

CARR CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY HARVARD KENNEDY SCHOOL

International Womxn's Day

In recognition of International Womxn's Day this year, we spoke with faculty and fellows across the center and asked them to share their insight on one question:
What do we need to focus on in the coming year to fully realize the rights of womxn and girls around the world? Here's what they had to say.





ELIZABETH BENNETT

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Of the estimated 450 million people working in global supply chains, the vast majority of low-paid, low-skilled workers are womxn. When multinational corporations aim to maximize profits by offshoring, outsourcing, and subcontracting, they often turn to suppliers whose low prices reflect poor working conditions and indecent wages. In this context, differing social roles make womxn especially vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Consequently, gender-based violence and pay gaps are endemic to global supply chains. COVID-19 has exacerbated this affront to womxn's rights by slashing demand for consumer products—especially apparel, which relies heavily on the labor of womxn. Over the past year, many global supply chain workers were laid off, experienced wage theft, or worked in unsafe environments. For womxn, who often already work multiple (paying and unpaying) jobs, this has created an unconscionable spike in income- and time-poverty. In the coming year, to more fully realize the rights of womxn and girls in global supply chains, we need to focus on gender in due diligence policies for business and human rights. Over the past two decades, the United Nations has become increasingly clear that states must require companies to identify and address their adverse impacts on human rights. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has developed guidelines on how they might do so. This year, several countries will finalize due diligence policies and roll out plans for implementation. These policies should require companies to collect sex-disaggregated data, consult womxn, conduct gender-sensitive risk assessments, and attend to sexual harassment and gender-based violence.



KEISHA BLAIN

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Addressing the issue of educational inequality will improve the rights of womxn and girls in the United States and around the world. According to UNESCO, more girls remain out of school than boys. An estimated 16 million girls will never obtain a formal education, and womxn represent two-thirds of the adult global population without basic literacy skills—close to 500 million womxn. In the United States, girls' math skills are still undervalued by teachers in classrooms starting as early as kindergarten. These low expectations can influence student performance for the duration of their education. When young womxn enter college, this treatment shapes their experiences in STEM and in other fields of study. The underestimation of womxn's skills and abilities affect their careers and help to explain why womxn receive less pay with the same education, and why they are often passed over for promotion and leadership opportunities. Increasing access to quality education and working toward more equitable outcomes for womxn and girls are significant steps to dismantling patriarchy. These are issues we need to focus on in the coming year to fully realize the rights of womxn and girls in every part of the globe.



MARTHA CHEN

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Women in Informal Employment:
Globalizing and Organizing
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Over half of all women (and men) globally—and nearly 90% of women (and men) in developing countries—are informally employed. And, there is evidence from around the world that the COVID pandemic-cum-restrictions have had disproportionately negative impacts on the work, earnings, and food security of informal workers. Yet, most unemployment benefits and business stimulus packages do not reach—or even target—informal workers. The COVID recovery moment represents an opportunity to recognize that many informal workers are essential workers and to build their work and livelihoods into recovery plans. To do so will help reduce poverty and increase economic growth, as earnings from informal work contributes to poverty alleviation and the goods and services produced by informal workers contributes to the formal economy and to economic growth. A better deal for informal workers going forward should address the structural injustices and inequities they have always faced, which have been exposed and exacerbated during the COVID crisis. Consider four groups of informal workers with large numbers of women workers who provide essential goods or services: households should rehire the domestic workers they dismissed summarily and compensate them for lost earnings; firms and factories in manufacturing and commodity supply chains should issue regular work orders on fair terms to home-based workers who were the first to be let go; cities should support street vendors who sell food and other essential goods, allowing the natural open-air markets of street vendors to reopen and building these natural markets into local economic development and city plans; cities should also allow informal waste pickers to provide waste collection and recycling services and build them into plans for solid waste management going forward. In brief, informal workers—both women and men—should be recognized as essential workers and no longer be treated as expendable.



LAURA CORDISCO TSAI

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Womxn have stood at the frontlines of the COVID-19 crisis—as those who have been disproportionately impacted, and those whose tremendous efforts have championed recovery and healing. As health and mental health care workers, world leaders, caregivers, educators, and community organizers, womxn's leadership and contributions have been central to recovery. And yet globally, the pandemic is intensifying the violence, exploitation, and harassment womxn and girls face. Womxn are overrepresented as health and mental health workers, but lack representation as decision-makers in systems shaping policy. The crisis-induced poverty surge will likely deepen the gender poverty gap given womxn's lower wages, overrepresentation in the informal economy, reduced social protections, and disproportionate responsibility for domestic and caregiving work. In the coming year, the voices of womxn and girls must not only be heard, but power must also be shared. Womxn and girls' full participation, leadership, and decision-making authority in public life is essential—not only to realize the rights of womxn and girls, but also to develop policies, laws, and systems that function better for all. Steadfast efforts to eliminate violence against womxn and girls must be at the forefront. Violence-related services should be declared essential, and funding must go to womxn and girl-led organizations pursuing intersectional approaches and solutions. Realizing the rights of womxn and girls must include gender equality in caregiving, safe sexual and reproductive health services, efforts to ensure the safety of health and mental health care workers, access to equal pay and education, and enhanced protections for those working in the informal economy.



AARATHI KRISHNAN

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Often, in our efforts for gender equality, we focus on parity: counting womxn and girls, as if getting the right number is what is most important. But, if we are to truly strive for equity, then intersectionality, access, and addressing the structural, systemic, and cultural barriers to equality are integral.

Our identities aren't narrowed to just womxn and girls, but rather the plurality of identities that exist. We need to ensure that we are allowing all of those that identify as womxn or as girls, or whose genders are not binary or are fluid, to be included. We need to also recognize that the experiences of all who identify as womxn and girls are not identical nor homogenous; depending on your economic class, where you were born, your abilities, the colour of your skin—these all influence how you are seen, perceived, and received in the world.

It is also about how we expand access to those that may not have the same rights or opportunities to access the pathways that those with privilege might have. It is our obligation to consider pathways to flourishing for all womxn and girls, however we choose to define it. It isn't just about a seat at the table, but also about how much space, freedom, and safety is allowed at the table to talk, to make decisions, and to influence action.



BINALAKSHMI NEPRAM

Scholar at Risk, Carr Center

On International Women's Day, we call upon the peoples and nations of the world to work towards having every girl child realize their full and brilliant potential; to recognize and honor the remarkable work, histories, and struggle of indigenous women and nations around the world, such as the women of Meira Paibis in Manipur, India—women with flaming bamboo torches who have been protecting the rights of people in Manipur; to recognise the existence of 496 million indigenous peoples living in 90 countries and territories working towards gender justice, and ending environmental and militarized violence; to know that in the committed work done every on this day, and all the days to come, for and with women and girls around the world, including indigenous women and girls, will usher in efforts for environmental justice, ending wars and conflicts, deepening our democracies, and bringing global and sustainable peace for the entire planet.



AMINTA OSSOM

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I think that the coming year should inspire a focus on social and economic justice to realize the rights of all women and girls. What was already untenable for those who have faced historical discrimination, underinvestment, and exploitation is assuredly engulfing all of us. To reverse this trend, we should promote the rights to equitable, safe, and decent work for workers of all kinds, including women carrying out informal, precarious, unpaid and care work. We should work to reconcile the dual and drastically different realities created by social and economic inequality while renewing our commitment to the fight against poverty.

Doing justice to the millions of women whose lives have been lost or forever changed by COVID-19 calls for an awakening in realizing the right to health. As well, we should join the fight to combat climate change, which has had devastating effects on the water, land, and food to which women and girls are intimately connected in many places—and which are sources of cultural identity, nourishment, economic well-being, and stability around the globe. One step that would help enable this would be the further democratization of decision-making, so that the women-powered communities confronting a confluence of crises are not ignored but have a say in the policymaking that frames their everyday existence.



SUSHMA RAMAN

Executive Director, Carr Center

Women and gender non-conforming human rights defenders around the world are under increasing threat of verbal harassment, discrimination and stigmatization, restrictions on freedom of movement, expression, and association, criminal charges and imprisonment, physical attacks, and even death. The rise in authoritarian leaders who use sexist, homophobic, and racist rhetoric and vitriol, the shrinking of civic space and a rights backlash, and the entrenched nature of patriarchal and heteronormative societies all contribute to this crisis.

Environmental human rights defenders and those working with indigenous communities are particularly affected, representing one in two defenders killed in 2019, according to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. According to Frontline Defenders, the most targeted individuals are those working on land, environmental and indigenous people's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and women's rights.

In an increasingly digital and interconnected age, new forms of harassment and defamation build on and amplify attacks in the analog world. Takedowns on social media, fake viral videos of a violent or sexualized nature, and thousands of hate-filled electronic messages and coordinated anonymous campaigns have resulted in virtual harassment that translate to real life intimidation and even death for women journalists, environmental activists, human rights defenders, and LGBTQ individuals.

In the coming year, we need to focus on the safety, security, and dignity of these brave human rights defenders in order to be able to advance environmental, racial, and gender justice and to promote pluralistic and peaceful public spheres. We need to challenge the impunity of state and non-state actors, press technology platforms to address problems of hate speech and disinformation, advocate for the repeal of repressive and outdated laws and policies that undermine freedom of expression, association, and assembly, and ensure that defenders and the movements they represent are valued as vanguards of progress.



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March 8th is a day to time travel embraced by feminist dreams. It is a collective ritual very localized, but also very global, in which we celebrate historical victories from the past and cherish our collective strength and will to fight for a different future.

Over centuries, women organized around the world have been fighting for gender equality in social and political rights. It has been an enduring and continuous struggle to end gender-based violence, ensure that sexual and reproductive rights are respected, guarantee equal work conditions, and, among others quests, have political and leadership positions occupied by people from a non-binary diversity of genders in all its intersectionalities of race, class, sexuality, capabilities, etc. But, reaching gender equality in the current Surveillance Capitalism system is not enough. For instance, having women's bodily autonomy respected to ensure the right to safe abortion, or for a woman to love another woman in peace, should actually be pretty basic requests. We want to go beyond equality in the current status quo. Within decolonial, antiracist, feminist movements we seek futures (and a present) in which, instead of extracted and exploited, our bodies and territories are respected. Nourished to be unique, while also free to be interconnected.

Therefore, International Women's Day is also a day to cherish our dreams about speculative feminist futures. If patriarchy has ended, if the future was transfeminist, what social, political, economical, and technological structures would prevail in our societies? To dig into these questions, on this special day, I want to invite you all to play with tools I've been developing with incredible, inspiring feminists: the Oracle for Transfeminist Technologies, a card game used to co-design tech and M.A.M.I, a collaborative museum from 3021 that displays feminist art and activism pieces created to fight archaic patriarchal acts of violence that were common in the distant 2021.