

The A.I. controversy : Are Women's Rights Still Human Rights?

Thursday 18 March 2010, by [TAX Meredith](#) (Date first published: 15 March 2010).

Contents

- [Who is Moazzam Begg?](#)
- [Underlying philosophical \(...\)](#)
- [The stakes are high](#)

On Feb. 7, 2010, Gita Sahgal, head of the gender research unit at the London secretariat of Amnesty International, was suspended from her job three hours after she gave an interview to the Sunday Times airing her concerns about AI's relationship with Moazzam Begg, a British jihadi who was imprisoned in Bagram and Guantanamo. Her suspension became an international cause celebre, featured on the BBC, CBC, NPR, and in all the major British newspapers. Soon a website called Human Rights for All was tracking the controversy; and an international petition originating in South Asia has gathered more than 1500 signatures, including many women's human rights organizations and such luminaries as Malalai Joya, (suspended from the Afghan Parliament for criticizing warlords), Dr. Yakin Erturk (former UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women), I. A. Rehman and Iqbal Haider (the most senior members of Pakistan's Human Rights Commission), Nawal El Sadaawi, Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, Farida Shaheed (UN Independent Expert on Cultural Rights), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Marieme Helie-Lucas, Charlotte Bunch, Rhonda Copelon, Martha Nussbaum, Ros Petchesky, and Katha Pollitt.

Many of these people have worked with Gita Sahgal during her long career as a human rights campaigner. An expert on jihadi networks in the UK and a founder of the English feminist groups Southall Black Sisters and Women Against Fundamentalism, Sahgal was one of the first to understand the threat fundamentalist movements pose not only to women's rights but to the secular state itself. As Salman Rushdie told the Sunday Times on Feb. 21: "Gita Sahgal is a woman of immense integrity and distinction and I am personally grateful to her for the courageous stands she made at the time of the Khomeini fatwa against The Satanic Verses, as a leading member of the groups Southall Black Sisters and Women Against Fundamentalism. It is people like Gita Sahgal who are the true voices of the human rights movement."

Sahgal is a careful and principled activist who would never gone public with her concerns, risking her own career and her family's livelihood, unless she felt the stakes were very high indeed. While she believes that all Guantanamo prisoners must be defended and the place should be closed down, she fears that Amnesty's close alliance with a Taliban supporter, Moazzam Begg, is undermining its claim to defend the universality of human rights—and raising particular problems for women.

Who is Moazzam Begg?

Moazzam Begg is a British citizen who was held by the US at Bagram and Guantanamo for three years, then released without trial. So he is a victim of arbitrary arrest and torture. When he returned

to England, he started an organization, Cageprisoners, whose stated mission is to help those still imprisoned without trial in Guantanamo. But the Cageprisoner website also endorses jihadi prisoners who have been tried and convicted in the UK such as Omar Khyam, convicted of trying to blow up a British shopping mall and nightclub; Abu Qatada, an Islamic militant described as Al-Qaeda's spiritual leader in Europe, wanted on terrorism charges in 8 countries; and Abu Hamza, author of the handbook, *The Encyclopedia of Afghan Jihad*.

Gita Sahgal was suspended from Amnesty for going public with her concerns that Amnesty's close relationship with Begg enables him to sanitize his politics and present himself as a human rights defender, misleading people who do not know of his support for the Taliban.

There is no question that Amnesty International has developed an extremely close relationship with Begg and Cageprisoners as part of its campaign to close down Guantanamo. Despite advice from experts on its own staff, including Gita Sahgal, Amnesty has helped organize a European speaking tour for Begg and made him part of its delegation to Downing Street—even though these actions might seem to contradict Amnesty's position on Afghanistan, where they oppose negotiations with the Taliban. When asked to account for the close relationship, Claudio Cordone, interim head of Amnesty, told the CBC that he had no problem with Begg: "Are we supposed to act on the basis of accurate information or just innuendos and generalizations?" Apparently he has not examined the evidence submitted by AI's own researchers.

Moazzem Begg is a jihadi by his own admission. His book *Enemy Combatant: My Imprisonment at Guantanamo, Bagram, and Kandahar*, describes his first trip to Afghanistan, in 1993, where he trained at a mujahedeen camp, as a "life changing experience for me." He fought in Bosnia, and subsequently tried to join Muslim fundamentalists in Chechnya, but could not get into the country. In 2001, he moved his family from the UK to Afghanistan to help the Taliban build a new society based on a Salafi version of Islam. This was around the time that the Taliban was destroying the ancient Buddhas at Bamiyan, massacring four thousand people in Mazar-al-Sharif because they were Hazara rather than Salafi Muslims, crushing homosexuals to death, closing down all schools for girls, and forbidding girls over eight to be out in public. Yet Begg says Afghanistan was better off under the Taliban than it had been for the previous twenty-five years.

What lies behind Amnesty's attachment to Begg? All too many on both left and right are stuck in binary thinking: "the enemy of my enemy is my friend and if US imperialism is bad, then all those who oppose it must be good." Activists who see US imperialism as an enemy so great it dwarfs all other considerations prefer to see people whom the US has violated as "pure" victims. But it is folly to assume that everyone imprisoned by the US is a good guy or that anyone who opposes US imperialism is a friend of the people. The world is a complicated place and freedom has more than one enemy.

Underlying philosophical differences

The Gita Sahgal-Amnesty International controversy has been confusing to some because underlying philosophical differences have been expressed in the technical language of human rights. The basic issue is the centrality of feminism to social change. By feminism, I mean not only support for equal treatment of women but also a radical skepticism and a fresh eye on political issues like war, power, economics, labor, nationalism, and the environment. Feminists question any analysis based on the assumption that the experience of men is the rule and the experience of women is an exception to the rule.

We have been developing a different approach for the last forty years, first in our separate countries

and, more recently, globally. Our thinking by now has attained considerable sophistication. We see that issues involving gender underlie every other political question. We know, for instance, that nation states constructed on the basis of male identity will tend to assume that war is a natural and inevitable means of resolving differences, and that this assumption will not change until large numbers of women can represent a different point of view at the negotiating table.

We also know that a vision of human rights issues based on what happens to men will not cover a lot of what happens to women. In wartime, at work, and when we try to express our views, women are subject to extra forms of assault and humiliation; we remain responsible for complex family obligations, and meet barriers to free expression not faced by men.

It is therefore necessary to integrate the experience and needs of women into the analysis of every other social and political question. Strategies for social reform and transformation must begin with such excluded forms of knowledge.

Many progressive people and human rights activists have not grasped this radically new vision of our common struggle for social justice. They still see women's interests as sectoral—in US terms, they see women as one stripe in a rainbow made up of different interest groups: African-Americans, Latino/as, Asian-Americans, Native Americans, queers, workers, farmers, prisoners, immigrants, etc. In addition, they often see the world in terms of one monolithic enemy—US imperialism—that crushes little people everywhere. Their strategy is to unite all the rainbow stripes against the main enemy.

To feminists, this worldview seems simplistic. For one thing, the stripes in the rainbow are very different and have different structural relationships to one another. And, while US imperialism is responsible for a lot of what is wrong with the world, it's not responsible for everything. And some of the people who oppose it are unacceptably authoritarian and regressive themselves.

Besides, women are not just another interest group. We are half of the world's population and our issues arise within every other question and sector. For the last twenty years, feminists have stressed the dangers of fundamentalism because we have experienced these dangers more sharply than many of our brothers in the Western human rights movement. We have also experienced the sufferings caused by imperialism; the global feminist movement has been extremely critical of both globalization and the so-called war on terror. But we see that the world is a complex place and freedom has more than one enemy.

The stakes are high

The stakes are very high in this controversy. A recent statement by a group of women's human rights organizations—Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), Baobab for Women's Human Rights, Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL), INFORM, MADRE (International Women's Rights Organization), Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights (UAF), and Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML)—discusses the stakes in Afghanistan:

"In the present context of 'constructive engagement' with the Taliban, AI bears the burden of closely scrutinizing that its partners do not use its platform to condone fundamentalist groups that are accountable for gross violations of women's human rights, the rights of minorities and indiscriminate attacks on the civilian population in Afghanistan. Amidst the growing tendency of privileging religion and culture at the expense of women's human rights, we must be vigilant not to undermine the extensive work we have done in exposing religious fundamentalisms and draw attention to the lack of mechanisms for accountability of non-state actors such as powerful fundamentalist forces, which

have further empowered religious extremists groups such as the Taliban.”

These issues go back at least twenty years, to the struggle in Algeria, when Islamic fundamentalists (“non-state actors”) targeted by the state were themselves busy executing various groups whom they wanted to purge from society—intellectuals, foreigners, women. Marieme Helie Lucas has written of the way Amnesty and other mainstream human rights groups responded to this complex situation:

“Numerous reports on violence in Algeria, produced by different human rights organizations, were drawn exclusively from information given by supporters of fundamentalists in the guise of human rights defenders. Our attempts, as women’s rights defenders, to organize interaction between victims of violence by non-state actors and international investigation teams that came to Algeria were ignored.”

After women’s human rights groups held their famous tribunal at the UN Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, demonstrating the range of violations against women, the mainstream human rights organizations agreed that “women’s rights are human rights” and set up gender units to work on women’s issues. The problem is, without a deeper grasp on the centrality of women’s issues, these gender units can become window dressing with no more influence on policy than the women’s commissions of the old line communist and socialist parties.

And it is proving difficult for some to hold onto the importance of women’s human rights in the context of the “war on terror.” For twenty years we fought to move human rights from its original Cold War form, in which the normative subject was an Eastern European male prisoner, and build a human rights movement that gave weight to offenses against women and children. Until the 90s, people thought only in terms of human rights crimes committed by the state. We struggled to enlarge that definition to include crimes committed by “non-state actors”—militias, paramilitary groups, religious fundamentalists, even fathers and brothers and husbands. And we insisted that women who fought for their rights be moved from the category of “victim” into the category of “human rights defender.”

It was an uphill struggle, but we made significant progress. We campaigned for an international criminal court and got one, even though the US never joined. We got wartime rape defined as a human rights abuse rather than a natural consequence of armed struggle. We fought for UN Resolution 1325, which mandates that women be equally represented at peace negotiations—with the right women at the negotiating table, this could be transformative. But the “war on terror” has returned us in many ways to status quo ante: the normative human rights subject is once again a male prisoner, this time in Guantanamo, and women and children are once more seen as pitiful victims and pushed to the margins of the discourse.

In a speech to Amnesty in 2007, Gita Sahgal recalled the moment when women’s human rights politics came together:

In 1993, at the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, a group of feminist advocates held a now famous tribunal on Violence against Women. And in that moving event which reflected the experiences of thousands of women across the world, a challenge was posed to governments and to the leadership of the formal human rights movement. It was not a challenge to abandon the principles of human rights, or to dilute them. It was a challenge to embrace them more fully by accounting for the experience of a whole category of excluded victims....[This did not mean] abandoning the principle of universality. It was a foundational challenge to the way in which universality is constructed.

Under the influence of the war on terror, universality is again becoming narrowed. The backlash has

affected even human rights organizations that jumped on the bandwagon after the Vienna conference. This backlash is the real reason Gita Sahgal was suspended as head of Amnesty International's gender unit. And it is the reason we have to defend her—to make sure that women's rights remain human rights.

by Meredith Tax

P.S.

* Source : Gita Sahgal and Amnesty International: Are Women's Rights Still Human Rights?
published Wednesday 10 March 2010, on Taxonomy. Reproduced ob:
<http://www.siawi.org/article1738.html>