

# Introduction

## *Gender, Communication, and Women's Human Rights*

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### **Women's Rights in a Shrinking Civic Space**

*All it takes is a political, economic or religious crisis for women's rights, our rights, to be called into question. These rights can never be taken for granted. You must stay vigilant your entire life.*<sup>1</sup> Simone de Beauvoir speaking in 1974, quoted in Monteil (2011, p. 41)

Half a century after de Beauvoir's warning, its prescience is striking. The 2022 CIVICUS report on the state of civil society concluded that "women too often remain at the whim of politics" (CIVICUS, 2022, p. 6). Despite some advances, particularly during the 1990s, in the twenty-first century it is clear that women's rights cannot be taken for granted (Birchall, 2020a, 2020b). Nowhere have these rights been so comprehensively overturned as in Afghanistan, following the country's takeover by the Taliban in August 2021 (Amnesty International, 2022). But in June 2022 a United States Supreme Court ruling ended a constitutional right to abortion that American women had held for nearly 50 years. In South Korea Yoon Suk-yeol was elected president in 2022 following a campaign that included a pledge to abolish the country's Ministry for Gender Equality, established in 2001 (McCurry, 2022). In October 2022 Sweden's new right-leaning government abandoned the ground-breaking feminist foreign policy introduced by the country's previous administration in 2014 (Walfridsson, 2022). Women's gains, great or small, remain precarious and subject to reversal.

These recent reversals have taken place in the context of a decades-long shrinking of civic space, which has been "structurally and purposefully squeezed" in a very large number of countries (Buyse, 2018, p. 967). By 2021 the world had experienced "16 consecutive years of decline in global freedom" – during which "checks on abuse of power and human rights violations have eroded" (Repucci & Slipowicz, 2022, p. 1). Those 16 years of decline affected all world regions and measurement categories, including freedom of expression and belief, and associational and organizational rights (op. cit., p. 14). Compounding a pre-existing trend, the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2022<sup>2</sup> triggered numerous nondemocratic or illiberal governments to impose new restrictions on civil liberties, to limit protests, delay elections, and introduce new mass surveillance techniques (Carothers & Wong, 2020, p. 1).

The squeeze on civic space has extended to previously inclusive global forums including the United Nations. For example, at the COP26 climate summit in 2021 civil society organizations (CSOs) were “pushed to the back of the queue” behind the private sector (CIVICUS *op. cit.*, p. 45). At the 2022 Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the foremost annual global women’s rights gathering, most civil society representatives were obliged to take part virtually, and even those who could attend in person were not admitted to sessions where the meeting’s outcomes were negotiated. “For the foreseeable future,” says CIVICUS, civil society at CSW is destined to work “from the margins” (*ibid.*). Of course, women have found ways of fighting back (see for example, Ahmad, 2022; Kachambwa, 2022). However, vociferous anti-feminist rhetoric (Cupać & Ebetürk, 2020) and the shrinking communicative space for media and gender equality CSOs (Kassa & Sarikakis, 2022) are ever-present obstacles to women’s rights globally.

There is an obvious link between the rolling back of women’s rights and assaults on democracy. Nitasha Kaul (2021) has analyzed how misogyny works as an effective political strategy for right-wing leaders: they may use it to promote an identity politics that demonizes opponents as feminine/inferior/anti-national, or to manipulate and distort progressive ideas – using “progressive gender talk to promote regressive gender agendas” (p. 1621); see also Chenoweth and Marks (2022). This analysis connects with an important strand of feminist media and cultural studies scholarship that has critiqued the instrumentalization of feminism by the “neoliberal onslaught” of capitalism (Fraser, 2009, p. 117), in which media and communication systems are complicit. From neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2018), which tutors a stratum of (white, middle-class) women in “having it all,” to popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Press & Tripodi, 2021), which schools women in consumer-based “empowerment,” these versions of feminism are predicated on a politics that “exculpates social structures and institutions from responsibility for gender justice” and is involved in “making over feminism along individualistic and neoliberal lines” (Orgad & Gill, 2022, p. 28).

Feminist political theorists including Wendy Brown (2015, 2019) have analyzed neoliberalism’s “stealth revolution” across social, economic, and political life as an assault on democratic rights – a hegemonic force that legitimates inequality and in which everything and everyone is “economized.” This creeping economization has become clear in recent UN plans such as the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda,<sup>3</sup> which seeks to “empower women and girls” within a traditional economic model,<sup>4</sup> and which lacks any strong human rights language (Esquivel, 2016; Gallagher, 2017; Vega Montiel & Rubinstein, 2021). Equally, the UN’s 2021 Action Coalitions – designed to “update” and supersede the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) – have abandoned the BPfA commitments on media and communication but include a strand on “technology and innovation” aimed at achieving “equal digital opportunities” for women within “inclusive digital economies,”<sup>5</sup> In both these cases, the depoliticization of the feminist agenda and the influence of a neoliberal economic worldview are evident (Vega Montiel & Rubinstein, 2021).

In an essay published in 2009, Nancy Fraser foresaw processes like these when she distinguished between feminism as a social movement and feminism as discourse. In the context of neoliberal capitalism, Fraser argued, feminism in the discursive sense has “gone rogue.” As a result, the feminist movement is “increasingly confronted with a strange shadowy version of itself, an uncanny double that it can neither simply embrace nor wholly disavow” (p. 114). These paradoxes and contradictions – in particular, the incorporation of feminist ideas into media discourse that serves to deny the politics of feminism as a movement, and into policy discourse that ventriloquizes a version of feminism in official documents and speeches – have created what cultural theorist Angela McRobbie has described as “disarticulation,” a process that, through its insistent focus on female individualism and consumerism, severs the seams of connection between groups of women who might find common cause, and “makes unlikely the forging of

alliances, affiliations or connections” (2009, p. 26), whether locally, nationally, or internationally (see Gallagher, 2011, pp. 132–133).

In 2019 Nancy Fraser extended her analysis of a decade earlier with a critique of “progressive neoliberalism” whose aim is to “diversify” existing social hierarchies by “empowering,” “leaning in” and “cracking the glass ceiling” – a feminism for the 1 percent, whose principal beneficiaries, she argues, can only be those with the requisite social, cultural, and economic capital: “everyone else would be stuck in the basement” (p. 14). To counter this version of feminism, with its vision of “equal opportunity domination,” Fraser and colleagues (Arruzza et al., 2019) propose a “feminism for the 99 percent” – a reimagining of gender justice in anti-capitalist form, “that connects with anti-racists, environmentalists, and labor and immigrant rights activists” (p. 5). In the context of media and communication scholarship, these ideas imply a move away from versions of feminist analysis that have focused on patterns of representation in specific media texts or industries toward a feminist structural analysis of the constraints on women’s lives and rights that arise from systemic processes in which the actions of many people are abstractly or impersonally mediated (Fraser, 2009, p. 115).

## **A Feminist Intervention on Gender, Communication, and Women’s Human Rights**

Against the background of these developments the *Handbook on Gender, Communication, and Women’s Human Rights* sets out to make an intervention in the debates on women’s rights, democracy, and neoliberal politics through the lens of feminist communication scholarship.

One of the major contributions of feminism has been to make explicit the gender-determined framework of so-called “universal” human and communication rights (Gallagher, 2014). Feminist theory and feminist research have shown that women’s and men’s enjoyment of rights such as freedom of expression or access to information must be understood in the context gender-based differences (Byerly, 2018). These are decisive in the structuring of power, the shaping of social and cultural institutions, and the development of systems of ideological authority. Media and communication technologies are deeply embedded, both institutionally and ideologically, in the structures and systems that support gender differentiated rights, and for the past 50 years feminist scholars have focused attention on media and communication systems as major agents in the processes through which gender equality and women’s rights are determined.

During those five decades there have been important shifts in the conceptualization of the issues addressed by feminist scholars and activists. The earliest preoccupations of the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s – equal access to media employment and decision-making, fair representation in media content – were expressed in the language of “discrimination” rather than “rights.” This conceptualization resulted in a predominantly micro-level focus, in which issues of representation and access were explored within particular settings and environments. Starting in the late 1980s and early 1990s women’s movements began to use a human rights framework to analyze and explain the gender-specific nature of concepts, definitions, and practices used to determine and allocate rights (Gallagher, 2014, p. 236). Prior to the adoption of that framework, with its slogan “women’s rights are human rights,” women’s rights were regarded as separate from and secondary to “general” human rights (Reilly, 2009). This separation and hierarchical positioning conditioned the status accorded to women’s struggles within the media and communication arena. Seen as special and separate, women’s connection to other, “general” communication movements of the late twentieth century was often ignored. However, in the past 20 years

the shift toward a rights-based conceptualization of gender and media issues has increasingly focused on macro-level considerations of media policy, governance, and accountability which, although they had preoccupied critical communication scholars for decades, until relatively recently had been somewhat neglected in feminist media scholarship (see, Vega Montiel & Macharia, 2018).

The *Handbook* aims to redress the balance between micro and macro-level approaches by highlighting some of the most recent work by scholars who critically analyze developments in media and communication in structural terms, and from a feminist standpoint. The volume includes a range of feminist perspectives on long-established questions pertaining to media and digital content and institutions which, in the light of enormous changes in the media environment, present new opportunities and challenges. It covers some of the traditional, core issues of feminist media theory and research – gender-based violence and sexist stereotypes in media and digital contents, the position of women within media and communication industries, debates on freedom of expression and on communication governance – based on contemporary analyses of the progress made and the problems that remain. At the same time, it addresses new issues that have been added to the twenty-first century scholarly agenda – gendered disinformation, accountability of digital platforms, social media use and impact, online misogyny and violence, gendered surveillance, artificial intelligence (AI) – from the perspective of women’s human rights. The “digital turn” in feminist media scholarship is evident in the focus of many chapters, illustrating both the risks associated with digital communication and the possibilities it offers for new social formations that combat the neoliberal reduction of the political to the personal (Baer, 2016).

A further aim of the *Handbook* is to give prominence to the importance of feminist media advocacy and activism in promoting change. Feminist scholars from all regions of the world have acted – at times individually, at other times collectively and together with feminist activists, advocates, and with women media workers – to advance debate and development at three levels: by providing data and building knowledge; by helping to set the public agenda on communication debates; and by attempting to influence the formulation of policy. Feminist theory and practice are shaped by historical as well as geographical location, and the *Handbook’s* contributors include a mix of feminist scholars, advocates, and activists who have worked to theorize, analyze, and advance the agenda on women’s human right to communicate in different parts of the world.

Shaped during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022), many of the *Handbook’s* contributors reflect on the pandemic’s impact within their areas of expertise, how it has exacerbated pre-existing structures of inequality, escalated the spread of disinformation, amplified the precarity of women’s rights, and demonstrated the need for strong feminist critiques of exclusionary power regimes. In these and other reflections a theme that surfaces frequently across the chapters is the need to consider “lived experiences” – to ask questions about the human actors who are frequently universalized in communication analysis and research (Sarikakis, 2012, p. 403), but who in reality are affected in a multiplicity of ways contingent on their sex, gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexuality, locality, and more, and by the intersections between these. An intersectional approach is therefore called for in feminist analytical frameworks. As Angharad Valdivia (2022) has pointed out, rhetorical support for intersectionality does not necessarily result in intersectional scholarship, though Stine Eckert and Ingrid Bachmann (2022) argue that intersectional approaches “have come some way over the past two decades” (p. 178). Intersectional analysis can be found, in varying degrees, in many of the chapters, illustrating the importance of an intersectional sensibility in uncovering the structural organization of power, or the “matrix of domination” (Collins, 2022, p. 24) in which media and communication systems are complicit.

Feminist communication scholarship, which provides the overall perspective of the *Handbook*, is distinguished from approaches such as media and gender studies. It not only theorizes gender as an organizing mechanism that helps to shape power relations in society, but it offers insights into the structures and concepts that define what a woman is deemed to be and that determine women's status (Bachmann & Eckert, 2022, pp. 4–7). This work continues to face resistance at many levels. For instance, though the “embattled political experience” (Rakow, 2022, p. 61) of the first generation of feminist scholars in academia may have given way to a more complicated “dismissive recognition of feminist scholarship” (Pereira, 2017, p. 114) in many settings, online harassment and abuse have become routine hazards for feminist researchers (Dej & Kilty, 2023; Pevac, 2022; Vera-Gray, 2017) and activists (Holm, 2022; Mahadeen, 2022). And while finding and giving “voice” to women has been integral to feminist theory, research, and strategy, voice – like rights – cannot be taken for granted. Introducing the second edition of her classic *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins wrote: “I know how quickly voice can be taken away. My concern now lies in finding effective ways to use the voice that I have claimed while I have it” (2022, p. xviii). Continuing this theme in the preface to the third edition of the book, she writes: “If we do not write our own stories about the world as we see it, someone else will write them for us. If you do not raise your voice, someone else will speak for you” (2022, p. xxvi). That is a powerful lesson for feminists everywhere, in every field of activity. In the *Handbook* the voices of scholars and activists are raised in search of answers to this fundamental question: To what extent do media, information, and communication systems in the twenty-first century contribute to the promotion of women's human and communication rights, or to the maintenance of a social system in which women's rights are ignored, questioned, or denied?

## **Part One: Governance and Policy**

Though relatively neglected in the early decades of feminist communication scholarship, the past 20 years have seen an increased focus on issues of governance, regulation, and policy. This is linked to a growing realization of the profound impact these dimensions have on women's rights and freedoms, an understanding that the absence of women's voices and perspectives in policy-making spaces is rooted in structural inequalities, and a realization that gender-blind policymaking contributes to the perpetuation of those inequalities. The search for a gender-sensitive, transformative approach to policy and governance is fundamental to each of the four chapters in this first part of the *Handbook*. Claudia Padovani (Chapter 2) presents a panorama of the major instances of global communication policy debate, particularly over the past 40 years. Looking in detail at a series of high-level processes and events in 2021 – the year in which the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was celebrated internationally – she finds that though women's and gender concerns appear to be “on the agenda,” a closer look shows that these policy conversations are “highly disconnected, and revolve around different and sometimes conflicting languages and perspectives.” The chapter explores feminist-based concepts and approaches that could enrich communication policy at all levels, from micro-level questions to macro-level models, arguing that centers of policy debate either ignore these contributions or refer to them in a purely tokenistic way. The challenge is to move beyond political narratives in which gender inequality features as a concept, to policy processes based on analyses of the gendered structure of media and communication environments.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by United Nations Member States in 2015, formally articulates gender equality as a fundamental human right that is necessary for a sustainable world. In Chapter 3, Karin Gwinn Wilkins explores how this vision becomes

articulated in the priorities of major bilateral and multilateral development agencies, and of prominent non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The chapter distinguishes between “empowerment” and “justice” narratives embedded in development discourse, and examines the different ways in which communication is conceptualized – as an instrumental technology, a source of content, or an instrument for advocacy and action. The analysis shows that, with few exceptions, dominant development discourse emphasizes women’s empowerment, highlighting individual rights and responsibilities based on neoliberal models of social change. The expression of human rights as a collective issue, linked to gender justice movements and feminist critique, is found only among the NGOs.

Disinformation has long been a threat to public trust and political stability. But its potential for democratic disruption in the era of digital communication has made it a major twenty-first century concern to which policymakers and regulators are struggling to respond. Margaret Gallagher in Chapter 4 takes up the topic of gendered disinformation – an aspect as yet relatively overlooked in policy debates and in research. The chapter situates gendered disinformation as both an attack on women’s rights and freedoms, and an assault on democracy. It considers the failure of platform self-regulation and the emergence of new forms of co-regulation. Fundamental to this chapter is the issue of platform accountability, and the challenge of ensuring both women’s freedom of expression and women’s safety in the online world.

Rounding up this part, Leslie Regan Shade (Chapter 5) provides a detailed mapping of social movements that have aimed at restructuring communication systems in the public interest over the past 25 years – from media reform, through media justice, to data justice. Showing how women’s human rights are challenged in myriad ways by digital technologies, the chapter highlights feminist interventions of resistance to datafication, as well as feminist strategies to build alternative rights-based digital platforms within a data justice framework. This quarter-century analysis reveals the ever-changing, but ever-present persistence of gendered discrimination and denial of human rights in communication systems. It calls for feminist intersectional policymaking, combined with data justice initiatives, in efforts to contest corporate power and build a digital space in the interests of social justice and human rights.

## **Part Two: Systems and Institutions**

Moving on to the dynamics of communication power, in this part we look at how power inequality in communication systems produces gendered workplaces, environments, and outputs – systems in which rights-based norms often conflict with revenue-driven goals. We start with a chapter on intersectionality – a concept which, though much employed in feminist analytical frameworks, is not always well understood or applied. Laura Guimarães Corrêa (Chapter 6) provides a detailed account of its conceptualizations and its applicability in media and communication systems. Focusing particularly on the triad gender, race, and locality, and using perspectives from Black feminist scholarship, she shows how an intersectional framework helps to reveal the interconnectedness of systems of power. Through many examples, including data and experiences of Black women in Brazil, the chapter argues that the intersectional paradigm is a powerful theoretical tool for the analysis and potential transformation of the current dynamics of media, communication, and society.

In Chapter 7 Carolyn Byerly takes a feminist political economy approach in her analysis of structural gender relations in today’s communication industries. The chapter considers evidence on access, occupational status, ownership, governance, and regulatory policies as factors in women’s unequal relationship to media and communication systems. Byerly concludes that despite feminist

interventions, some of which have been successful, there is little sign that the deeper structural power arrangements in this sector are changing. Issues of power are fundamental to Chapter 8, in which Kate Devlin charts the gendered history of artificial intelligence (AI) – a pivotal field in today’s communication systems worldwide and one in which, despite notable contributions by women, power has become gradually corporate, technocratic, and masculine. The chapter examines how gender and racial bias occur algorithmically in language and image selection, and in the organizational environment in which software is developed. Notwithstanding growing public awareness and initiatives for reform, Devlin maintains that transformation depends on deeper analysis of AI’s complex power imbalances in terms of who benefits and who is excluded.

The next two chapters focus on journalism. A profession whose power makes it vulnerable to other power centers in society, it is also a profession in which power-holders are influential in selecting and shaping the information that reaches the public. In Chapter 9 Mindy Ran turns a trade unionist’s perspective on the struggle of women journalists to assert their rights in a context of media amalgamations, populist backlash, and the impact of COVID-19. The chapter explores the scope and limitations of existing tools intended to guarantee women’s and workers’ rights, the effect on women’s rights of changes within the journalistic profession, and the potential for a revival of trade union activity in the face of growing authoritarianism and the erosion of press freedom in many parts of the world. Maria João Silveirinha (Chapter 10) takes as her starting point the stark inequalities laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic to argue for a re-imagined journalism that is aligned with women’s communication rights. Inspired by the work of feminist philosophers Nancy Fraser and Iris Marion Young, the chapter applies key concepts such as framing, ethics, justice, and social responsibility to consider changes to journalism’s practices and paradigms “which, once again, during the COVID-19 pandemic, left women behind.” Silveirinha’s analysis shows how these ethical considerations interface with the political economy of the media, a financial crisis in journalism which has disproportionately affected women, and the need for new funding and economic models oriented to a stronger, more equal profession that is integral to democracy and justice.

To close this part, we turn to the exercise of power in the workplace, and specifically the issue of sexual harassment, abuse, and assault. As Ammu Joseph (Chapter 11) points out, despite decades of feminist research and activism on the subject, it was the #MeToo phenomenon that led to unprecedented recognition of the ubiquity and gravity of sexual violence, particularly in settings such as media industries where hierarchical gender relations foster the abuse of power. This chapter traces the global spread of #MeToo through social media channels, with particular emphasis on its emergence and impact in India. Limitations and critiques, including those of feminists, are also examined. It was the “spectacular inadequacy of ‘due process’ that ... forced women to speak out publicly,” and Joseph concludes that #MeToo has been a game changer, pointing to the 2019 ILO Convention C190 – the first international treaty to recognize that violence and harassment in the world of work can constitute a human rights violation and a threat to equal opportunities. While not a direct result of #MeToo, the Convention does address many of the concerns highlighted by that historic moment.

### **Part 3: Content, Rights, and Freedoms**

In this part we consider how media and communication systems interface with women’s rights and freedom of expression. The latter has been one of the most jealously protected values of media and communication policy in democratic societies, and is often held to be at risk in the face of advocacy for equal rights. Yet feminists have argued that women’s right to freedom of

expression is limited by layers of structural, economic, and cultural constraints. The chapters in this part highlight how aspects of communication content systematically limit women's rights, calling into question the assumed universality of rights and the supposed gender-neutrality of media freedom. To set the scene, in Chapter 12 Maria Edström and Eva-Maria Svensson tackle the complexities involved in reconciling the principles of gender equality and freedom of expression from a human rights standpoint. The chapter reviews the relationship between the two concepts as articulated in global commitments, and examines regional and national efforts to bridge the gap between the two rights through policies and regulatory approaches. Edström and Svensson conclude that a more solid system, combining law and self-regulation, is needed to achieve gender equality in media content.

The next two chapters explore how particular communication cultures function to suppress women's freedom of expression both online and offline. Debbie Ging (Chapter 13) focuses on the rise and spread of virulent misogyny and anti-feminism in digital culture. She maps the various forms this takes, and puts forward possible reasons for its emergence at this historical juncture. The scale and complexity of the issue are such, Ging concludes, that we are facing a human rights crisis – one that calls for radical reconceptualization of the relationship between social media companies, their infrastructures, and the public. In Chapter 14 Rosalind Gill and Whitney Francois-Cull home in on the experiences of young women as users of social media in the United Kingdom. Based on recent original research, the chapter reveals the tensions and complexities embedded in these young women's relationships with social media – simultaneously critical and complicit – and shows “how a strong feminist and antiracist perspective can co-exist with a quotidian neoliberal sensibility that is increasingly pervasive.” Decades after the first studies of media representation, this research confirms that twenty-first century media remain sexist, racist, disablist, heteronormative, and permeated by many other patterns of exclusion and misrepresentation. But it also highlights the very high level of media literacy among young women media users, pointing to the need for a deep critique of the power of media platforms and for policy responses aimed at their transformation.

The issue of surveillance has emerged as a major preoccupation in the context of intense datafication in contemporary communication systems, provoking fierce debate on privacy rights and free speech. Yet until now the gendered nature of surveillance has been largely absent from these debates. In Chapter 15 Shmyla Khan draws on feminist theory and surveillance studies to explore the ways in which technologies and modern systems of surveillance reproduce gender hierarchies, patriarchal violence, and other forms of control and discipline. Arguing that the “grand narratives” of surveillance treat the objects of surveillance as a monolith and gloss over the lived experience of the surveilled, Khan takes a feminist perspective to show how surveillance and digital technologies impact lived experiences in the social, historical, and political context of South Asia. These experiences are examined through three main themes: technology-enabled gender-based violence; the disparate impact of surveillance in public/semi-public spaces; and surveillance within private spaces such as the home. By highlighting the lived realities of surveillance, the chapter raises questions about the usefulness of the individualized framing of privacy rights pursued through existing juridical avenues, and suggests that dismantling the gendered structures of power and control that surveillance reflects and supports calls for a deeper, systemic feminist analysis.

The final two chapters in this part focus on the erosion of women's rights through different forms of mediated violence. In Chapter 16 Rosa Cobo Bedía tackles what historically has been a difficult, and sometimes divisive, issue for feminism – pornography. Cobo's thesis is that pornography can be understood as a material and symbolic mechanism that contributes to the patriarchal organization of society. She argues that without an appreciation of the political significance of the hyper-sexualization of women in pornography, and of the political economy of a sexual

exploitation industry whose power and reach are greatly amplified by new communication technologies, it is impossible to develop a feminist political critique of social organization. Asserting that the lack of rights embedded in the processes of domination endemic to pornography are less visible, but no less harmful than women's lack of political, civil, or economic rights, the chapter concludes that the normalization of violence in the pornographic imaginary feeds the imaginary of misogyny and violence that women encounter in their daily lives. Aimée Vega Montiel extends this theme of the relationship between mediated and real-life violence in Chapter 17. The chapter gives an overview of the types of violence against women (VAW), including its media and digital forms, identified in various international classification systems. It reviews research into VAW-related issues in a range of media studies, and looks at how international, regional, and national policy instruments highlight media and digital actors in approaches to the elimination of VAW. The chapter concludes that, despite the success of the feminist movement in securing a prominent place for these issues on policy agendas, powerful obstacles – including the distortion of feminist concepts and the commercial imperatives of media and digital industries – mean that a life free from violence as a fundamental women's right remains a distant goal.

#### **Part 4: Strategies, Advocacy, and Activism**

Perhaps the most defining characteristic of feminist media scholarship is its explicitly political dimension. Feminism has always been a two-sided social movement – engaged both in practical lobbying and struggles for equality and rights, and in intellectual struggles that challenge cultural norms and ideas. These struggles interact and inform each other in a political sense. Together, their potential is transformative, and in this final part of the *Handbook* we include examples of the work of feminist scholars and activists aimed at transforming communication processes and systems in ways that respond to a women's human rights agenda.

In Chapter 18 Jan Moolman and Christy Alves Nascimento invite us to “imagine a feminist internet” – an exploration which, in 2014, produced the first Feminist Principles of the Internet. Continuously updated and expanded since then, the Principles provide “a framework for feminist movements to articulate and explore technology-related realities, experiences, and desires on their own terms.” Drawing on examples of feminist activism in the global South, the chapter uses the Principles to demonstrate the contextual and intersectional nature of technology-related issues, and to analyze how feminist organizing and resistance have helped to shape policy advocacy and discussions on internet governance. In the face of continued de-prioritization of global South perspectives in academic and policy centers, the Feminist Principles support feminist counter-publics in the global South so that structurally marginalized voices and realities can be reflected in the norms and priorities that shape online spaces.

The need for hitherto marginalized voices to be heard in communication debates is fundamental to Chapter 19, in which Karla Prudencio focuses on Indigenous women. Rarely foregrounded in research or indeed in activist accounts, Indigenous women have over many years been subjected to structural discrimination by States and to gender-based discrimination within their own communities. Media treatment of Indigenous women's issues has tended to reproduce discriminatory practices, stereotypes, stigmas, and misinformation, with significant consequences for the exercise of human rights. The chapter shows how Indigenous women's advocacy for communication rights is based on strategies and perspectives that are different to those articulated from a western and colonial point of view. It argues that, because they bring to the table different contexts and realities, acknowledging the specific voices and demands of Indigenous women is essential to a communication and women's human rights agenda in which every voice is heard and respected.

In Chapter 20 Tarisai Nyamweda presents a critical analysis of the work and experience of the Southern African feminist organization Gender Links (GL). Since its establishment in 1981 GL has made the media a pivotal focus in its work to build gender equality and women's rights in the region. The chapter describes the tools – including policy development, media monitoring and research, awareness raising and training, peer learning, and advocacy – that GL has used over a two-decade journey. Along the way, funding challenges and a continually shifting media terrain have required constant re-visioning of methods and approach. Many lessons can be drawn from this 20-year Southern African experience, the fundamental one being that changing the media narrative “cannot be achieved overnight and cannot be one-dimensional” but will result from incremental gains in attitudes, editorial, and institutional practices, as well as in legislation. Chapter 21 shifts the focus to Latin America, where Graciela Natansohn reflects on a “new wave” of cyberfeminism that she calls cyberfeminism 3.0. The chapter distinguishes this from earlier waves of cyberfeminist activity, emphasizing its focus on the ethics of care, its links to decolonial, anti-racist, and environmental movements, and its vision of an internet based on principles of sustainability and human rights. Examples from cyberfeminist groups from across Latin America point to three main lines of action: technical training and increased visibility of women in technology; production of manuals and tutorials to democratize access to the protocols and codes of networked software; and production of free and/or open-source hardware and software. In essence cyberfeminism 3.0 aligns with a movement that imagines an alternative internet that is open, free, and democratic.

The next chapters deal with two of the foundation stones in a feminist rights-based communication structure – education and data. In Chapter 22 Yanet Martínez Toledo, Lucía Vázquez Rodríguez, and Soledad Vargas focus on journalism and communication education, where the integration (or “mainstreaming”) of gender perspectives has long been considered a key to encouraging media content that is more attuned to the gendered realities of society. The chapter analyzes the extent to which gender mainstreaming has been incorporated into journalism and communication institutions and curricula, and the challenges to its integration. Despite important initiatives such as UNESCO's model curriculum to train media professionals sensitive to gender issues both in their workplaces and in the content they produce, the chapter concludes that the rise of right-wing, anti-feminist rhetoric calls for urgent action at various levels to support the incorporation of gender issues in curricula and the ending of the sexual division of labor in educational workplaces.

Reliable research data allows feminist scholars and activists to demonstrate the extent to which media content, by reflecting the priorities of elite power-holders and sustaining the status quo, fails to respect human and communication rights. In Chapter 23 Sarah Macharia reflects on the evolution and impact of feminism's largest and longest-running media research undertaking, the Global Media Monitoring Project. Since its first iteration in 1995, every five years the research has gathered time series data on the representation of women in the world's news media. It has built not only an immense and robust database but an ever-expanding feminist movement that is constantly renewed and enriched with methodologies, tools, advocacy, and other actions, contributed by its diverse constituency from civil society, academia, and the media industry. The chapter details the development of this unique feminist initiative, highlights its findings over a quarter century, and discusses its contributions to feminist media research and practice, policy, and movement building. Despite the continued need for data evidenced over its 25-year history, consistent difficulty in securing financial resources and the need to rely on volunteer labor threaten its long-term sustainability.

If funding is a perennial challenge to feminist work world-wide, in the global South it is just one among many obstacles confronting feminists who want their voices and those of their communities to be heard in the shaping of global policies on gender equality and women's rights. In the final chapter of the *Handbook*, Dinah Musindarwezo, Felogene

Anumo, and Sanyu Awori unpack some of the structural barriers Southern feminists face when engaging in international policymaking spaces, from visa and logistical challenges, through chronic under-funding to conduct independent advocacy, to the co-option and capture of feminist agendas by the private sector, and the persistence of racist and colonial stereotypes in global advocacy ecosystems. The chapter traces the development of transnational feminist mobilization and movement-building from the 1970s to the present, showing how Southern feminists have intervened in key global policy arenas and have built on internationally-agreed norms to leverage national level advocacy for gender equality and women's rights. Despite the persistence of power imbalances in global policymaking spaces, including the double-edged sword of digital communication technology, the chapter makes a strong case for the value of transnational feminist organizing as a key strategy to build collective power, agency, and solidarity with which to influence international policymaking and standard setting on women's human rights.

### Notes

- 1 Authors' translation. De Beauvoir was commenting on the approval of the law to give abortion rights to women in France.
- 2 In December 2022 the World Health Organization announced that the emergency phase of the pandemic was nearing its end. In January 2023 it announced that COVID-19 remained a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC).
- 3 The Sustainable Development and Goals (SDGs) were adopted in 2015: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda>.
- 4 For instance, the UN's Women's Empowerment Principles Gender Gap Tool encourages businesses to contribute to the SDGs by "unlocking the potential of women" which will result in "significant positive impacts on business productivity and the bottom line." See <https://weps-gapanalysis.org/case-for-gender-equality>.
- 5 See <https://forum.generationequality.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/UNW%20-%20GAP%20Report%20-%20EN.pdf>, p.105.

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