Vienna’s legacy: feminism and human rights

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The United Nations World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna is widely recognized as the tipping point in efforts to gain international acceptance that ‘women’s rights are human rights’. The affirmation of women’s rights as full universal rights, and the identification of violence against women as a key issue on the global human rights agenda, initiated a process of integration of women and of gender-based perspectives into human rights theory and practice.

This success did not come about in a vacuum. Women organized for the Vienna Conference as part of the growing global feminist movement that emerged in the 1980s and 90s - a social movement that crossed Global South and North lines and saw the UN as an important international space for advancing women’s rights.

The Global Campaign for Women’s Human Rights in Vienna was kicked off in 1991 with a petition to the UN Conference that asserted, “violence against women violates human rights,” and calling on it “to comprehensively address women’s human rights at every level of its proceedings.” The petition touched a nerve. In this pre-internet era, it was translated at the grassroots level into 25 languages and quickly circulated in some 124 countries, arousing feminist interest in the upcoming conference and sparking widespread debate over why women’s rights were not already considered human rights.

The campaign aimed at transforming human rights to be more inclusive by bringing women’s experiences and feminist gender analysis to bear on all issues. We sought to demonstrate what violations of human rights such as torture, denial of the freedom of expression and movement as well as of the right to food and security look like in the lives of women. Further, the campaign did not present women only as victims who are “vulnerable” to abuse, but also as activists with agency who are a powerful human rights constituency for change.

The VDPA assertion that human rights are universal and that the “promotion and protection of all human rights is a legitimate concern of the international community” is one of Vienna’s most important achievements. Since the human rights of women are often at the center of challenges to the universality of human rights, this aspect of Vienna is especially important for women. Moreover, the defense of the universality of rights for women is also crucial to any defense of the universality of human rights; if the violation of the rights of half of humanity can be conditional in the name of culture, religion or nationality, then the rights of anyone can be so conditioned.

After Vienna, a number of gains were made in the effort to establish more systematic standard-setting on women’s human rights in general, and especially around gender-based violence. The UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DVAW) in December of 1993, and the Commission on Human Rights, at its first session after Vienna, appointed a Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women. In 1994, the Commission adopted its first resolution on gender integration, which paved the way for regular sessions on this topic at the Human Rights Council, as well as a wide range of efforts to bring women’s perspectives more fully into work on human rights. For example, the inclusion of gender-based persecution and a gender quota for judges in the founding statute of the International Criminal Court broke new ground in...
addressing women's rights from the beginning of the creation of a global human rights body, rather than trying to tack it on later. Advances have been made at the regional level also, such as the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa.

The refrain “women's rights are human rights” became a guiding principle in other areas beyond the formal human rights system and coincided with the effort in the 1990s to mainstream human rights into development and other aspects of UN operations. It was adopted by those working to affirm reproductive and health rights in the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development, to reinforce women's socio-economic rights at the Copenhagen Summit on Social Development in 1995, and to produce a Platform for Action framed around human rights at the Fourth World Conference on Women, in Beijing in 1995.

The Vienna, Cairo, and Beijing conferences also inspired greater grassroots interest in the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and gave impetus to the creation of the Optional Protocol that strengthens CEDAW as a vehicle for implementation of women's rights.

Feminist perspectives have also influenced national and global work on gender in relation to issues of war and armed conflict. The first ever Security Council resolution (1325) on women, peace and security was adopted in 2000, followed by further Council measures on violence against women in conflict.

Since Vienna, feminist thinking has contributed to human rights through its critique of the socially constructed separation of the public and private spheres, demonstrating how human rights violations that might be denounced in the ‘public sphere’, such as violence and confinement, are often tolerated or excused when they are committed in the so-called private arena of the family. This has added to a growing human rights understanding of the importance of addressing violations by “non-state actors,” and how the state is often in collusion with private actors like the family, corporations, private militias, or others.

A fundamentalist backlash against women’s claims to equality, and especially to sexual and reproductive rights, has seized on national sovereignty, culture and religion as excuses for perpetuating patriarchal discrimination and violence. Most governments pay no more than lip service to their obligations to the human rights of women, and with economic austerity policies on the rise in the past few years, resources needed to bring about substantive equality for women are sorely lacking.

A major challenge today is the growing gap between women whose economic and personal status has improved and those who have been further marginalized as the gap between rich and poor, connected and powerless, has widened.