Editorial: Human Rights in an Age of Populist Authoritarianism

Stephen Cowden, Gita Sahgal, Amrita Shodhan and Rashmi Varma*

*Correspondence: feministdissent@gmail.com

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)

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

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).

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

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

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).*

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

'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.

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.

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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