Overcoming the Division Between Universalists and Cultural Relativists in the International Women's Human Rights Movement

Lauren Campbell
Denison University
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The division between universalists and cultural relativists is a major issue in any human rights debate. This divide can impede rational discussion and encourage arguments over theory rather than the practical issues at hand. Universalists believe that human rights standards are identical for everyone and that the same standards should be applied to all people and observed by all authorities. Cultural relativists, on the other hand, believe that human rights must be mediated by the values of distinct cultures and that every culture should be able to define and follow its own notion of human rights. This division exists within the international women's rights lobby, embodied most obviously in the division between white, middle-class, Western academics and non-Western activists. The universalist theory has dominated the international women's rights lobby, embodied most obviously in the division between white, middle-class, Western academics and non-Western activists. The universalist theory has dominated the international women's rights lobby, with some Western activists even appearing unaware of the alternative theory.

However, there is strong opposition to universalism within the lobby. Cultural relativists argue that universalism is generally articulated by middle-class, hetero-sexual, Western women whose concerns do not represent the concerns of all women (Lugones and Spelman 498). There is no single "women's perspective" and attempting to create one, critics say, further suppresses marginalized group.

Even though this deep division exists within the international women's rights movement, lobbyists presented a united front at the Second World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993. At the Vienna Conference, they successfully petitioned for the inclusion of important new language naming women's rights as human rights for the first time at the international level. This was a major accomplishment for the movement, making women's issues more visible and giving activists access to established human rights instruments to resolve their grievances. Identifying women's rights as human rights also empowered women as agents with legal claims acting on their own behalf, instead of as victims begging for rights from an unresponsive framework.

Although divided by race, class, culture, and geography, the international women's movement was able to recognize certain issues of common concern. Activists focused specifically on these concerns during preparations for the Vienna Conference and at the Conference itself. They were able to compromise on potentially divisive issues, such as the usefulness of rights-based language and the struggle between different kinds of rights. This cooperative spirit was based on reciprocal dialogue and discussion, which was fostered well before preparations for the Vienna Conference began, starting during the UN Decade for Women.

The Development of the International Women's Movement

The international women's lobby has mushroomed since the United Nations Decade for Women in 1975-1985. This period marked the first time women's issues received serious attention at the international level. The conferences held during the UN Decade for Women laid the groundwork for communication and cooperation among members of the international women's lobby, which would prove to be the movement's vital foundation. The strategies exchanged and the relationships developed at the World Conferences on Women in Mexico City in 1975, in Copenhagen in 1980, and in Nairobi in 1985 would later be mobilized in preparation for the Vienna Conference in 1995.

In the years between the end of the UN Decade for Women and preparation for the Vienna Conference in the early 90s, much progress was made on issues that had only begun to be addressed at the 1985 Nairobi Conference. By the early 1990s, the international women's rights lobby had developed a number of prominent regional organizations and international networks, which facilitated communication between the various members (Freidman 22). Women's organizations became adept at information sharing, making especially efficient use of the Internet (McFarland 8).

Organized and coordinated women's organizations were already well-established when the time came to prepare for the Vienna Conference in 1993. The groundwork that had been laid over the past twenty years enabled the international women's lobby to seize control of the Conference, securing the inclusion of vitally important clauses in the Vienna Declaration.
CREATING DIALOGUE

As the preceding brief overview of the development of the international women's rights movement indicates, active grassroots and regional organizations aided inter- and intra-cultural dialogue. The women's lobby historically relied on grassroots organizations and was skilled at organizing at the local level (Friedman 24). A major strength of the international women's movement was its reliance on strong local bases, without assistance from established non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or home governments, sometimes even in the face of active opposition (Bunch, "Organizing" 146). The global conferences during the UN Decade for Women allowed these local organizations to form networks, facilitating dialogue. This dialogue was crucial to narrowing the theoretical division between universalists and cultural relativists. Face-to-face communication was vital for building trust between the various groups. During these meetings, women from opposite theoretical positions talked together. Cultural relativists expressed their frustration that Western universalists dominated the human rights debate, that feminist critiques of the human rights framework were grounded in Western concerns, and that Western concerns did not resonate with the rest of the world (Kerr 167).

Instead of allowing this disagreement to fragment the movement, the international women's lobby focused on reaching a mutually acceptable consensus through discussion and dialogue. In the women's rights lobby, women who highlighted differences of opinion were seen as helping to identify previously unknown protests and perspectives, rather than as isolating members from each other (Farley 179). Openly confronting and respecting these differences actually made the movement stronger and more united.

Although this development may seem fairly obvious and an essential step forward for the women's rights lobby, one that few other human rights movements have been able to take. The activists within the women's lobby made this step forward because they had to do so. Since the UN Decade for Women, the women's rights lobby had been moving towards the idea that their greatest strength lay in their ability to unify (Antrubo quoted in Kerr 167). Openly confronting and respecting these differences actually made the movement stronger and more united.

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to focus on this issue at Vienna not only made it more difficult for their opponents to argue against them—who, after all, could question the support violence against women?—but also made internal divisions much less likely.

COMPROMISING ON POTENTIALLY DIVISIVE ISSUES

The international women's rights lobby neutralized a potentially divisive issue, the debate over the usefulness of international human rights law. In the wider human rights debate, there is a major division between those who believe human rights laws are sufficient for ensuring the well-being of the world's citizens and those who believe rights-based language alone is insufficient for the task. In preparing for the Vienna Conference, the women's movement agreed that, as helpful as rights language is, its effectiveness is limited (Cook 5). Activists believed that rights language alone would not be sufficient to protect women's human rights. They also agreed that present articulations of human rights law were insufficient to address women's needs.

However, rights language offered some powerful advantages which the women's lobby found appealing. Rights language is an established tool recognized as legitimate by many of the world's authorities. Including women's rights in the human rights frameworks puts the force of the established UN structure behind the international women's rights lobby. Even if they offer inadequate protection, current articulations of human rights law give groups some measure of necessary protection (An-Na'im 172).

Although some analysts say that "women's disadvantages are often based on structural injustice and winning a case in court will not change this" (Charlesworth quoted in Cook 4), there are a number of ways women seek to make human rights more receptive to them. Activists within the women's rights lobby encourage women to take ownership of rights language. It has long been limited to men's experiences, but now women's perspective must shape international human rights law. As more women, from many diverse backgrounds, enter the human rights dialogue, their perspectives and experiences gain more influence and currency in the international structure (Romany in Cook 4).

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The language included in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action reflects this compromise. Women's rights were defined as "full and equal participation of women in political, civil, economic, social, and cultural life." Universalists in the women's rights lobby could support this language, since it recognizes women's human rights as an "in-divisible part of human rights" (Denai 100). Cultural relativists were satisfied because economic, social, and cultural rights were specifically cited, beyond just political and civil rights.

Human rights instruments developed after the Vienna Conference reflect this new demand for increased recognition of second generation rights. International human rights instruments are willing to address economic, social, and cultural issues, in addition to civil and political issues. So far, few complaints dealing with women's issues have been brought before international bodies, especially few on economic, social, and cultural rights or the inability to intervene in the private sphere. However, some important cases have been won that explicitly defend women's human rights (Byrnes 210).

As the issues discussed above illustrate, the international women's lobby has managed to define many divisive issues, including the distinction between the public and private spheres, the relative importance of the first and second generation of rights, and the sufficiency of international human rights language. Any of these issues could have been a major stumbling block for any aspect of the human rights debate, impeding rational discussion and fragmenting the movement.

The international women's rights lobby did not ignore these challenging issues, but instead faced them, discussed them, and reached a mutually acceptable agreement. This ability to neutralize potentially divisive issues extended even to the fundamental division between universalists and cultural relativists.

In preparations leading up to the Vienna Conference, and at the Conference itself, activists generally recognized the validity, strengths, and weaknesses of both the universalists' and cultural relativists' positions. As Arvonne Fraser wrote in a chapter published in preparation for the Vienna Conference, "We [the international women's rights lobby] must build and maintain coalitions across political lines, understanding the tensions we shall have to deal with, and respecting the right to disagree on some matters while agreeing on our common agenda and moving it forward" (153). This ability to respect and accept apparently mutually exclusive theories seems to be leading towards the articulation of an alternative approach to human rights, with an emphasis on common, not universal or cultural, human rights standards.

Many analysts in the women's movement articulate the need to transform the human rights framework to make it more responsive to women. They encourage members of the international women's lobby to work within the existing framework, while at the same time changing it to be more receptive to the concerns of women. Women themselves must define their own vision of human rights by identifying what is central to them as human beings. This vision should be based on women's experiences, insights, and consciousness. Charlotte Bunch urges women's rights lobbyists not to "ask existing human rights groups for their recognition or [try] to twist women into existing human rights categories" (141). Opinions like this indicate that the international women's rights movement is ready and willing to articulate a new theory of human rights.

AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO HUMAN RIGHTS

In their article "Have We Got a Theory for You? Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for 'The Woman's Voice'" Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman propose such a theory. Their article is concerned with rejecting an imperialist notion of feminism and articulating a new theory that "celebrates women's different ways of thinking, doing, and being without separating women from each other on account of these differences (Lugones and Spelman 491). Some have interpreted Lugones' and Spelman's rejection of the "imperialist view" as a rejection of universalism in favor of cultural relativism (Charlesworth 62). For the purposes of this paper, however, "imperialist" and "universalist" are not synonyms. As has been noted above, universalists in the international women's lobby were concerned with integrating diverse opinions from as many cultures as possible. Universalists certainly do not consider themselves imperialist, and universalists within the women's rights lobby are aware of this criticism and have consciously worked to become more responsive to cultural relativists.

The new theory of Lugones and Spelman is not, however, a cultural relativist theory. It does not advocate separate groups of people, each articulating separate visions of women's rights. Instead, this theory encourages all women rights activists to work and speak together, while continuing to recognize their differences.

As a category, write Lugones and Spelman, women have been silenced and oppressed, but the time has come for women to reclaim their voice. However, "women" is not a single category. Women are divided by class, race, ethnicity, religion, cultural identification, sexual orientation, and geography. In general the "women's voice" that has been heard in feminist debate, and in the international human rights framework, has been Western, white, middle-class, heterosexual, and Christian. This voice represents a single perspective from the broad category that includes all women, but it excludes all other women. It also encourages an imperialist view since it assumes that this Western perspective "knows more" about other women than these women know about themselves. As long as this imperialist view is dominant, other women are forced to adopt the dominant culture if they want to talk about women's issues, while the dominant culture does not have to adjust to others (Lugones and Spelman 498).

Lugones and Spelman suggest creating a new, non-imperialist theory based on friendship. This new theory would make room for the articulations, interpretations, reflections, experiences, and perspectives of many diverse groups of women, not just the traditionally dominant group (Lugones and Spelman 499). By its very nature, this new theory must be developed by groups working together, not isolated groups developing their own criteria, but then trying to incorporate it to include more groups (Lugones and Spelman 503). The spirit of friendship the authors describe is based on mutual respect, reciprocity, dialogue, and concern for each other's well-being as a basis for creating a new theory: as the authors put it, working and speaking together, two people from different backgrounds can develop a theory that applies to one, or possibly both of them.
however, one person cannot observe herself and people like her and then use those observations to describe someone else (Lugones and Spelman 500).

To create this spirit of friendship, all the groups involved must be patient, open to new ideas, and willing to learn from each other. They must respect their differences. Western women face the added challenge of giving up some measure of their power. The authors caution them not to use their power to overwhelm marginalized groups with their education or require other groups to use dominant Western languages (Lugones and Spelman 505). Instead, Western women need to be unobtrusive and should use their influence to "provide space and time for other women to speak" (Lugones and Spelman 504). Western women's rights activists have an obligation to give up their traditional dominance, not out of any paternalistic guilt, but simply because this Western dominance "seriously harms" marginalized groups (Lugones and Spelman 499).

This theory is far from complete and is very much a work in progress; however, it seems that the international women's lobby is beginning to articulate such a new theory. The elements Lugones and Spelman describe—mutual respect, reciprocal dialogue, concern for the other's well-being, and recognition of common issues—are all apparent in the development of the international women's movement, in the preparations for the Vienna Conference, and at the conference itself. The groups and networks that were developed in preparation for the Vienna Conference are still active and focused on making sure women's human rights are a part of upcoming UN conferences (Friedman 31). As these groups continue to use international networks and discuss issues in search of a mutual consensus, they move closer to articulating an alternative theory of human rights.

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Both the creature in *Frankenstein* and Frank from *The Wasp Factory* exist in a position of liminality. In his essay, “Limits, Liminality and the Present: Foucault’s Ontology of Social Criticism,” explains liminality as a period of transition when “the past has lost its grip and the future has not taken definite shape.” Such times are those which problematise the existing moral and social structures...from the process of transition itself” (MacKenzie). Monsters serve as configurations of the liminal, as the liminal personae who cannot escape the experience of liminality, or marginality. As such, they have been separated from the existing social structure with no promise of aggregation, or unification into a new society (and it would take a “new society” to include uncategorized, i.e. monstrous, persons such as these). Thus, the liminal personae is considered “structurally invisible” - they are at once no longer classified and not yet classified” (MacKenzie). Victor Turner furthers the idea of the liminal to constitute a realm “of pure possibility where novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise;” an arena “where we are dealing...with the essentially unstructured,” and a time “associated with the unbounded, the infinite, the limitless” (Mac). Turner emphasizes the transitional element of liminality, marking it as both conceptually and physically unrealized. I will argue that liminal constructions are unrealized for one of two reasons: 1) we have not created a category to place the liminal in, or 2) we willfully refuse to categorize the liminal. Either way, they become monstrous formations, or as Jeffrey Cohen puts it, “disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration” (6). Cohen argues that because of the monster’s “ontological liminality,” the monster “notoriously appears at times of crisis as a kind of third term that problematises the clash of extremes—as that ‘which questions binary thinking and introduces a crisis’”(6).

In both Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Iain Banks’ *The Wasp Factory*, the monster’s liminality helps to reveal the transcendental conceptions of sex, gender, and power. Both the Creature and Frank deal with the anxiety of their marginality by seeking to destroy the system that created them (and abandoned them) as well as the “perfect beings” who fit neatly into the ordered system. However, while the Creature in *Frankenstein* desires to be included into the dominant structure of being—into a categorized structure, Frank insists on resisting categories, and, as a result, disrupts the binaries of dominant society. Frank says, “But I am still me; I am the same person, with the same memories and the same deeds done, the same (small) achievements, the same (appealing) crimes to my name” (182). Even though Frank finds out he is a girl, and not a castrated boy as he was led to believe by his father, he still defines himself/herself as the uncategorized, inviting us to include him/her into the structure of being; or rather, more appropriately, to exclude us.

In this essay, I will use a gender analysis to explore the monster as the liminal Other. First, I will portray the Creature from *Frankenstein* as a sexless limenal personae whose despair is caused, in part, by society’s inability to include it into the structure of being. Second, I will argue that Frank from *The Wasp Factory*, like the Creature, is a sexless monster of the not-funy-functional variety (castrated). When given the opportunity to become fully sexed (operational female), Frank refuses to throw away his/her/its identity as the “unsexed,” which is part of who Frank is, part of Frank’s history of liminality. Finally, I will argue that while Mary Shelley’s Creature is a liminal monster that disrupts gender, its longing to be included into the bourgeois system of gender and class protects the author and her audience from any real or dangerous threat of destruction. Put simply, the Creature is a monster who wants to reject its monstrosity, its power to destroy the way things are. Frank, on the other hand, accepts his liminal status, and unlike the Creature, is not head-over-heels in love with beautiful, perfect beings who define what it means to be normal. The key turning point for Frank is not when he is supposedly castrated at the beginning of the novel, but when Frank is told that [he] is actually a “normal” female. It is Frank’s rejection of femininity and embrace of a female masculinity that keeps [her] outside of the situated gender categories. Frank is the more disruptive monster of the two novels. By accepting her monstrosity, she remains a continuing threat to everyone not in her position of liminality. *Shelley’s Monster: The Creature Wants to Play, Too*

Cohen argues that the monster is “difference made flesh, come to dwell among us” (7). The difference for the creature lies in the inability to classify it as anything human or natural. As a non-human, it is difficult to establish the creature’s sex, even though it was constructed in the likeness of a “male.” Victor, the monster’s creator, initially avoids referring to his creation’s gender or sex. His first conceptions of it are “a being of gigantic stature” and “a new