

# Counter Narratives as Political Contestation: Universality, Particularity and Uniqueness

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## Introduction

If human rights, as a Western concept bound to notions of individualism and secularism, are incompatible with particular values in non-Western cultural contexts, then this entails that Human Rights Education (HRE) is missionary in its attempts to bring people's particular beliefs into harmony with the presumed universalism of Western human rights. I aim to recast this presumed dichotomy of universality and particularity, towards a dialectic of a universality, as based on conflicting ideological values, with a notion of uniqueness found in life narratives. This paper aims at reclaiming the radical politics of human rights and the power of people to advocate for universal social justice through counter narratives that act as political contestation to dominant particular narratives legitimising patriarchal and colonial discriminatory practices. A presumed dichotomy between the universality of human rights, as an ideology, and the particularity of cultural and religious moral value systems, implies that HRE takes on an ideologically and politically missionary character, which is more accurately defined as persuasion than education. The actual drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) challenges universalism of human rights as Eurocentric, opening up the possibility for competing historical narratives to be drawn upon in human rights learning as an open relational inquiry.

Earlier research on the drafting process leading up to the UDHR in 1948 has generally focused on the contributions and political subjects of the Western and male delegates who participated in that process.<sup>2</sup> The French delegate to the Commission on Human Rights, René Cassin – who was also in the drafting Committee – has long been viewed as the “father” of the UDHR. This view was questioned by Morsink who instead highlighted the contribution of Canadian delegate John Humphrey, who had collected earlier work on human rights (from the Botoga conference, the French Declaration, etc.).<sup>3</sup> Supplementary to these descriptions,

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2 Ignatieff, M. and Gutmann, A., *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry*, Princeton University Press, 2003; Lauren, P.G., *The Evolution of International Human Rights: Visions Seen*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011; and Morsink, J., *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Origins, Drafting, and Intent*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

3 Morsink, above note 2.

Mary Ann Glendon has illustrated a more complex understanding of the drafting process, focusing on Eleanor Roosevelt's influence in the Commission on Human Rights alongside male delegates Charles Malik from Lebanon and Peng Chang from China.<sup>4</sup>

In light of the minimal attention paid to the non-Western female contributors to the drafting of the UDHR in earlier research, there are insights to be gained from acknowledging these alternative narratives. Considering these perspectives entails questioning the static quality of rights in terms of both universality and particularity. From this inquiry into the drafting of the UDHR, where counter narratives contest the reification of a European, male subject, we can illuminate the broader point that notions of political subjectivity are able to morph through the availability of competing historical narratives.

The concept of "counter narratives" makes explicit the hegemony that silences some of the voices that counter conceptions of a universal subject. Reading the UDHR through narratives other than the Western narrative of the origin of human rights enriches human rights studies. The arguments for human rights put forth in 1948 by the women delegates from India, Pakistan and the Dominican Republic based on their different religious and cultural values contain important messages about both the legal and pedagogical aims of the document.

In this paper, I highlight three female delegates: Hansa Mehta (1897–1995) – an Indian delegate and legislator who was active in the movement towards India's independence, a delegate to the Commission on Human Rights; Shaista Begum Ikramullah (1915–2000) – a Pakistani author, founder of the Muslim Women Students Federation in Pakistan and delegate to the UN Third Committee of Social and Economic Affairs; and Minerva Bernardino (1907–1998) – a feminist politician, leader of women's movements in the Dominican Republic and delegate to both the UN Third Committee and the Committee on the Status of Women.

I claim that there are important, albeit neglected, philosophical conclusions to gain by closely examining the roles of the women delegates in these different bodies as their contributions and arguments were distinctive and often quite different from those of the male participants. In this paper I draw on Cavarero's notion, that we as individuals are singularly unique and that there cannot be total identification with a plural other, nor are all human beings alike.<sup>5</sup> According to Cavarero what unites human beings is the sharing of stories, of narratives that relate in different ways to our personal life narrative. This reading also uncovers educational possibilities of shared and unique narratives of learners in global education within the constraints of politics of particularity.

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4 Glendon, M.A., *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Random House, 2001.

5 Cavarero, A., *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, Routledge, 2000.

## 1. Counter Narratives as Political Contestation

Within feminist research, creating counter narratives is seen as a political act; using dominant stories to create counter narratives by unearthing alternative sequences, experiences and trajectories. Adams St Pierre and Richardson argue that the presence or absence of particular narratives influences the available degree of subjectivity.<sup>6</sup> The presence of a master narrative on man encourages men to relate their experiences in these stories that not only represent masculinity but also replicate the master narrative of classical theory. Equally, as stories of women's political influence in history continue to be overshadowed by a continuous reification of maleness and whiteness, there is a dearth of narratives that women can relate their experiences to – especially non-Western women. Who is seen as a political subject, with an active voice of agency, becomes limited to the repertoire of historically represented subjectivities and the presence of disparate individuals who have collaborated to change society and the world.

Although women played a significant role in the movement toward independence in India and Pakistan in 1947,<sup>7</sup> history has focused almost exclusively on Mahatma Gandhi (who opposed granting women the right to vote) as the leader of the Indian Independence movement as well as on Mohammed Ali Jinnah as the founder of Pakistan. Though there were women involved in the drafting of the first constitutions of India and Pakistan – two of whom were also part of drafting the UDHR (Hansa Mehta, India and Shaista Ikramullah, Pakistan) – their role has been subsequently overshadowed by male, nationalist and religious narratives in the re-telling of the historical founding of the nations.

In Europe, the political roles that women played during World War Two to combat the Nazi occupation in the post-war years were not recognised for their political significance. French women involved in the resistance movement against the Nazi occupation did not receive the same acknowledgement as their male counterparts.<sup>8</sup> Only six women received recognition for their resistance through *Croix de la Libération* after World War Two – four out of the six being awarded posthumously – in contrast to over a thousand men who received the *Croix*.<sup>9</sup>

From a feminist perspective, the counter narratives of non-Western women who took part in the drafting of the UDHR are a valuable component in harmonising human rights with religious and cultural values. Such counter narratives of non-Western female politicians who

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6 Adams St Pierre, E. and Richardson, L., "Writing: A Method of Inquiry", in Denzin, N.K and Lincoln, Y.S. (eds), *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*, SAGE Publications, 2008, pp. 473–500.

7 Basu, A. and Ray, B., *Women's Struggle: A History of the All India Women's Conference 1927–1990*, Manohar Publications, 1990; Forbes, G., *The New Cambridge History of India. Women in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, 1996; and Narain, V., *Reclaiming the Nation: Muslim Women and the Law in India*, University of Toronto Press, 2008.

8 Duchen, C., *Women's Rights and Women's Lives in France 1944–1968*, Routledge, 1994.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

argued for human rights on religious grounds – the same religious beliefs that today are conflated on an international scale with a rejection of women’s human rights – may serve to give young girls educational alternatives. Girls and women can relate to such narratives as political subjects in their on-going process of subjectification.

Due to the marginalisation of the non-Western women’s voices through earlier recounting of the creation of human rights in the UN, recent scholars have argued that conceptions of human rights reflect the concerns and freedoms of a male, universal subject that neglects the lived realities and challenges of women. According to Butler, the definition of “human” and thus of human rights represent a universalisation of Man and of male subjectivity. Therefore, the basis of human rights rests on a notion of a human dignity that excludes women, children, “minorities” or “anyone other” than a white, male subject. Butler argues that there exists a dichotomy between the intended international legitimacy of human rights and the dominant local notion of human rights as Western and American. In Butler’s view, there is a need for cultural translation as a method of re-reading human rights through occasionally conflicting cultural and religious value systems in order to create a more inclusive notion of rights, or a limited list of rights and freedoms that would be acceptable in divergent moral value systems. Butler’s critique is solid if we presume that the dominant Western, male narrative on the creation of human rights is unquestionable.<sup>10</sup> In my earlier writings, I have focused on what I referred to as an “intersectional dialogue” surrounding the UN debates on the universality of human rights, precisely in an effort to question this Eurocentric narrative that I argue is additionally reified through its postmodern and feminist critiques.<sup>11</sup>

What I highlighted was the participation of delegates from different ideological backgrounds – from countries that held conflicting political and religious stands. Delegates from different nations argued for the universality of human rights based on Communist, Catholic, secular, Christian, Islamic, liberal, socialist and feminist beliefs on social justice. They did not agree on a “right” basis for human rights, but they agreed on a list of rights, to accommodate conflicting ideological grounds.<sup>12</sup> In order for this agreement to be reached, delegations from 56 countries held over 200 sessions, debates that led to an abstraction of the text, as all specific cultural and religious references had to be deleted from the document. This is precisely the reason why there is no mention in the UDHR of any conception of “God” as the basis for human dignity, nor to natural law, nor to specific discriminatory practices such as apartheid, the caste system or racial segregation.

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10 Butler, J., “Competing Universalities”, in Butler, J., Laclau, E. and Zizek, S. (eds), *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, Verso, 2011, pp. 136–181.

11 Adami, R., “Intersectional Dialogue: A Cosmopolitan Dialogue of Ethics”, *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol 5., 2013, pp. 45–62.

12 *Ibid.*; and Adami, R., “Reconciling Universality and Particularity through a Cosmopolitan Outlook on Human Rights” *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 4, 2012, pp. 22–37.

Earlier accounts on the conceptualisation of human rights in the UDHR have focused mainly on the male delegates from the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, France and the socialist Soviet Union. Rightfully, Butler raises a well-founded critique against the exclusion of women in the notion of “human” rights today and to the way that some women are excluded by this term. It is against a dominant notion of a universal, male subject that Butler raises the need to rearticulate what being “human” signifies if women are to be included within such notions.<sup>13</sup> Within any dominant narrative that gives precedence to one description of what it means to be human over another, there are the untold, the silenced, the marginalised stories – counter narratives that disrupt the reified notions in the dominant narrative. One of these particular counter narratives is that of “women” that I explore in this paper, arguing that one must transcend the notions of particularity towards notions of uniqueness and life narratives in order to reconcile the universal notion of subjectivity with the uniqueness of lived experience, that transcends redundant particular narratives. Still, there is a political dimension of particular narratives that shouldn’t be ignored in favour of a totally relativistic position which emphasises the importance of identity politics to social categories. There lays political significance in particular narratives, as a means of highlighting violations of social justice from a shared perspective of oppression of marginalised peoples. However, too much faith in the particular to represent “all” marginalised within a specific group has been heavily criticised by recent feminist research. As Webster writes in her discussion on the subjectivity of women in the work of Benhabib:<sup>14</sup>

*In recent years, however, feminism has been criticised for its assumption of authority over the experience of women and for its general presumption that, simply on the basis of a shared gendered identity, women have immediate access to and knowledge of the lives of other women.*<sup>15</sup>

The critique that Webster raises by engaging Benhabib and Butler<sup>16</sup> problematises “women” as a homogenous entity and is simultaneously a critique of white privilege blindness in feminist research that overlooks how different social structures other than gender create marginalisation and experiences of oppression that cannot be understood or shared by all women since specifics other than gender bind people together within common interests. Whenever people meet in a political context, not one but multiple categories of positional power relations are at play that can effectively silence communication. These include but are not limited to social status, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, language, nationality, ethnicity and age.

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13 See above, note 10, pp.136–181.

14 Webster, F., “The Politics of Sex and Gender: Benhabib and Butler Debate Subjectivity.” *Hypatia: a Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, Vol.15, 2000, pp. 1–22, citing Benhabib, S., “Subjectivity, Historiography, and Politics”, in Nicholson, L. (ed), *Feminist Contestations: A Philosophical Exchange (Thinking Gender)*, Routledge, 1995, pp. 107–126.

15 *Ibid.*, Webster, p. 1.

16 Butler, J., “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism’” in Nicholson, L. (ed), *Feminist Contestations: A Philosophical Exchange (Thinking Gender)*, Routledge, 1995, pp. 35–58.

When the individuals met for a conversation of human rights in the international arena in 1946 through 1948, they engaged not only in the sharing of particular narratives incorporating different religious, cultural and ideological values, but particular narratives which had been interrupted by the uniqueness of the lived experiences of the individual participants.

Thus, the female representatives, when narrating human rights through their own particularity, interrupted the male-centred notion of such religious and cultural values through their personal experiences. For example, Shaista Ikramullah – delegate in the Third Committee to the Economic and Social Council – was the first Muslim woman to obtain a doctorate from the University of London. Ikramullah describes in her book, *From Purdah to Parliament*,<sup>17</sup> how she was in constant dissonance with her male colleagues in the first Constituent Assembly of Pakistan. Whereas Ikramullah argued for the importance of liberal education in Pakistan, the Pakistani Education Minister countered her by pushing for education to be religious and conservative. Shaista Ikramullah argued for women’s equal political and social rights based on her Islamic beliefs. When Ikramullah took part in the drafting the first constitution of Pakistan, she debated her male colleagues for Sharia laws to include equal rights of women to own property and to inherit property. The law she pushed for also guaranteed all citizens, including women, equal pay for equal work, equality of status and equal opportunities with male citizens. The law was opposed in the Constituent Assembly but was voted through after protests from the public.<sup>18</sup> Shaista Ikramullah, in her contention that human rights were in harmony with the Islamic personal law, de-centred the male focused notion of Islamic law as un-inclusive of equal rights of women. Hence, her personal moral conviction was argued partly through a particular narrative of religious values and partly by interrupting dominant voices of static notions of particularity, from her position both as a woman and an advocate for women’s equal rights. Neither Ikramullah nor the other Muslim delegates (from Iran, Saudi Arabia and Syria) insisted on a reference to God or Allah in the UDHR. Rather, Ikramullah argued that:

*[i]t was imperative that the peoples of the world should recognize the existence of a code of civilised behaviour which would apply not only in international relations but also in domestic affairs.*<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, Hansa Mehta did not insist on a mention of caste in the non-discrimination list, as she thought it was out-dated and should not be referred to in the declaration. Instead, “social status” was used as a more inclusive term in the declaration (this was later amended to “other status”). The common goal of establishing a shared definition of human rights overruled potential differences of particularity. As a universal ethics, Benhabib conceives that:

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17 Ikramullah, S.B., *From Purdah to Parliament*, Oxford University Press, 1998.

18 Shaista Begum Ikramullah describes challenges faced in the Pakistani Constituent Assembly in *From Purdah to Parliament*.

19 “Summary Record of the Ninetieth Meeting [of the Third Committee]” UN Doc., A/C.3/SR.90, 1 October 1948, p. 2045.

*What a universalist ethics seeks to establish is that in the face of the needs and suffering of others, we have to engage in moral conversation and action; that we cannot abdicate the responsibility of responsiveness to the other with facile arguments about cultural relativism.<sup>20</sup>*

During the drafting of the UDHR and the debates in the different UN bodies through which the Declaration was approved, delegates representing different and even antagonistic ideologies were faced with the horrors of the Holocaust. In the wake of such immense human suffering they were preoccupied with seeking a common ground for affirming a sense of human dignity that had been in question both during war, Nazi occupation and Western colonisation. Through compromise, delegates were able to reach a common list of human rights and an agreement to disagree on the philosophical and ideological underpinnings for those rights.

## **2. Conflicting Voices in the Commission on Human Rights and in the Third Committee**

I turn now to the contributions of the female delegate Hansa Mehta from India to the Commission on Human Rights. In the Commission, Mehta was the only female delegate apart from Eleanor Roosevelt. Mehta was at variance with Roosevelt on several crucial issues. Notable among these differences was the wording of “men” instead of “human beings” in the document.

Hansa Mehta fought for Indian independence alongside Mahatma Gandhi in peaceful resistance demonstrations. Like Gandhi, she was from an Indian ethnic group called Gujarati. Mehta was the third woman from her ethnic group to obtain a college degree in India, her sister having been the second before her. Mehta obtained an undergraduate degree in philosophy and then studied journalism in London. In India, she proposed a Charter of Women’s Rights 1946.<sup>21</sup> When the Declaration of Human Rights was discussed in the Commission on Human Rights in 1947, Hansa Mehta said that she did not like the wording “all men” or “and should act towards one another like brothers”, sensing that they might be interpreted to exclude women, and were outdated.<sup>22</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, the acting chair, replied that the word “men” used in this sense was generally accepted to include all human beings.<sup>23</sup> The delegate from the United Kingdom, Lord Dukeston, proposed that in order to avoid further discussion on the subject, a note should be included at the beginning of both documents to the effect that the word “men”, as used therein, referred to all human beings.<sup>24</sup> Mehta stated that she didn’t object to the United Kingdom suggestion, though Article 1 was the only place in the Declaration where the expression “men” appeared. Mehta wished to have this overruled to “human

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20 Benhabib, above note 14, p. 252.

21 Basu, above note 7.

22 ECOSOC, “Commission on Human Rights: Summary Record of the Thirty-Fourth Meeting”, UN Doc., E/CN.4/SR.34, 12 December 1947, p. 1255.

23 *Ibid.*

24 *Ibid.*

beings” or “persons”. This wording in Article 1 was voted on and Mehta’s suggestion was adopted at that stage of the process.<sup>25</sup>

Mehta raised her voice in the Commission on Human Rights, both against the apartheid in Africa and against the United Kingdom’s colonial manner of neglecting and disrespecting the notion of human rights in the UN. In this way, she mobilised a strong rhetoric against colonialism and imperialism, representing the newly independent India in 1948:

*Hansa Mehta (India) declared that the Government and people of India attached the greatest importance to the Human Rights Commission and considered that its work would profoundly influence the future of the UN. She recalled that the Government of South Africa had maintained the position during recent discussions that there had been no violation of human rights in South Africa since there existed no written definition of human rights as such within the framework of the UN. The Government of the UK had taken a similar attitude by suggesting that the dispute between India and South Africa might be referred to the International Court of Justice. Mrs. Mehta considered it the justification of the Commission that pleas of this nature should not be allowed to be advanced within the forum of the UN in the future.*<sup>26</sup>

The Commission on Human Rights sent the Declaration to the Third Committee of the Economic and Social Council before it was sent to the General Assembly. In all instances, the Committee on the Status of Women had three representatives when human rights were debated. Eleanor Roosevelt was initially opposed to the creation of a Committee on the Status of Women arguing that the Commission on Human Rights addressed women’s rights, but the female delegate from Dominican Republic, Minerva Bernardino, sustained the need for such a committee, and won the debate.

The discussion on the wording of “all men” versus “all human beings” was further debated in the next UN body through which the declaration was approved. Along with Roosevelt, several male delegates held that “man” was inclusive of women. The female delegates from non-Western countries including India (Hansa Mehta), Pakistan (Shaista Ikramullah) and Dominican Republic (Minerva Bernardino) stressed that in their national legal and political systems, “man” would not indicate that women were included under the auspices of human rights. Since women in many countries at that time were not seen as political subjects eligible to vote or take part in government, these non-Western female delegates spoke for more than just their own particular societies and cultures. Their critique of the wording “man” and “rights of Man” and the changes that followed – to the wording “human rights” in the title of the Declaration – indicates that “human rights” was considered as inclusive of women. In light

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25 *Ibid.*

26 ECOSOC, Commission on Human Rights: Summary Record of the Second Meeting, UN Doc., E/CN.4/SR.2, 27 January 1947, p. 161.

of this contribution to the UDHR by these non-Western female delegates, Butler's critique of human rights as representing only male, white subjects can be challenged. Acknowledging such critiques raised during the drafting of the UDHR may help legitimise the universality of human rights today as cultural and religious translations were being made already in 1948.<sup>27</sup> Minerva Bernardino argued in the Third Committee to the Economic and Social Council that:

*As one who had taken an active part in the international feminist movement, she thought it appropriate to remind the Committee that the question of equality between men and women had been raised at the San Francisco Conference, and that the delegations of Brazil, Mexico, the Dominican Republic and several other countries had submitted amendments the result of which had been the explicit recognition of that equality in the Charter of the UN. That had not been achieved without a certain amount of controversy; a group of delegations had held that women were included by implication in any reference to men. The fact that the Charter explicitly proclaimed the equality of the sexes was a triumph for the women of the world. It was not an empty triumph; legislators in various countries were proceeding to implement those provisions of the Charter. Nevertheless, some States still had constitutions, which granted rights, in particular suffrage, to men alone.<sup>28</sup>*

Bernardino lobbied for women's equal rights while representing Dominican Republic, which was under dictatorship for a long period of her career. DuBois and Derby, in an article entitled "The Strange Case of Minerva Bernardino", conclude that this context may explain her record in the international arena. DuBois and Derby believe that Bernardino's autobiography is a list of achievements, not portraying much self-reflection.<sup>29</sup> Notwithstanding their critique of Bernardino's loyalties to a corrupt regime in Dominican Republic, DuBois and Derby affirm that Bernardino took a progressive position relative to women's equal rights, especially in relation to social and economic rights, in conflict with the female representatives from the US (Roosevelt) and Britain (Margery Corbet). Bernardino mentioned this controversy, stating her view that these women who came from two of the countries where women had advanced their positions, were least supportive of the inclusion of women in the notion of human rights.<sup>30</sup> There were two articles in the UDHR regarding women's rights which were seen as particularly controversial in 1948: the article on equal rights of women and men in terms of marriage and its dissolution; and the article on equal pay for equal work. Again, the American female delegate Eleanor Roosevelt said that her delegation:

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27 See above, note 10, pp. 136–181.

28 "Summary Record of the Ninety-Eighth Meeting [of the Third Committee]", UN Doc., A/C.3/SR.98, 9 October 1948, p. 2168.

29 DuBois, E. and Derby, L., "The Strange Case of Minerva Bernardino: Pan American and United Nations Women's Right Activist" *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 32, 2009, pp. 43–50.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

*[w]as aware that the declarations might be improved upon; it did not think, for instance, that article 14, which dealt with marriage, should be included in the declaration at all.<sup>31</sup>*

It was reported that, in response to the questioning of the article on equal rights in marriage (Article 14 UDHR), the Pakistani female delegate Shaista Ikramullah said that:

*All civilised countries could accept article 14, which she thought was designed to prevent child marriage and marriages contracted without the consent of both parties, and also to ensure protection of women after divorce and the safeguarding of their property. Since the laws of Pakistan recognized all the rights referred to in article 14, her delegation was prepared to accept it. She would wish to make it clear, however, that “equal rights” must not mean “identical rights”. Identical rights for women as to marriage could in some cases be a liability to them rather than an asset. That point had been ably put by the representative of Saudi Arabia, and the Pakistan delegation would have been the more ready to support his amendment as the Mohammedan laws of marriage in all countries where they are applied gave adequate safeguards to women. Unfortunately however, she could not support the amendment, as she feared it would enable countries with laws discriminating against women to continue to apply them.<sup>32</sup>*

This was a highly diplomatic way of not offending the Saudi Arabian delegation while criticising the suggestion that there should be an insertion of “according to every national legislation” in terms of equal rights of women and men in marriage and at its dissolution. Further, this equally stressed that one could hold a feminist notion of Islamic personal law but that in some countries, this would be used to neglect the equal rights of women if non-discrimination due to sex and gender was not explicitly mentioned in the Declaration.

Arguing in this manner, Shaista Ikramullah was truthful to her own struggle toward equal rights and freedoms for Pakistani women – drawing on her own life’s narrative of moving from a life in strict purdah to a life in parliament – while simultaneously redefining how the particular narrative of “Islam” was understood from a feminist perspective. Ikramullah was born into a politically influential and wealthy family where she had the privilege of studying at college abroad and working in public politics and international diplomacy alongside male colleagues while being a mother of three.<sup>33</sup> The uniqueness of her life experiences, of being devoted to her faith and of being privileged with access to public power positions, helped her to challenge the dominant narrative of the cultural and religious values she worked to re-claim on what today we would call feminist grounds. By arguing for the universality of hu-

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31 See above, note 28, p. 2038.

32 “Summary Record of the Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Meeting [of the Third Committee]”, UN Doc, A/C.3/SR.125, 8 November 1948, p. 2470.

33 See above, note 17.

man rights based on her Islamic beliefs, she challenged the notion of universality as conflated with a secular ideological ground and equally interrogated the patriarchal definition of the particular narrative with which her life was in constant negotiation.

### 3. Learning Human Rights Beyond Dichotomies

There is a presumed dichotomy between the notion of universality as inherent in human rights and the particularity of the context in which human rights are interpreted and taught. Although particular narratives create links to universal principles, human rights learners in national settings are left with *dominant* narratives closely rooted in specific religious and cultural interpretations of rights and duties. When these dominant religious and cultural narratives are articulated through patriarchal structures, they may undermine countering feminist narratives on human rights within the same religion or culture. Hence, the language in the UDHR may not touch the unique experiences of individual lives that may transcend particular narratives of difference. There is no universal to counteract the constraint of narratives of particularity. Therefore, these have to be transcendent – through relationality – as shifting to uniqueness. Notions of particularity can contain suppressive elements which totalise power within a cultural religious group. The solution to this is a relational approach. A relational dynamic highlights the aspect of particularity that comprises of, and allows for, truly unique articulations. What would happen to this dichotomy between particularity and universality if we would instead approach learning about human rights as occurring within the narration of life experiences?<sup>34</sup> Narrating one's life story in relation to human rights would not be limited to the socially held notions of what it means to be human in a certain culture or religious context, but instead, what it means to be human through the lived experiences of unique human beings.

The Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero argues for an ethics of relationality, wherein she criticises a categorical subject and introduces a “narratable self” who is addressed by the singular other in the sharing of narratives.<sup>35</sup> The relationality that Cavarero conditions the subject with is borrowed in part from the work of Hannah Arendt. In Arendt, I read an opening towards change, where the subject acts in the world, in relationships, and these actions and words receive their meaning (according to Arendt, a political meaning) through the way in which they are interpreted by others.<sup>36</sup> What is interpreted is neither *you* nor *me*; what is interpreted are the narratives *through* which we expose ourselves:

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34 Adami, R., “Re-Thinking Relations in Human Rights Education: The Politics of Narratives.” *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Vol. 48, 2014; and Adami, R., *Human Rights Learning: The Significance of Narratives, Relationality and Uniqueness*, Doctoral Thesis from the Department of Education, Stockholm University Press, 2014.

35 See above, note 5.

36 Arendt, H., *Men in Dark Times*, Harcourt Publishers Ltd, 1968; Arendt, H., *The Promise of Politics*, Schocken Books, 2005; and Arendt, H., *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, Penguin Books, 2006.

*The one who tells us our story speaks the language of the you. Within the shared narrative scene, the addressee of the tale and its presence wins out over the classic role, in the text, of the absent protagonist.*<sup>37</sup>

In the work of Cavarero, there exists an ontological notion of an embodied other, who is a *you*, and who addresses us with a specific and unique narrative. The universality of such an ethics entails that what is universally shared between human beings is the notion that all individuals have a unique life story to tell. Such a universality is not based on sameness – that we are all the same – nor does the notion of a narratable self render it impossible to speak of the universality of human rights since the uniqueness of the life narrative is not to be conflated with a relativistic view of difference. The notion of a narratable self touches upon the particularity of cultural signifiers which impact upon the way in which the life narrative is negotiated and articulated. Relational life narration challenges the dominant narrative in national and cultural contexts. This means that the particular is not static but under constant re-articulation through people’s lived experience. There is not one way to articulate what it means to be woman, Muslim, Hindu, agnostic, but a multitude of ways; divergent narratives that may contradict and enrich the dominant narrative. As for the women in the Third Committee, the other is not an absent protagonist, but a real human being with a unique life narrative that contradicts static notions of particularity. Through a narrative articulation of the other and myself as in constant relationality and reciprocity, one finds an identification (though Cavarero does not use that specific term), which is beyond egocentrism (making the other myself) or exoticism (making the other everything else but me), towards a recognition of uniqueness beyond social labelling.

The historical counter narrative of the women’s voice in drafting the UDHR, is, I believe, of the utmost importance today when UN Women speaks of “women’s rights” instead of “women’s human rights”. This use of “women’s rights” implies that human rights of women need extra protection and must address issues specific to the lives of women but also problematically, (and this is where my critique comes in to the use of the concept “women’s rights”), the wording “women’s rights” suggests that these are not human rights. Through the use of “women’s rights” instead of “women’s human rights”, human rights are reified as the rights of *man*, and not as human rights for all. As with all declarations, the UDHR is open for reinterpretation when read both through particular contexts and in the light of competing historical narratives on the intent of the disparate and unique drafters. According to both Arendt and Cavare-ro, it is the relationality of narratives that creates the political dimension – this means that human beings are not political subjects in isolation from each other, rather that deeds and words gain their political significance when received and acted upon by another. Accordingly, counter narratives act as political contestation to dominant notions of power. When human rights are read today in different cultural contexts, it is through the uniqueness of the individual and her life narrative that human rights receive meaning and it is through narrating these rights in community with others that human rights receive their political weight.

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37 See above, note 5, p. 92.