations of any state that is still younger than our grandparents.

Those who claim to bring freedom with missiles are lying. Those who watch the crimes in Gaza in silence but cry fake tears for the people of Iran are not friends of freedom. They are merchants of blood.

Freedom in Iran will not come from above. It will come from below, from the women who stood in the streets, from the workers who went on strike, from the youth who rejected power even in religious spaces. That is where the seed of liberation has been planted. And only that seed can save this ancient land from dictatorship and hypocrisy, not the shadow of a drone that confuses freedom with death.

This is a photo of Sanandaj, a city in Kurdistan. It's the city where I grew up, and tonight, I miss it deeply.

30 June 2025

Three well-known women political prisoners in Iran, Golrokh Iraee, Reyhaneh Ansari, and Verisheh Moradi have published a letter from Qarchak Prison, released through the Tehran and Suburbs Bus Workers' Syndicate. Their message sheds light on the dangerous conditions inside Iran's prisons following Israel's recent missile attacks, and the ongoing struggles of women prisoners.

On Monday, June 24, while over 3,000 detainees were imprisoned in different sections of Evin Prison, Israeli rockets struck the facility. Some of the rockets landed directly inside the prison compound and hit buildings. Several people were reportedly killed. Others, especially those held in solitary confinement, are still unaccounted for.

The next morning, Iraee, Ansari, and Moradi were transferred under strict security conditions to Qarchak Prison in Varamin. Around 3,000 male prisoners from Evin were moved to Greater Tehran Prison at the same time. The authors report that conditions in Qarchak are worse than in Evin. Despite this, they say their struggle continues alongside their fellow prisoners in Greater Tehran.

"We are not separate from the pain imposed on the people of Iran," the letter states. They describe their imprisonment and current suffering as part of a long history of repression, from the Constitutional Revolution over a century ago to today's authoritarian government.

The letter emphasizes that the latest attack and transfers have not broken their will: "This is not a road where one can reach the end without pain," they write. They declare they will continue their resistance until dictatorship and all forms of authoritarianism are overthrown.

The political prisoners describe Qarchak Prison as a site of intense suffering, mostly inhabited by over 1,000 women with various charges. These women, the letter notes, are almost invisible in media and human rights reports. Yet their daily lives are filled with hardship and humiliation.

Many women sleep on broken beds no larger than graves. They suffer from poor hygiene, dirty walls, and lack of basic supplies. Some trade their bodies for cigarettes or food. Others work for hours each day—pushing food carts, cleaning prison staff rooms, or working in the prison's sewing workshop—without pay. In return, they are sometimes given a few extra minutes of phone time or a small pack of cigarettes.

Though political prisoners are usually kept apart from the general prison population, sometimes they are forced to live among them as punishment. The letter describes how the suffering of ordinary women prisoners mirrors and, in some cases, surpasses that of political detainees.

Iraee, Ansari, and Moradi call on all who support them to also support the women they now live alongside: "We ask you to improve the conditions for 'us,' regardless of our charges or gender. Those crushed under the attack's rubble, and those erased from public life, matter more than we do." They also urge the public not to forget these women and to include them in future struggles for freedom and justice.

The letter ends with a clear commitment: "We will continue the fight. Alongside the tireless efforts of the people against dictatorship, we walk

this path with clarity and determination." They hope to be one more link in the long chain of the Iranian people's fight for equality and freedom—after more than a century of enduring dictatorship and exploitation.

Siyâvash Shahabi is a writer and independent journalist. He is a political refugee in Athens, Greece. He writes about Iran, the Middle East, and the condition of refugees in Europe.

Image 9: **My Skin is not a Sin** (2020) ©

Artist in Spotlight: MALAK MATTAR

'To paint to tell our stories is resistance': An interview with Pragna Patel and Rashmi Varma*

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Pragna Patel: Thanks for joining us, Malak. *Feminist Dissent* is so honoured to showcase your artwork. Please could you tell us a bit about yourself and why you got into art.

Malak Mattar: Thank you for having me. I was born in the Gaza city, and I am the granddaughter of refugees. Both my ancestors, paternal and maternal, were forcibly displaced in 1948. But they really had a passion for art, poetry, literature--it was part of everyday conversation. Going to school, the Palestinian curriculum was heavily immersed in literature, in painting through art courses, and different subjects. Growing up I was really encouraged by my parents to pursue art, specially by my mother because her family is the artists' family. My maternal uncle is an art professor, a multi-media artist. My mother's maternal uncle is also a renowned Palestinian artist, educator and calligraphist.

But I didn't really pursue art seriously until I was 14. I was still in Gaza in 2014. War was launched and my neighbourhood was changing, it was being flattened by the airstrikes. In one of these buildings that was two buildings away, I saw my neighbour being brutally torn off by the airstrike that struck her house. After this scene, and inspired by the environment, I came to appreciate that art is a way of self-expression and of discharging your emotions. So, I saw myself working with pencils and papers.

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Rashmi Varma: Also tell us about your journey to the UK. When did you come here and in what circumstances?

Malak: Before I came to the UK I was denied entry twice by the Home Office—once in 2018 and then 2022. I had applied for a visa on the basis of being an artist and wanting to exhibit my work. I applied to the UK from Istanbul where I had managed to go in 2017 and from where I have a degree in Political Science. I was officially resident in Istanbul when I applied for my UK visa which would make you think it would be easier to travel because Istanbul is not under military blockade like the Gaza strip. In 2018 I was supposed to come for an exhibition as part of the popular Greenbelt arts festival that happens every year. Everything was set up— my hotels, my flight. Unfortunately, I was presented with a paper that said how I am not honest, how I am not really coming for the exhibition That was really devastating. I had felt once I am out of Gaza, because I saw it as like a prison, once I am out, the world will open its arms. I was literally trapped. But after that, I applied to go to Europe, to France, and I got the visa. Then travelling started getting easier. In 2022, thinking that I had a good travel history, and the UK will say yes because I have shown I am not overstaying in any way, I am being punctual, I got denied entry again for very similar reasons.

Then a friend of mine who lives in Essex said Priti Patel was his MP. No one believes in my story till I show them the evidence of Priti Patel writing to overturn the decision. She called the Consulate who then called me and said 'oh we think we made a mistake. Come to get the visa'. I got a 6-month visitor visa to the UK. I was starting to apply for a master's in fine art and I got admission to Central St Martin's.

Rashmi: This is the only positive thing we have heard about Priti Patel in all this time!

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Malak: And you know she resigned days after!

Pragna: Why do you think she supported your visa application?

Malak: She did because when I was denied entry in 2018, I wrote a Facebook post about how devastating it was. It was racist to deny me entry. I was only 21 or something. It got a lot of publicity and started getting into news. I would think, it is only speculation, I really don't know for sure, maybe she saw these articles when she looked me up. Maybe she liked my works. Maybe she wanted to do one good deed.

Pragna: I suspect it was more the publicity side of things…

Malak: And in one of these articles the headline was: A teenager slams UK racist policies!

Pragna: Malak, I have had the privilege and pleasure of seeing your artwork which is absolutely stunning and beautiful and powerful. What strikes me is the central role of women and the focus on women in your art. Can you tell us a little about why did you decide to focus so much on images of women?

Malak: I wouldn't say it was that conscious. It was not a very conscious decision when I was only 14 years old starting to make art. But I would say that I was heavily influenced and inspired by women. A lot of them were successful but a lot of them were survivors of the Nakba, survivors of Israeli wars, survivors of occupation.

Growing up I lived in the house of my grandparents—they lived on the first floor we lived on the second floor. I learnt about where we came

from because I am a refugee. I learnt about my village Al-Jura from my grandmother who spoke about it with so much emotion and that is what made it different from my grandfather's speaking about the story which was very static. I could see tears in my grandmother's eyes, how much she really missed her home and how much she was really believing in the idea of return. She had nine children, and she got married below the age of 18. I was fascinated by stories of how she raised her kids, how she really worked with my grandfather, hand in hand to make ends meet.

My grandmother from the other side—she was a very bright, strong leader in her house. I really remember how much she cared about flowers, about the design in her house. Sometimes she would commission her clothing from tailors. She never wore black--she said 'I am too young for black'. When she saw us wearing black, she said 'no, you need to love life, you need wear colours, and this is how you shine'. She was always proud and always very wise. She had love for art, she was the one choosing where to place paintings of my uncle, where to place posters of western artists. She had a collection of Van Gogh, Edgar Degas, Leonardo da Vinci. She was a curator in her house. She cared so much about the beautiful details of living in Palestine, the landscape.

And of course there was my mother. She is a fantastic person. She is very positive. She loved her students. For 25 years she taught English, but she really was more than a teacher to her students. Oftentimes the students would come to our house, having a meal, preparing for a theatre performance. She was so giving.

Pragna: One of the things that struck me as you say your grandmother, in particular, loved colour, and saw colour as the love of life. What strikes me about your paintings is also colour. They are incredibly colourful. I don't know how conscious you were or are but there are elements of

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Frida Kahlo in the way in which you use colour and the images of women. Were you conscious of that? Was she an influence?

Malak: Based on my art education in school, it was broadly focused on art history from a Western perspective. But also, most of it was about Palestinian art history. It was about Sliman Mansour, Tamam al-Akhal. It was about how art was really part of the political struggle, how artists were resisting occupation and how even painting your own self, and your own story is an act of resistance. We were also told a lot about how art works were confiscated, how artists were arrested, how they were interrogated. Even the colours of our flag were not allowed in paintings. The flag was not allowed to be visible from the windows or the streets or schools. Having this art education has really given me a lot of consciousness about why art is important and why I need to be an artist.

I was particularly interested in women artists and women poets. These women spoke to me—they spoke about patriarchy but also about occupation. One of the most important poets in the history of Palestine is Fadwa Toukan. Her brother was Ibrahim Toukan. He was encouraged by society to be a poet, and he was given all the platforms. But the family of Fadwa Toukan told her, 'He is a man, and you are not'. It was only because she was a strong, important woman who believed in herself and had the support of her brother who believed in her voice, that we read her stories and poetry today. She was in the curriculum that we studied as kids.

So, part of me, when I saw these examples, I felt empowered to become the person I want. I was not limited just because of society or occupation. If these women could do it, I could also do it. That was the environment I grew up in. Were there stories of oppression? Absolutely. Were there stories of patriarchy that I could see through my eyes? Of course. But these women inspired me, and my mother was a direct influence.

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Rashmi: One of the things we argue in *Feminist Dissent* often is that our criticism of patriarchy and of oppression and occupation, in whatever form and in whatever geographical context, must be carried out together. Whereas some people argue that we cannot be criticising patriarchy now. This has been the story of so many nationalist movements in which women were told, 'hang on, present your demands, once we have independence we can look at your demands.' And of course independence came and nothing much happened. What do you think about this perspective—that this is not the time to talk about patriarchy? Let's all focus on the fact of occupation and oppression.

Malak: That is a very strong question, and I am going to be really honest. I don't think there is a special time of patriarchy. If patriarchy is affecting us on a daily basis, its criticism cannot be postponed on delayed. What I have a real problem with is when I share my testimony about patriarchy, the western media uses it and weaponises it against me. They use it out of context, see it as blaming the government as if this justifies occupation. I am really left in a very difficult situation—do I speak out openly knowing it will be taken out of context? Will it be taken against me at the end? I get questions from journalists like 'what is your dad like, has he ever oppressed you? We saw your photo in this newspaper saw-- does your dad allow this?' Sometimes this is what the western media wants to highlight. That is why I keep saying as an artist, and this is really my personal view, but the main reason why I am being censored is Israel.

I remember I was only 16 years old; I was so excited at that time. I was packing my things as I got permission to travel to Jerusalem which is really exceptional for someone from Gaza as such a thing doesn't happen. So, I was packing my work, framing them, packaging them and going to fly. And I was denied entry as a 16-year-old. Another story: I went to ship my work as a teenager and the post office asked me 'what is

the content of the painting?' I was like 'it is a tree'. I was told, 'if it has any political content, it will be confiscated. And you cannot ask why'. As a teenager hearing this, I questioned what is political. I do not even know what politics means at such a young age. Metaphorically speaking I felt handcuffed. I felt like whatever I am painting should not have any political symbols. As a colonised person, the only factor stopping me from becoming an artist is the fact that occupation is taking place and is really assassinating everyone I know.

Pragna: I totally understand in the context of occupation nothing feels real for you except the occupation. But your focus on women as resilient, as survivors, that women can do anything—those are some of the interpretations of your paintings. That appears to be as much about a response to patriarchy which you may not have experienced personally because you have a very loving family, but which other women do, like the poet you were describing who was told initially you cannot do what your brother does. That must have influenced you, right? The idea that women are equal to men, that women are survivors, they are resilient, they have a voice. Your focus on women expresses those views.

Malak: Absolutely. I remember the first solo exhibition I had. It was a really big success and we had a lot of support from lecturers, students. There I got comments like 'women paint beautiful things'; 'leave politics to men and focus on portraying beauty'. That made me

think: why can't we be political? Why can't I make painting of criticism? It opened my eyes to this social structure of what is expected from a woman, like a pre-existing order and expectation.

Rashmi: You mentioned western media and how they tend to weaponise anything that you may say that is critical of patriarchy or of Palestinian

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society to use it against Palestinian resistance. In that connection I also wanted to hear your views on the reception of Palestinian art in the west. As a Palestinian artist—how do you keep your art really resistant and politically sharp when there is also a market for political art like there is a market for beautiful things and through consumption of that they can then drain it of politics? It is a really difficult predicament, I am sure.

Malak: Absolutely. I have to also say about the shift of my work after October 7, 2023, which lost its colours. After 7 October, I only use black and white in my work. I wouldn't say it was an act of protest; it was just a shocking reaction of what I have been witnessing and seeing. My family was in the middle of the genocide while I was in the UK. It was tormenting. When I started using black and white I did receive comments such as 'we want colours back. You need to give us some hope'. Building your career with a style, with a significance--suddenly you decide to change all of that because your instinct is telling you something else. It was such a difficult move.

Speaking of the market, people tend to buy more colours, interact better with emotions, with objects like oranges and olive trees and things like that. But when they see art in black and white, it reflects the genocide. But that is not necessarily art they want to have and wake up for it every day. What I really feel as an artist is that I want to sleep at night feeling that `I am really responding to my instinct'. I want to be true to myself and be true to what we are going through as people because we are being ethnically cleansed. That was the overwhelming feeling I had.

Pragna: Where do you think you are now as an artist? Has anything changed in terms of how you see things?

Malak: A part of me is really reclaiming some power in my own practice, to not make it only a response to what a criminal regime is doing to my people. But rebelling against it and insisting and finding elements of hope. My family is starting life again as refugees.

I also feel part of my work is to dedicate it to artists who have been killed. Some of them were friends. We exhibited together; we worked together. So, a part of me is responding to Dr Refat Alareer, one of the most important academics from Gaza who said, 'if I die, you must live to tell my story'. And indeed, after hundreds of death threats he was assassinated in December 2023. Telling the stories of those who were killed, who believed in their art is an act of resistance. I feel responsible as a fellow artist to talk about them, to highlight them and to also advocate for the lost lives.

And it is also about the loss of cultural heritage. I was recently at the Victoria and Albert Museum, on a panel titled "Culture in Crisis". Although it is significant to speak about Gaza in these big institutions, in the end I had to say that 80% of cultural heritage has been demolished by war machines. We are a population stripped out of its culture. We breathe culture, we celebrate it. To be taken away from us, it is cultural genocide, it is not an accident, it is not a collateral damage. In mainstream media you do not see much about this. Culture is the people who built it. It is cumulative. It is collective.

I saw a clip two days ago in which one woman screams on television: 'Where are the Arabs?' You know what a woman said: 'I am not going to call for anyone. Where are you women?' When you look at the genocide, it is a feminist issue. When I have my menstruation cycle and I cannot use a bathroom, when I give birth there is no anaesthetic available—these are feminist issues. Feminism cannot be selective—if the women in

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Europe matter, women in Gaza matter equally. We need more action, more mobilization.

Rashmi: Thank you, Malak, for giving us so generously of your time. We hope that by spotlighting your words and your art in this issue of *Feminist Dissent* we can do one little thing to bring your message of resistance to more readers.

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Image 10: **Zebra** (2022) © <u>Malak Mattar</u> All rights Reserved

Identity Politics of the Left and Right: An Interview with Chetan Bhatt

Chetan Bhatt in conversation with Stephen Cowden and Rashmi Varma*

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Abstract

Chetan Bhatt is the Anthony Giddens Professor of Social Theory in the Department of Sociology at the London School of Economics. Chetan's research has looked at the global rise of religious fundamentalism, the international authoritarian far right, and the power of nationalism and racism historically and in contemporary political movements. Some of this work is discussed in his TED talk: Dare to refuse the origin myths that claim who you are. His most recent book is entitled *The Revolutionary Road To Me* (Cambridge & Hoboken NJ: Polity Press, 2025). This book looks at the way the rise of identity politics, and its underlying form of 'identitarianism', has paralysed the Western political Left. He argues that identity politics has divided progressive and Leftist political parties in a highly damaging way, leaving organisations and campaigning groups mired in intractable conflicts. Most importantly, the predominance of identity politics has diverted the Left from its founding political mission – addressing the human misery caused by the vast increases in poverty, inequality and violence across the world, driven as this is by capitalism's relentless drive for accumulation. He also discusses the way contemporary corporate capitalism has adopted the language of identity politics, transforming what were once genuine demands for addressing discrimination into a corporate branding exercise. The form of identity politics on the Left, in so degrading the capacities of the Left to address people's real concerns, has created a golden opportunity for Right to respond with their own forms of identity politics based on racist nationalism and misogyny, which is paraded before the populace as though it is they who now represent the interests of 'ordinary people' against 'cultural elites'.

What is the politics behind Identity Politics?

Stephen: Welcome, Chetan. We are interviewing you in the context of your new book *The Revolutionary Road to Me*. This is a book which offers one of the most trenchant criticisms of identity politics and the role they

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play in Left and progressive politics. You're writing this book at a time when authoritarian, reactionary and fascistic political tendencies are on the rise. At the same time, you also are attacking the kind of identity politics that have come to be called 'woke', which are associated with the Left. So, an important question we would ask you right at the outset is, where do you position yourself politically within the current moment in terms of the critique of identity politics which is offered in your book?

Chetan: Thank you, I very much appreciate *Feminist Dissent* taking the time to do this interview.

Consider the 'culture wars' as beginning in the 1960s, coming from the political Right, in a small way initially, and then getting more ferocious into the 70s, and then accelerating massively under Ronald Reagan's Republicanism alongside the rise of the Moral Majority and the Christian Right from the early 1980s. What the culture wars represent is a political reaction to certain kinds of progressive thinking and the diversification of the sphere of rights that grew out of the Civil Rights movement in the US from the late 1950s. You can think of the Civil Rights movement as representing particular groups aiming to make real the universal claims that were promised to them. From the experiences of racist segregation, discrimination and violence, claims based on universal rights arose. These claims were made in the period after WW2 which also saw the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). In that crucial moment, universal rights were claimed, but they failed. The Civil Rights movement was itself destroyed. Even though you had the Civil Rights Act in 1964, the reaction to the Civil Rights movement and the opposition to segregation in the US was ferocious. What came after that was black nationalism in the form of the Black Power movement. One way of thinking about this is that you then had the rise of the first form of identity politics. And then a number of other social movements emerged, in particular Women's and Lesbian and Gay liberation. And they were situated alongside other movements that were largely left-wing or socialist in orientation and were more focused on socio-economic factors and class. So, what I've briefly outlined is one way to tell the story of identity politics and how it emerged.

While such narratives about identity politics are widespread and typically talk about the further development of identity politics from the 1980s, I want to put these narratives about the origins of identity politics in a different frame. What I argue in the book is that the modern political Right has historically been driven by identitarianism and identity politics.

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The culture wars represent a contestation between different varieties of identitarian thinking. From the Right, it's focused on race, nationalism, religion and gender, and it's marshalled against the Left. The attacks that are currently taking place against Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) policies, are an example of this. These attacks from the Right are not made to defend universalism, but instead to further the Right's own forms of identitarianism that are largely based on preserving various inequalities.

The original template for identitarian thinking comes from the rise of ethno-nationalism in the 19th century, a period when elites asked people to ask themselves: "Who are we?" If you think of the 'template' of identity politics as being formed in that way, then you are addressing a different historical, political understanding of identitarian thinking. It's not simply that the Left has identity politics and the Right opposes it. Rather, the Right exhibits a ferocious form of identity politics, which you see emerging today largely as white racial and cultural nationalism across Europe and the US. This is currently taking the form of a nationalistic techno-fascism, which we see clearly in the people who are around Donald Trump in his second presidency. It also represents new elite capitalist class that has broken from the logic of the way these elites have organised themselves politically since the 1990s. The Right is using identitarian thinking in a visionary, fascistic way that is not simply a reaction to the Left, and it represents a formidably bleak period for the Left and its values of equality.

Now, let's turn to the Left. There have been left-wing critiques of Left identity politics from the moment they arose. And those critiques have taken two main forms. The first is liberal universalism largely based on Human Rights or a liberal conception of equality. This represents a meritocratic, colour- and gender-blind approach. The second is a different kind of universalism, usually socialist or Marxist in orientation, in which the working classes, as the exploited classes, represents universality. However, both of those forms of universalism have been insufficient, and were precisely the reason that the new social movements of the 1960s arose.

Within the Left, contestations between universalism and identity politics have been longstanding. Identity politics has been internally contested within the Left for a long time. But this contestation failed to happen in the way it needed to. In my experience of activism from the 1980s onwards in various campaigns and movements, activists saw the rise of

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identity politics and often joked about it its absurdities and zealotry. But we failed to challenge it in any significant and sustained way – whether those identities were libertarian or authoritarian, religious and communal or based on race, gender, sexuality and their so-called intersections, each simplistic and impoverished ways of thinking about people and their lives.

In parallel, left identity politics of authoritarian religious kinds as well as supposedly liberatory ones were adopted by Local Government in UK as a means to bring about certain kinds of inclusion, consciously creating spaces for different identity groups. At the same time these sorts of Local Government policies were attacked from the Right – there was a huge campaign from the Conservative Party and the right-wing press to describe these policies as "Loony Left". The shape of the attacks were very similar to the ones we see today, though today they are much more ferocious, as seen with the Trump administrations. The targets then were similar to those today; anti-racism, feminism, lesbian/gay rights.

Then, as now, this creates a political trap, a false one in my view, but still a trap of sorts. Many people on the Left used to remain relatively silent about of the absurdities of Identity politics because they were worried about not attacking sections of the Left that were prime political targets for the Right – for example, not criticising left wing Labour Local Authorities when the Right was attacking them. I think that that's a really difficult position for some on the Left to be in. It creates a defensiveness. It places the Left in the position of defending not only the absurdities and idiocies of identity politics but also morally indefensible actions and events undertaken by some members of identity communities. And, it makes much Left politics driven by a purely reactive oppositional stance based on how the Right will react, and so it is unable to engage in internal reflection and critique without constantly thinking about how the Right is going to respond. So, you cannot discuss this issue because it will fuel racism, and so on, an internal policing by identitarians. This distorts the possibilities for different visions for what the antiracist Left can and should do.

In retrospect, the Left should have been far more robust in its critique of certain forms of identitarian thinking within the Left. A good example of this is the way 'multiculturalism' transformed into 'multi-faithism' under the Blair period, after which both the state and the political Left were jointly empowering very reactionary forces within minority communities, including powerful authoritarian religious movements with defined

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political interests who were transnationally organised and had more resources and political experience than the Left activists who worked to amplify them solely as immaculate victims of racism or Islamophobia. These forces were pushing forward their ideology and controlling communities, particularly controlling women within those communities. So, within the Left and the alliances it formed, there was a huge scope decades ago for taking this on, and this wasn't done. This was a major failure because this politics represented a different kind of logic which is narcissistic in orientation and can only think in communal terms. This results in the Left fostering divisive communalist politics. This kind of politics is simply focused on itself, it cannot extend solidarity to other groups. It was in such ways that the narcissistic and communal logic of identity politics changed the culture of the Left, and this created the situation we now find ourselves in.

Consider the horrific, systematic abuse of largely white working class girls by largely South Asian men over decades in Rotherham, Rochdale and elsewhere. This represents a key example of the evacuation of moral judgement on the identitarian anti-racist left. These events are spoken about by many sections of the Left solely through the consequences for racism, the stereotyping of Pakistani or Muslim men. I know full well that the main, determined and dogged prosecutor for the Rochdale cases was a Pakistani lawyer. I know that around five hundred mosques coordinated sermons against child abuse, I know after the revelations how the far-right mobilised at least a dozen times in Rotherham, often violently, against the South Asian community. An elderly South Asian man was brutally murdered in Rotherham following these mobilisations.

But imagine a different situation where the South Asian and antiracist Left's approach from the start of the revelations was solidarity with those girls and their families, and the possibility of an alliance across white and South Asian working class communities that isolated the abusers and worked for support and justice for those girls and young women and their families together. Instead, to this day, some of the antiracist left essentially continues – 'yes, isn't it awful what happened to those girls but let's focus on racism against the men, that is more important, otherwise you're fuelling the far-right'. Their attitude matches that of the police services who saw those girls as disposable. And it was their position that massively fuelled the far-right. This, to me, is precisely the moral corruption of some of the antiracist left. Everyone can see it as moral corruption. And those events, and the response of many

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antiracists, have empowered the right and far-right and will continue to do so powerfully for years to come. It's a key example of how identitarian thinking is destroying the political possibilities for Left.

The Professionalisation of Identity Politics

Returning to the social movements of 1970s and 1980s, it is critical to recognize what they achieved. Those movements didn't have a penny between them. They emerged from the actions of ordinary people and communities and, while they were often focused on specific campaigns, they didn't necessarily take identitarian forms of the kind we see today. They emerged as social movements largely dealing with the coercive arms of the state, particularly the police and the law in the case of black and gay communities, but also in terms of reproductive and other rights as these affected women.

That's quite different from what we have seen since the late 1990s where identitarian forms of thinking have been shorn of that community base and delinked from the people and communities who created those movements. Identity politics has been largely taken over by NGOs in partnership with the state and other institutions. And its agents are largely credentialed middle-class activists. This shifted the political logic from one of ordinary people demanding rights to one of NGOs becoming technocratic experts, working in alliance with the state, businesses and international philanthropies that fund them, those NGOs deciding what those communities are and what they want. Once you have institutions like that becoming involved, then a different set of logics come into play that are not about ordinary people, but about the management of populations. So, if the modern state has the key task of managing people – how they live, how they die – then identity politics has become enmeshed with the management of populations. Multiculturalism is not a mechanism for ordinary people to demand their rights but a means for the state to manage minority populations.

The corporatisation and professionalization of social movements as NGOs also has many consequences. Imagine for a moment some left-wing activists are meeting, maybe a student groups or staff in an NGO. How would this group of largely middle class activists relate to others if the same discussions were taking place in an ordinary working class community? How would they relate to the people living in those communities? How meaningful are the languages of corporate identity

politics for working with and speaking to the people in those communities? How does the language used in contemporary identity politics reflect the people being spoken about? There is a huge disconnect. A good example of is between what what is now called LGBTQ + and ordinary gay and lesbian communities. Unlike the gay movement, LGBTQ+ is a corporate invention and not a representation of an organic movement from below. The same could be said of many lobbying and advocacy organizations for BAME communities – there is a deep disconnect between the people they claim to be speaking for and those professional people who work in the NGO sector.

While some of this politics was certainly present in some of the early funded groups, in the 70s and 80s, there was also a natural orientation towards the communities. Activists didn't largely see themselves as experts. There was more commonly a democratic orientation towards the communities and what they felt or wanted. Public meetings that involved families and communities affected were often the organisational norm in antiracism, for example. Early funded organisations may have provided essential welfare and other services, but also tried to link the people to politics. Once you start thinking of politics in terms of NGO experts, equalities procedures, institutional policies, discrimination procedures, you're systematically depoliticizing everything. You're taking issues out of the realm of political struggles and converting them into apolitical procedures. It is in this way that NGOs have facilitated the incorporation of identity politics into institutions and made it the political language of the professional and credentialed classes. This is a major change from that of the social movements and their organisations from the past.

Identity politics and the rise of Authoritarian Nationalism

Rashmi: Thank you, Chetan, for giving us such a rich account of the fault lines within left responses historically to identity politics. I want to sort of shift the discussion now to the current moment, which is the rise of identity politics in the age of Trump and Trumpism. And here, of course, it's interesting to also look at what some of the other left commentators are saying who are also critical of identity politics. So we have someone like Vivek Chibber [1] who got a lot of flak for saying this when he

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[1] Interview with Vivek Chibber 'Why Elites Love Identity Politics' Jacobin 14/1/25 Available at: https://jacobin.com/2025/01/elite-identity-politics-professional-class

suggested that left identitarian politics were responsible for the rise of Trump. And then, of course, other commentators recently, such as Ash Sarkar from Novara Media [2] is also reflecting now on the role that identity politics have played in the rise of authoritarian politics globally, but specially in the West. So I was wondering if you could reflect on that, on the kind of causal argument. Do you think identity politics has caused the rise of Trumpism or is it one of the factors? What is the relationship between the form of identity politics, and the rise of someone like Trump?

Chetan: Some of the tendencies you mention are examples of identitarian zealotry and post-truth politics on the Left. That they are saying something slightly different now means little in terms of their sustained role in digging even deeper holes for the Left. The Left knows the Right will use culture war issues to attack them - it has known this since the mid-60s and particularly from the 80s onwards. Yet, look at some of the senselessness around identity politics, the many easy targets the Left continually presents to the Right, as if it has learned nothing from the experience of previous decades. In this sense, sections of the Left share a huge responsibility for creating the conditions in which the Right can so ferociously attack the basic rights of minority groups. But the consequences of this on minority groups and ordinary people will manifest in ways that some of the Left refuse to acknowledge or take responsibility for.

One of the points made in the book is that the identitarian Left sees itself as inherently morally good and morally benign, so part of the Left's self-belief is that nothing it can do is ever wrong since it, after all, is committed to supporting marginalised groups, opposing oppression and so on. It is a dangerous delusion to believe you or any group are morally perfect or morally excellent. In parallel, those seen to belong to identities consecrated by the Left are ciphers rather than real people - perpetually immaculate victims rather than full humans, a form of dehumanization that the progressive Left engages. The questions the Left needs to ask are not 'why are you attacking identity politics, these are marginalized groups?', but instead: 'Why is Trump in power? What are our failures that enabled this populist fascist to arise? What role did left-wing identity politics play in the popular support for figures like him?' And certainly,

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[2] This Is Why The Right Are WINNING, Aaron Bastani meets Ash Sarkar
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZS3UlB7aXmE

some of the absurdities of left-wing identity politics have played a critical role in the rise of the authoritarian Right, including, quite directly, of Trump[3]. Authoritarian Right or fascist figures such as Victor Orban in Hungary among several others across Europe are making instrumental use of gender issues, migration and racism by pointing directly at some of the inanities of left-wing identity politics. Instead of holding onto its sense of moral righteousness, the Left needs to ask itself how they are doing this. What is the impact of their identity thinking on ordinary people? Why have people, some of whom previously voted for Obama, shifted to Trump? Why did small sections of black communities and significant numbers of Latino and Asians shift towards Trump in the last election? As significantly, how is the anti-racist Left going to re-orient itself to the rise of what has been called 'the multiracial far-right', one where virtually every major far-right project in the United States and in many European countries, including white supremacist groups, has a significant presence of individuals from minority communities, from the Proud Boys and the Stop the Steal campaign in the USA to Reform UK and the followers of Tommy Robinson here.

So, while sections of the Left were focused on 'privilege politics' or were wanting to queer, decolonize and abolish everything, themes largely meaningless outside of NGOs and middle class or student activism, and while guilt ridden liberal whites were berated in 2020 about their racism by expensive antiracist trainers who would never engage Trump or Reform UK supporters, much of the Right was vigorously renewing its claims about *natural inequality*. While some Left groups are focused on the specialness of their identities, the populist and far right are calling for mass involuntary repatriation, what they call 'remigration'. There is a surreal disconnect between the identitarian obsessions of some of the Left and the dangerous mainstreaming of ideas formerly articulated by small neo-Nazi and neo-Fascist groups. It is critical in this overheated, volatile political period not to underestimate how powerful the far-right has become, its reach, its appeal among ordinary people and mainstream politicians and the impact it is having on the fabric of civil societies across the West. What were previously fringe neo-Nazi themes marginal to politics are now mainstream, including forced mass deportations, the normalising of hatred and polarising politics, and the consequences of

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[3] 'How the Transgender Rights Movement Bet on the Supreme Court and Lost', Nicholas Confessore, *New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/19/magazine/scotus-transgender-care-tennessee-skrmetti.html

that politics for generating vigilante violence in local communities against migrants and refugees.

A major part of the issue is the alienation of many people from the politics that the Left presents. This is related to the elitism of Left politics and the university-sourced languages and cultures of the Left within which identity politics is central. What does it mean for ordinary people to have the Left speaking languages that don't relate to them? To what extent is the Left active in work with ordinary people and communities? In other work I'm involved in, during meetings of working-class people, what you are immediately aware of is that the organised Left is hardly present in the lives of those people or, where it is, it often comes out with absurdities and languages that don't speak to them. This wasn't the case before. At the same time, people are being constantly exposed to the relentless, toxic disinformation that's coming from the authoritarian far-right and its local foot-soldiers.

A dimension to this is that when many people make use of public services, they constantly see messages associated with minority groups, for example the 'liberation' flag plastered everywhere. They see the outcomes of left-wing policies that tell them 'men can be women', or their children can change their biological sex. If this goes against what those people may believe, or the evidence of their own eyes, or just basic biological science, then many people on the Left would call them uneducated or prejudiced bigots. But, if the Left is promoting blatant untruths, why should people believe anything the Left says? If you're a public sector worker, you'll be required to do training courses where these kinds of ideas are put forward as unassailable truths. Now, I think there's a huge amount of scepticism around them from people who are required to attend these events. And for some people that scepticism results in cynicism or disengagement. But this scepticism can also take political forms and can mobilise people in unpredictable ways.
So, around trans policies, for example, particularly in schools, you see large sections of communities protesting against them, organizing protests as parents. The Right or far-right may be involved in organising some of these protests, but the concerns extend well beyond them and started outside and before any far-right involvement. The Left, which is supposedly based on reason, evidence and truth, has created the situation in which many ordinary people have legitimate concerns about their kids being taught biological untruths. Or they have legitimate concerns about the impact left-wing identity politics is going to have on

their children, including the possibility of them being put on pathways to potential medical transition. In a context where these approaches have been shown to be harmful for children[4], why is the Left surprised that people are becoming open to the ideas and projects of the Right and far-right and turn ferociously against the values historically associated with the Left? These issues are playing out in a situation where you have massive social media disinformation and the spread of multiple, complex and compounded lies that are well beyond the reach of fact-checking, reason and associated approaches. We're in a very different universe of large-scale lies and distortions in politics that are impossible to unravel effectively, and which are becoming embedded in the infrastructure of mainstream politics. In that context, it becomes even more critical for the Left to work with ordinary people, win them over to its values. Those values can't just be a coalition of identity communities. The Left has to be much more visionary in terms of offering people a different, better life and engage with ordinary, often deeply polarized and often impoverished communities in other sustained ways.

Diversity policies as Corporate Branding

Stephen: I think you have set out some very important points there, so just to pick up on the whole question of Trump. One of the key elements of Project 2025 was Trump's commitment was to dismantle Diversity, Equality and Inclusion initiatives. You've talked about the way identity politics have travelled into this bureaucratic form and the scepticism that many people feel towards these kinds of policies, as well as the fact that they are often imposed on them rather than something that comes from the grassroots or involves them. In the context where you have a fascist right which is attacking these same DEI initiatives, what should a Left anti-racist feminist response be to the attack on these be?

Chetan: A fundamental baseline for the Left is absolute universal human equality, and equality between men and women, and institutions have to ensure that. Institutions have to prevent discrimination, whether it's around hiring and promotions or service provision. So, support for antidiscrimination policies arises naturally from a commitment to

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[4] *Independent review of gender identity services for children and young people*, Hilary Cass, April 2024, https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20250310143933/https://cass.independent-review.uk/home/publications/final-report

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universal equality. At the same time DEI policies have shifted since the early 2000s from addressing, real measurable, evidenced forms of discrimination, inequality, harassment and bullying, to a different set of ideas based on promoting particular identity groups within corporate spaces. The focus is rarely about addressing real and measurable discrimination, but often concerns the value which accrues to the corporate brand by linking particular identities to that brand. It's almost as though the identity becomes connected to the corporation's brand value and image.

There is also strong evidence that, for example, racism awareness, unconscious bias and other related training hardly do anything to address actual discrimination, and they barely change people's attitudes. Identitarianism in the liberal corporate environment has economic and bureaucratic logics that are different from the intention to prevent discrimination and address unfair treatment based on discrimination. Much identitarianism owes to transformations in corporate workplaces and changes in the labour processes for middle-class workers. In the major intensification of their work, corporations compensate by making people feel valued in particular ways. This often works through developing certain cultural sensibilities within a broadly liberal corporate sphere that stretches from the UN and NGOs through to large liberal corporations like IPM, Apple and Google. But even with companies like BlackRock, a global financial institution in its own right, having larger assets than those of several countries combined, these corporations have enormous influence in determining what financial and banking institutions do. They can make it mandatory that you have to certain DEI policies if you're want to continue working with them.

Now that's very different from addressing real discrimination. It's one thing to have groups, what are called employee resource groups for Latino or LGBTQ+ people and their 'allies', and addressing real discrimination or economic poverty. I would agree with writers who have said that many aspects of discrimination, racial discrimination as well as aspects of discrimination against women, could be addressed by addressing economic discrimination and inequality more widely. But that, of course, can't be the solution for large corporations because their interests stop at the moment at which economic inequality come into play because this would go against their primary goal of accumulating wealth for their owners and shareholders.

The Trump and Musk type of attack on DEI policies has to be seen as part of their political strategy, their instrumental, symbolic use of the DEI industry that might be important in some people's lives but represents, even with its global value of several billion dollars, a small amount of money for the USA or any large Western economy. The attack on DEI serves many political and symbolic functions because it makes people think we're finally dealing with these absurdities and unfairness. But it is essentially a way of polarizing populations and maintaining support among your supporters.

Authoritarian populism, which is often a sanitized term for the word 'fascism', works in liberal democracies by focusing on the 30 to 40% of the electoral vote required to win and then working towards making future elections unwinnable by the democratic opposition or challenging unfavourable outcomes in other ways. So, the strategy is of severe polarization that will create the section of the electorate that you need to win and create conditions in which you make it difficult, if not impossible for the other side to win. This is achieved through testing and challenging the constitution in multiple ways, ignoring law or settled procedures, using various arms of the state – whether taxation, NGO legislation, immigration services or the police to harass the opposition, critics, journalists, make life very tough for them. Through multiple means, formal, informal, personal, institutional, legal and extra-legal, the goal is to make it hard for opponents to win and ensure that the balance of power is always for you. This need not be done in a systematic way, such as targeting every liberal journalist for example, but sporadically, chaotically, this generating greater uncertainty and dislocation for the Left.

It's important not to be distracted by the chaos and perpetual crises that authoritarians systematically generate and for which they present themselves as the only solution. These forms of authoritarian governance may be relatively new in the United States but are very well known elsewhere. Additionally, virtually all populist figures tend to be colourful characters that throw tantrums and manufacture personal conflicts. That is not accidental and is intended to focus public attention on them and not elsewhere. Similarly, engaging in large symbolic acts around DEI, for example, is about turning public focus on them. That takes attention, scrutiny away from what their administration is doing. In the first Trump presidency, this meant the replacement of Supreme Court justices and numerous judges at federal levels, and enacting many other changes

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through executive orders and policy. These have become ferocious during the second Trump administration with aggressive, unlawful, punitive attacks on migrants, protestors, critics, opponents of Israel's genocide against the population of Gaza, and the human rights of transgender adults, similar to what you see across many authoritarian populist states. So, there is another dimension to the culture wars and the easy targets that identity politics provides: they are the basis for mobilizations that can also distract from the actions taking place beyond public scrutiny and accountability.

Identity Politics and the Crisis of the Left

Rashmi: Could you talk about what you think is at stake in all of this, for feminist politics in particular going forward. We are in a context where there are elements of identitarian thinking within feminism, as well as tensions between feminism and other social movements, such as the trans rights movement, around identitarian thinking.

Chetan: In the past two decades, you've had vast range of Left social movements across the world. You could locate the trajectory of these movements of resistance from the Zapatistas through to the Arab Spring, Occupy, Black Lives Matter and the recent mass demonstrations against Israel. There has been a great upsurge of people and energies across the globe, people initiating and engaging in progressive and democratic political struggles. But not a single one of these large movements has succeeded in its aims over the past few decades. Instead, there has been a repetition of failures and the international rise of fascism and proto-fascism in country after country. Why has the Left continually failed? Despite these massive uprisings of people, why have the models of organisation, the ideas, projects and visions, failed? This is a complicated area to unpick, but if now is not a time for internal political, moral and ethical reflection and reorientation, when is?

We can see at a microlevel these kinds of transformations and failures with the example of socialist feminism in the UK that arose from 70s, 80s into the 90s. This was a universal form of feminism. It was usually libertarian in his approach to questions of pornography and sexuality. It supported lesbian and gay rights. It saw the involvement of women and feminist demands within trade unions and the labour movement as of key importance, and many socialist feminists came from labour movement work. It integrated questions of class. Now, from around the

early 2000s but especially from 2015 onwards, that brand of socialist feminis was faced with younger women on the left who are speaking for trans rights and the inclusion of transwomen in women's spaces. In the UK, unlike the USA, the 'gender-critical' movement began largely through left-wing socialist feminist activism. Subsequently, that element of the movement has receded and the meaning of the term 'gender critical' has widened in terms of the political orientations of those within its umbrella, including anti-feminists and some women in or rapidly moving to the populist right or far-right.

The far-right link transgender issues to questions of migration, Muslim communities, the decline of public life in a seamless narrative. So, you give people a clear link between trans rights activists and their ideology, Muslim minorities in the West, so-called Muslim 'rape gangs', 'mass migration', the decline of public services and the quality of life in European cities, and alleged rises in crime, producing, for many, a compelling, essentially fascist world-view. This is typically articulated in a way that positions all (white) women and children as under threat from all Muslim and migrant men, as well as from transactivists. These are often linked to a broader conspiracy narrative about the 'globalists' who have caused this decline in Western societies. It is a neat story and reproduced in many forms across social media. I've heard variants of this far right narrative from some formerly liberal women, gay men and South Asians.

I think if you are a feminist on the left and the main focus in recent years has been 'decolonizing' feminism, including 'decolonising' reproductive rights and abortion, and you see around you the crude identitarianism that says little more than 'white feminists are racists' or 'white feminism is colonial'. And at the same time, virtually the entire left is telling you to accept a fully intact adult human male as a woman because of the way they are dressed. In such a situation, you can see the alienation of women who would have been formerly committed to the Left but now find ready-made friends on the political right. This is not just a problem of fragmentation, but about the way in which certain tendencies in liberal and radical feminism have openly allied with the transatlantic far right and have become more powerful in that context.

Parallel faultlines to these occurred around 15-20 years ago in relation to feminism and political Islamism where, again, the political right and far-right opened its arms to welcome people who were liberal or left-wing

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but were active around the impact of religious fundamentalism on women. Of course, in these earlier cases and today, the Right has its own political agenda, anti-Muslim or anti-feminist. But a common factor in both is how Left identitarianism consecrates all members of its favoured oppressed groups as morally excellent victims of oppression who do not have the capacity for any independent agency unless it is that involved in fighting racism or colonialism. Of course, no group can be this morally excellent group.

And as the Left within feminism has receded, or rather has been largely replaced by an identitarian form of it, this also reflects a generational issue, a clear dislocation between the older traditions of anti-racist, internationalist socialist feminism and something that calls itself feminism but whose origins are largely elite universities and Western NGOs. Put crudely, it believes sex work is work, natal men are women, all whites are racist, feminism needs to be queered and decolonized, and so on – but these would be meaningless to, for example, black and white working class women. So, I think the older splits between radical, revolutionary and socialist feminists have been superseded by these newer divisions and fuelled by corporate and NGO identitarianism. And in its impact, there are novel dynamics and unusual and unpredictable political alliances being created on the Left and the Right.

Reconstructing an Anti-Racist Feminist Left

Stephen: I mean, that really leads us into our final question. One of the things that the book does very powerfully and trenchantly is it offers a very detailed and thorough critique of these identitarian movements. And how they're inserted into what was previously a historic form of universalist, socialist feminist, anti-racist politics. The book fully analyses way identitarianism has captured the NGO and corporate sector. This brings us back to the question of the Left. One of the things that readers of your book might be asking would be what are those tendencies on which new hope and the kinds of visions you refer to can be built? Your book refers to the work of Ella Baker, the work of CLR James, but the arguments for an alternative aren't fleshed out within the book. I just wonder if you could offer readers some kind of sense of the materials from which the kind of universalist left needs to rebuild itself from.

Chetan: It's much easier to consider what the problems are, and this is the focus of the book. But there are some strands there which I'm happy

to outline. There are some absolutely critical priorities for the Left: the rise of the fascisms that we're seeing, and in particular the kind of techno-populist fascism in the US, means that opposition to the Far Right has to be a central focus of activity for the Left. This factor now affects everything of importance for the Left, including opposing the genocide against Palestinians. In enacting this politics, the Left, in the UK for example, must think globally and be attuned to the detailed manifestations of fascism across the globe. It's absolutely critical that the Left organize to fight what is very clearly an alliance of the far-right across states and movements that is self-reproducing and acting in concert, well-resourced, and containing both political party and violent street-level vigilante forms.

And alongside that other key priorities are the climate emergency, increasing poverty, and violence against women and the equality of women and girls. These are areas of critical work, often emergency work. It's also the case that people on the Left working in those situations are besieged from multiple directions and often facing severe demoralization. Given that new fascism is now a long-term feature of our political landscapes, what is the kind of Left needed to move forward that is able to work on multiple fronts in a state of siege and refuse to let internal identitarian follies derail or distract it. And were talking about a divided and fragmented Left having to deal with major issues that require international responses. The Left is very good at reacting and organising its reactions through mass demonstrations and protests. Beyond these necessary protests, issues like the climate emergency, billionaire-fuelled social media fascism, the international far-right, inequality and poverty, the global movements of people because of war or poverty, require dealing with international institutions, science, technocratic approaches, things the Left is less good at doing.

Those are the kinds of challenges the Left is facing. And one argument perhaps may be that they're so insurmountable, and so the left is turning inwards and into identitarian politics; identity politics is a lot easier to do than addressing poverty. It's easier to deal with symbolic minority rights than it is to deal with the climate emergency we're in. At the same time, technocratic solutions involve states, bureaucracies, legislative frameworks which, in the sphere of rights, are thoroughly discredited or have failed. Yet, institutional infrastructures are necessary for any complex society let alone for relations between them. So, what are the alternative democratic international institutional frameworks the Left

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can propose? What, in other words, is the Left for? For example, beyond slogans, what would a democratic one-state solution look like? What form would it take? What would its constitution be?

In terms of social movements and organisation, and in the context of the extent of social media disinformation we have today and the way social media has transformed political communication and political authority, there is a need to rethink social movement organisation. And I think that that means the left has to rethink its orientation towards political communication as a result of social media. This doesn't mean engaging in disinformation or crude populism as the Right does. The work of people like CLR James and Ella Baker offers important ideas in how they understand the power of ordinary people to change things and the way they urge activists to look at where people are at, not where you want them to be. Both James and Baker urged activists to listen to and learn from people, and in the context of what needs to be a reconstructive period for the left, this is very important. It is not the university-educated activists and NGOs that are important, and it is not what credentialed activists think that is important, but instead what the people they speak for think, what they want. That may not always be pleasant to hear. This means that, yes, you have to engage with and work with and listen to ordinary people who hold views you consider to be racist, misogynistic, homophobic if you are to persuade them with your arguments. And because activists, who are largely middle-class, have access to information and resources that can guide and inform, their role here becomes important. But they can't substitute for the people.

I think the Left needs to rethink organization. The horizontal forms of organisation developed as an alternative to centralist forms have failed repeatedly over the last two decades. They have certainly mobilised huge numbers of people, but faced with the repression which has often followed, they have not been able to continue. We need to think beyond the opposition between centralised forms of organisation and decentralized horizontal forms of organization, and the often-interminable meetings that result which are only meaningful for university-educated activists and NGO workers. Relatedly, the left really needs to let go of a lot of the ideas embedded within particularly younger university-educated activists, stereotypically those who want to queer and decolonize everything or who prioritise identitarianism within every issue however unrelated or irrelevant it may be.

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I've had conversations where people have said: 'Well, it shouldn't be the job of black or Asian people to oppose fascism or racism, they're vulnerable and shouldn't be at the forefront'. Why not? There's a language of vulnerability and a language of therapy on the left which is hindering in terms of effective activism. When the far-right instigated riots occurred in 2024 across the UK, in my university, there were calls from colleagues to offer emotional support for black and minority students. For a university, this might be legitimate. But we are immediately in the realm of psychotherapy rather than politics, and this is fundamentally different to antiracist, antifascist orientations I am used to. I argued that 'No, you have to be out, you have to be defiant, you have to be visible in the streets. You can't let the fascists make you hide'. So, this is also a difference from the past.

A key aspect of anti-fascist mobilisations of the 1970s-80s was that you cannot show fear to fascists, not least because once you do, they will harass and attack you even more. So, there are many areas within the organization of Left activism that we need to be honest about in terms of how effective they are. In particular, the policing of language as part of the effort to be inclusive -these are self-defeating forms of organizing. And this connects to our earlier discussion about identitarianism and the way it has so powerfully degraded the organisational culture of the Left. Get involved in a political campaign because of the atrocities, injustice or inequality that you see, not because of who you are. This means a radical reorientation away from the impoverished models which identitarianism has left us with.

Stephen and Rashmi: Thanks for setting out your thoughts and ideas for us today, Chetan.

Chetan: Thanks to you both and to *Feminist Dissent* for giving the space to do that.

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Image 11: **Peace in Jerusalem** (2021) ©

Review of *East West Street: On the Origins of Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity* by Philippe Sands (Weidenfield and Nicolson, 2016)

Pragna Patel*

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'The protection of the individual, and the idea of individual criminal responsibility for the worst crimes, would be part of the new legal order. The sovereignty of the state would no longer provide absolute refuge for crimes on such a scale, in theory at least'. (East West Street)

First published in 2017, Philippe Sands' *East West Street* is a moving and unforgettable story that interweaves a deeply painful and personal journey into the history of his family living under Nazi rule, with a parallel journey that traces the origins of the legal concepts of 'genocide' and 'crimes against humanity'. These concepts have since come to form the foundations of international human rights law and could not hold more resonance today as we enter a dangerous period marked by the slide towards authoritarianism and the retreat from an international rules-based world order created painstakingly in the aftermath of the holocaust and the second world war.

Sands takes us to Lviv: a city that over the years has seen many name changes and territorial claims to it on the part of many countries in Eastern Europe). It was the birthplace of his grandfather, Leon Buchholz, who managed to escape the horrors of the Holocaust unlike the rest of his family. Around the same time, two legal scholars - Hersch Lauterpacht and Rafael Lemkin - also escaped from the same city to the US where, unknown to each other, they developed the legal concepts of genocide and crimes against humanity. Both stories entwine and unfold like a compelling crime thriller, ending with the Nuremberg trials and the prosecution of Nazi war criminals such as Hans Frank, also a lawyer, who acted for Adolf Hitler and was likely responsible for the annihilation of the entire extended families of Leon Buchholz as well as Lauterpacht and Lemkin.

The power of the book lies in the simple fact that the concepts of genocide and crimes against humanity didn't come out of nowhere; they were the result of a need to find the language and tools capable of addressing the gravity of the unprecedented mass violence and cruelty committed against millions of people: Jewish, Roma and other minorities and political dissidents. While Lauterpacht's concept of crimes against humanity emphasised large-scale atrocities committed against individuals, Lemkin's concept of genocide focussed on the intentional and wholesale destruction of groups of people. In showing us how the concepts jumped off the pages of abstract legal theory and entered the Nuremberg courtroom, Sands presents a profoundly uplifting story about the search for truth and justice.

The story is also intriguing for other reasons: tensions existed between Lauterpacht and Lemkin as each argued that their specific conceptualisation was more appropriate to reflect the crime of mass killings. Underlying that tension was a wider debate about how the concepts might lend themselves to the creation of a false hierarchy of crimes in which genocide may be perceived as the greater crime. For their part, both the US and the British resisted the use of the term genocide, no doubt because of concerns about its implications for themselves, given their own dark history of slavery, racism and colonial conquests. Nevertheless, both concepts - genocide and crimes against humanity - were vital to the Nuremberg prosecutions and consequently in establishing the idea of an international rule of law that led to the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on Genocide and much more.

As Sands reminds us, this history has been indispensable to the prosecution of criminals such as the Chilean dictator, Augusto Pinochet who was arrested in 1998 on charges of both genocide and crimes against humanity that had by then been written into the Statute of the newly created International Criminal Court. The event represented a milestone in international criminal law since it established the principle of universal jurisdiction and the end of unlimited sovereign impunity for those who commit international crimes and violate human rights as part of state policy, regardless of whether or not the violations take place outside the state in which they live and regardless of whether or not they directly affect the citizens of that state.

Sands has unearthed a remarkable account of personal memory, human connections and legal history that speaks powerfully and urgently to our times. All around us we are witness to a ferocious attack on human rights, the rule of law and the very principle of universality from the forces of nationalism, fundamentalism and fascism. From Gaza to Sudan,

Ukraine, Myanmar, India, Iran and Afghanistan, large-scale violence and human rights violations amounting to genocide and crimes against humanity are visited upon those deemed to be the enemy within or the enemy without. In this exercise, the perpetrators are often aided and abetted by states like the US, UK and others engaged in reshaping the global order to serve their own financial interests and unrestrained abuse of power.

Closer to home, we watch in disbelief as the UK government, whose members were ironically, once the loudest advocates of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), call for its 'reform' in response to anti-immigration racism and right-wing populism. The government that lauded the ECHR as 'one of the great achievements of the post-war years' has, within 9 months of coming into office, joined many other European states in decrying the EHCR for interfering with their political agenda, particularly on immigration - for being 'out of step' with 'common sense', and the 'national interest'. It is an approach that only serves to legitimise right-wing concerns about human rights. Rather than an essential means by which to curb the overreach of political power, human rights law is increasingly regarded by the UK and other states as an impediment to sovereign governance, both at a domestic and international level.

Yet, where there is tyranny and oppression, there is also brave resistance mounted by ordinary people in the face of immense adversity. Our humanity is on the line, and to hold tyranny to account, we are often required to use international human rights law, however imperfect it may be, as an important part of our political resistance.

Witness for example, the arrest warrants issued by the International Criminal Court naming Netanyahu and his cohorts for crimes against humanity and genocide in Gaza: the use of mass starvation as a weapon of war and the destruction of the entire life-sustaining infrastructure of Gaza, including homes, water networks and hospitals as well as cultural and educational institutions, described accurately as 'civic annihilation' by the global charity Médicins Sans Frontières.

Elsewhere, women from Iran and Afghanistan are fervently advocating for the recognition of gender apartheid as a crime against humanity, confronting some of the most egregious and pervasive state-sponsored assaults on the human rights of women. These violations manifest through systematic violence and terror aimed at oppressing, persecuting and annihilating them; the denial of equality and autonomy; and their exclusion from every sphere of human endeavour, encompassing education, employment, healthcare, legal rights, familial roles, and public and political life. While such specific transgressions against women's human rights were not even contemplated by either Lauterpacht or

Lemkin, Iranian and Afghan women advanced a step closer to achieving their aspirations when, in January 2025, the International Criminal Court pursued arrest warrants for Taliban leaders due to their brutalization of women and girls. In this context, the parameters of international human rights law are being redefined, ensuring its relevance in an increasingly autocratic and repressive global landscape.

It is rightly argued that the international legal order is itself highly flawed and selectively applied to serve the interests of powerful states who bend the rules to suit their needs and ensure that judgements are unenforceable. But we also see what can happen if there is no moral and legal framework to check political power. Crimes against humanity and genocide remain an integral part of our resistance to the human rights crisis that surrounds us. If the emergence of these legal concepts represented a high point in humanity's endeavour to forge an ethical world order in response to the horrific realities of the Holocaust and other mass atrocities, the co-ordinated dismantling of human rights today represents the nadir of humanity. In this respect, ultimately, East West Street serves as an urgent warning cry to heed the lessons from history.

Pragna Patel is the co-founder and co-director of Project Resist. She is the former director and founding member of the Southall Black Sisters (SBS) advocacy and campaigning centre where she worked from 1982 to Jan 2022 with a break in 1993 when she left to train and practice as a solicitor. She was also a founding member of Women Against Fundamentalism, and she has written extensively on race, gender and religion. Pragna is an editorial collective member of Feminist Dissent.

Review of *Secular Muslim Feminism: An Alternative Voice in the War of Ideas* by Hind Elhinnawy (Bloomsbury, 2024)

Yasmin Rehman*

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I cannot express how excited I was when a friend sent me a link to this new publication. At last, a book about Muslim women 'that challenges the oversimplified and monolithic portrayals of Muslim women' as passive, subjugated victims of Islam that has dominated for far too long. Instead Elhinnawy presents us with the rich and long history of feminist activism in non-western and Muslim majority countries, of diverse struggles, contexts and ideologies as well as a glimpse of the immense potential for change that secular Muslim feminists can and are creating for themselves, their communities and the wider world. This book is a must read for anyone interested in gaining wider insight and knowledge of the struggles that face Muslim feminists in the West and in Muslim majority countries from religious fundamentalists and the Right.

Elhinnawy gives voice to and platforms secular Muslim feminists across the world, who have and are involved in challenging religious fundamentalisms, Sharia laws, the imposition of religious dress codes, gender inequalities, racism, colonialism and imperialism and much more. The book makes clear that advocating for women's rights, challenging religious, cultural and traditional practices can and is being done without opposing religion but critically in prioritising the need for, and preservation of secular spaces in guaranteeing equal treatment for all, including minority communities.

Many of the women interviewed for this book have helped shape my own feminist activism and my identity as a secular Muslim feminist. Some are missing but many including Marieme Helie-Lucas and Women Living Under Muslim Laws, Zainah Anwar and Sisters in Islam, Nawal El Saadawi, Saba Mehmood, Musawah, Afiya Zia, Azar Nafisi, Shirin Ebadi, Leyla Qasim, Taslima Nasrin, Mona Eltahawy, Tehmina Kazi and Maryam Namazie are recognised and their activism recorded. I have also been introduced to the work of many Muslim feminists, I'm ashamed to admit I did not know – including Elhinnawy herself. More about this later.

Elhinnawy analyses the narratives secular Muslim feminists draw on to articulate their political, ideological viewpoints. Further, she demonstrates how secular Muslim feminists and Muslim feminists working within a religious framing see the 'other' as 'monolithic and fixed, lacking in nuance, diversity and evolution' thus limiting opportunities to develop strategic alliances that would advance their shared struggles. However, whilst optimistic about the immense potential for positive change, she warns that secular Muslim feminists and feminism, not only runs the risk of, but are indeed often co-opted by the Right and thereby reinforce racist, anti-Muslim tropes and stereotypes often 'masquerading as concern for the subjugated Muslim woman'.

Elhinnawy presents the obstacles that secular Muslim feminists face including the discrediting and marginalisation of secular voices as pro-Western, racist, anti-Islam and inauthentic by Muslims and by many non-Muslims She describes the hijacking of feminist language and discourse by the Islamic feminist movement, the imposition of a singular Muslim identity that denies an inclusive, diverse understanding of religious and cultural traditions and practices and the exclusion of secular women's voices by the Left. She also analyses and critiques the idea that the war on terror and ongoing conflicts in Muslim majority countries can liberate the West from the scourge of Muslim terrorism and simultaneously free Muslim women from oppressive and violent Muslim men.

Elhinnawy includes in her challenges and critiques the 'celebration of Muslim women's agency' often presented as an alternative to western secularism and values which, she states, results in an accommodation of patriarchal and conservative aims that does little to further women's rights or emancipation. As she says, 'While recognising the contributions of Muslim feminists and Islamic reformists to the advancement of feminist awareness and women's empowerment in Muslim contexts, there is scant evidence supporting the notion that Islamist politics have led to tangible improvements in the material and symbolic status of women in any Muslim setting.' As I read this, I could not help but think of the ways in which religious leadership has been elevated by Western governments as the authentic voice of 'the Muslim community' and a search for solutions that seems to be caught in religious scriptures and framing.

In closing, I cannot write about this book without saying something about the author, Hind Elhinnawy. Despite living and working in the same city for many years, it has only been through the publication of this book that we, two avowedly secular Muslim feminists, have connected. The more I have found out about her the more evident is her courage and

commitment to advocating for women's rights. A former costume designer and now women's rights advocate and academic, Elhinnawy has dedicated more than two decades to advocating for women's rights in the MENA region and beyond. She has contributed to significant law and policy reform in Egypt and not least by being the first woman to file and win a paternity case in the Egyptian courts defying religious and social norms. Having met Elhinnawy, I can see she is a tour de force. I am devouring her other writings and look forward to seeing, reading and discovering more of what she does in the future.

Yasmin Rehman is a secular feminist activist and former CEO of Juno Women's Aid in Nottinghamshire, UK. She is an editorial collective member of *Feminist Dissent*.

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