



Volume 2, No 2 (2019)
Date of publication: 07-10-2019

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.7577/hrer.3407>
ISSN 2535-5406

BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEWS

Making women human: uncovering the contribution of women to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Adami, R. (2019). *Women and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Oxon:
Routledge. 161 pp., £115 (hardcover) ISBN-13:978-1-138-34535-5-90000.

Reviewed by Lynsey Mitchell
Abertay University, UK.

Lynsey Mitchell: l.mitchell@abertay.ac.uk

BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEWS

Making women human: uncovering the contribution of women to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.7577/hrer.3407>

ISSN 2535-5406

Adami, R. (2019). *Women and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Oxon: Routledge. 161 pp., £115 (hardcover) ISBN-13:978-1-138-34535-5-90000.

Reviewed by
Lynsey Mitchell
Abertay University, UK.
l.mitchell@abertay.ac.uk

This book offers both a historical and critical account of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the work leading up to this at the creation of the United Nations (UN). The book sets out its position in the literature as a counter narrative to earlier research, which it notes has 'generally emphasised the contribution of the Western and male delegates who participated in the process' (p. 1). It therefore offers a fresh account of the birth of the modern international human rights regime, focussing on the substantial contributions of the women delegates who contributed to the final text of the United Nations Charter and the UDHR. It charts the strategies and ideologies of the various women who were successful in ensuring the declaration reflected the language of 'human rights rather than the rights of man' (p. 2). In doing so, this book adds further understanding and insight into the birth of the United Nations' human rights mechanisms.

Each chapter of the book focusses on the deliberation and preparatory meetings where the drafting of key UN texts was discussed and agreed. Not only does the text offer further insight into the debates that led to the adoption of the final texts, but it also complements existing works by highlighting and exploring the role of the female delegates and amplifying their contributions. The initial chapters (chapters 1-3) begin at the San Francisco conference and focus on the text of the UN Charter. The book then has chapters dedicated to the establishment of the Commission on Human Rights and the Commission on the Status of Women (chapters 4-7), which explore the debates around whether women's specific needs and rights could be guaranteed in the main texts and enforcement mechanisms, or whether additional women's bodies were necessary. These chapters provide helpful insight into the compromises that led to the eventual adoption of a specific Commission on the Status of Women and bring alive the perennial debate over whether women need a separate human rights regime, or whether women's rights are protected by the generic texts.

The book then turns to the debates on rights in the private realm, and in the later chapters (chapters 8-10) considers the socialist movements and its contribution and the establishment of the General Assembly. The book ends by noting the call from female delegates for ordinary women to be more represented at the United Nations and the hope that women would soon hold positions in equal numbers to men. The text thus ends with a note of reflection on the achievement and

hopes of the women delegates and how they envisaged the future but invites the reader to reflect on the contemporary reality, noting that many of the issues raised by these women remain true today. Men continue to outnumber women in the UN, and there has been much scholarly engagement and critique of how, even though women were given visibility in the text of the human rights instruments, the human rights system is centred around an idealised subject who is male.

By providing a biography of the various female delegates, the book weaves a complex picture of the different backgrounds and ideologies that each of these women represented. The book makes clear that, as is often the case today, the women did not necessarily agree on how to incorporate gender into the texts, and indeed some of the delegates did not see themselves as representatives of women's issues, but instead as representatives who happened to be women. For example, it narrates the disagreement between Eleanor Roosevelt (elected Chair of the full Commission on Human Rights and US representative) and Indian representative Hansa Mehta, who argued that proposed language for the UDHR such as 'all men' (pp. 67, 92) could be interpreted as excluding women. It also describes the debate as to whether the UDHR should be legally binding, or a declaration, or both. Several chapters focus on the work done by individual women and the Commission on the Status of Women to eventually force the Commission on Human Rights to adopt the gender-neutral language of 'human beings' and explicitly refer to both men and women in the text.

This book therefore offers a welcome alternative account of the inception of the UDHR. It provides a valuable contribution and will be of interest to human rights scholars as well as legal historians and those with a wider interest in the United Nations and gender. Although focussed on, and drawing heavily from, the source material of the preparatory meetings, this book brings to life the various characters who worked tirelessly to bring, sometimes radical, understandings of how universal human rights could be protected. This book provides ample real-life examples of the continuing debates in human rights, such as the universalism versus relativism debate, the generalist rights versus specific rights debate, and the legally binding versus aspirational mechanisms of promoting and protecting human rights debate. While aimed predominately at researchers, this book offers an accessible and helpful account of the creation of the UN human rights mechanism, demonstrating the compromises reached that have been instrumental in both the successes and failures of this system. It will assist human rights educators in universities to bring alive the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and potentially invigorate student discussion around issues such as women's visibility and gender inclusive language. This text will also prove useful to those providing generalist education and information on international human rights due to its accessibility and reinvigoration of the story of the birth of UN human rights.