

# Book Review: The Remaking of Social Contracts – Feminists in a Fierce New World

*By Sehin Teferra*

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Let me start by stating that this is a brilliant book. It invites us to imagine what the authors characterize as a 'fierce new world' (a term I love) and which is obviously a counterpoint or perhaps a complement to the 'Brave New World' envisioned by the World Social Movements.

Before the book's offer of the concrete ways in which a new, more egalitarian world may be created, the authors, an impressive set of inter-generational activists and academicians from all over the global South, offer an arresting critique of all the ways in which what they term the social contract of the world has been fractured, from environmental degradation to the runaway greed of the capitalist system to conflict and violence.

With its focus on 'gender power', the book questions the 'institutionalized gender approach' by governments and non-governmental organizations which we know to often be weak, without teeth. *The Remaking of Social Contracts: Feminists in a Fierce New World* reminds that beyond interpersonal relations, the gender regime is shaped by economic, political, ecological systems and structures.

It follows that the feminist lenses that DAWN turns on to examine the state of the world unearth the complicated interplay between trade, globalization, finance, climate change and militarization. As a feminist text, the book explores the gendered facets of these phenomena; pulling together feminist economists' assertions that economic systems all over the world depend on women's unpaid labour as well as the gendered causes of climate change including consumption habits. An example of the more obscure political economy systems examined from a gender perspective is Free Trade - whereas most free trade agreements are considered harmful to poor women and men, it was Lice Cokanasiga's short ('boxed') insert in the book on trade in the Pacific which elucidates the argument that the loss of land which is considered sacred by Pacific Islanders not only marginalizes women from economic benefits but also results in women detaching from their traditional status, roots and authority.

Included in the narrative of *The Remaking of Social Contracts* is a series of texts which are highly critical of the neo-liberal state which the authors argue causes women's unpaid care to stretch to breaking point when common resources such as land for food and water as well as water get privatized and commercialized. *The Remaking of Social Contracts* is also critical of state policies that offer token prescriptions of the 'add women and stir' variety.

The human rights approach to development which is often offered as the antidote to the neo-liberal state is likewise problematized for its reliance on the state-machinery which doesn't always leave room for feminist activism. In addition to problematizing the neo-liberal system which is usually no friend to women, *The Remaking of Social Contracts* also expresses concern over the authoritarian nature of the developmental state. I could relate personally to many of the arguments presented in this regard; in Ethiopia, our nascent feminism faces most of the constraints outlined in the article, 'The State of States'

by Claire Slatter, Chair of the DAWN Board, including the political conditionality of 'good governance', as well as the tension between democracy versus authoritarianism.

The book is particularly strong in its dissection of climate change from a feminist perspective, highlighting the absence of women's groups in the citizens' groups demanding climate justice. In another instance, land grabs are discussed as a gendered phenomenon affecting women's access to agricultural lands and biodiversity while 'investments' by international companies often create opportunities for feminized jobs. I particularly appreciated the examination of current fads and trends designed to counteract the disasters characterizing our world as she stands currently. These range from a feminist exploration of the challenges of secularization in an increasingly conservative state of religiosity - with an associated increase in a backlash against gender equality - to climate finance mechanisms such as Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) which may prove to be business as usual where gender equality is concerned.

The DAWN position is clear; it advocates feminist query as a key analytical tool for the transnational activism of the feminists of the global South with the United Nations questioned as the appropriate locus for this multilateral engagement. However, global conferences such as the International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo (1994) and landmark documents such as the Beijing Platform for Action which both featured strong voices from the Global South are discussed appreciatively. A key component of both ICPD and Beijing was of course reproductive rights, and the abortion debate is highlighted in the book beyond the US where it is almost always under debate. The discussion is timely when we are hearing reports about the Uruguayan ten-year who raped and pregnant, was denied abortion. Lastly, the rise in homophobia in Africa, and particularly in Uganda following the passing of the controversial anti-homosexuality in 2012, is treated to an impressive Foucauldian analysis which critiques Western liberal human rights and humanitarian discourses which would save us Africans from ourselves.

One of the gems offered by this book is the reframing of women beyond their vulnerability, recognizing women as agents in the very social contracts the book considers dangerous including as willing participants in religious fundamentalist organizations. Women as agents engaged in the effort to recreate better social contracts are featured well including a great story from Gujarat where Muslim and Hindu women were able to overcome their mutual distrust to work together.

There were a few pieces in the book where I was left hungry for a deeper feminist analysis, as for example, in the article discussing the new colonization of Africa by China. However, most of the contributions offer a rich set of feminist viewpoints which greatly enhanced my feminist understanding of the processes shaping our world. In conclusion, I would say that DAWN has done it again, it has produced a definitive text that creates necessary discomfort, that poses as many questions as it answers but which always positions women and the perennial quest for equality as the key ingredient in the reworked social contract of the fierce new world DAWN has boldly drawn for us.

*Sehin Teferra is a PhD Candidate in Gender Studies at SOAS, University of London. Sehin is also the co-founder of Setaweet, a feminist network in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.*