

*The Remaking of Social Contracts: Feminists in a Fierce New World.* Edited by Gita Sen and Marina Durano for DAWN. London: Zed Books, 2014

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DAWN – Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era – has produced a fine-grained, well-articulated vision in its latest offering, *The Remaking of Social Contracts: Feminists in a Fierce New World*. The book invites us to imagine what the authors characterise as a “fierce new world,” which is obviously a counterpoint or perhaps complement to the “brave new world” envisioned by the World Social Movements.

The authors, an impressive set of inter-generational activists and academicians from across the global South, offer a convincing critique of the ways in which the “social contract” of the world has been compromised, from environmental degradation to the devastating impact of capitalist greed, to conflict and violence. The feminist lens through which DAWN examines the state of affairs unearths the complicated interplay between trade, globalisation, finance, climate change and militarisation. The book explores the gendered facets of these phenomena, for instance pulling together the longstanding assertions of feminist economists that economic systems all over the world depend on women’s unpaid labour. An example of one of the more obscure political economy arrangements examined from a gender perspective is that of free trade. Whereas most free trade agreements are considered harmful to poor women and men, Lise Cokanasiga’s short contribution on trade in the Pacific elucidates that the loss of land considered sacred by Pacific Islanders not only marginalises women economically but also detaches them from their traditional status, roots and authority.

The book is also strong in its dissection of climate change from a feminist perspective, highlighting the absence of women’s groups in the various citizens’ organisations demanding climate justice. 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 feminised jobs. I particularly appreciated the examination of current fads and trends ostensibly designed to counteract the environmental disasters characterising our world. Here, contributions ranged from an exploration of the challenges of secularisation in increasingly conservative religious contexts – with the associated backlashes against gender equality – to a discussion of climate finance mechanisms such as the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation mechanism (REDD), which may prove to be business as usual where gender equality is concerned.

Included in the narrative of *The Remaking of Social Contracts* is a series of texts that are highly critical of the neoliberal state, which the authors argue stretches women’s unpaid care to breaking point when common resources such as land for food, as well as water, are commercialised. The book is also critical of state policies that offer token prescriptions of the ‘add women and stir’ variety.

Furthermore, with what it terms gender power as an analytical tool, the book questions the “institutionalised gender approach” involving watered-down gender equity work by governments and non-governmental organisations that usually avoids difficult political questions. It shows that, in addition to relationships between women and men, the gender regime is shaped by economic, political, ecological systems and structures. The human rights approach to development, often offered as the antidote to the neoliberal state, is likewise problematised for its reliance on state machinery, which does not always leave room for feminist activism. The book 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 chapter, “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 and authoritarianism. DAWN’s position is clear: the organisation advocates feminist enquiry as a key analytical tool for the transnational activism of feminists of the global South, and questions if the United Nations is the appropriate locus for this multilateral engagement. However, global conferences such as the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo (1994) and landmark documents such as the Beijing Platform for Action,

which both featured strong voices from the global South, are given due credit. A key concern of both the ICPD and Beijing platform, was, of course, reproductive rights, and the abortion question is highlighted in the book beyond the United States where it is almost always under debate. Lastly, the rise in homophobia in Africa, particularly in Uganda following the passing of the controversial anti-homosexuality legislation in 2012, is treated to an impressive Foucauldian analysis that critiques Western liberal human rights and humanitarian discourses which purport to save us Africans from ourselves. One of the gems offered by *The Remaking of Social Contracts* is the reframing of women as more than vulnerable or victimised to instead recognise them as agents, including in the very social contracts that the book considers. An example is that women may willingly participate in fundamentalist religious organisations. At the same time, the book also features women engaged in efforts to recreate a better world, including in a wonderful account from Gujarat in which Muslim and Hindu women were able to overcome their mutual distrust to work together for peace following riots in March 2002. Women's groups working for relief and rehabilitation in both communities faced the threat of their work being completely. Eventually, using religious festivals and symbols adapted from both communities, the women's groups were able to come together *as women* whose livelihoods are the first to be threatened in riots. In one instance, the women lay down on the road in protest when a riot started between Muslims and Hindus; by the time the police arrive, the problem had been solved.

There were a few instances in the book where I was left hungry for a deeper feminist analysis, for example in the chapter discussing the new "colonisation" of African countries by China. However, most of the contributions offer a rich set of feminist viewpoints which will greatly enhance understandings of the processes shaping our world. DAWN has done it again: it has produced a definitive text that creates necessary discomfort, that poses as many questions as it answers, but resolutely positions women and the perennial quest for equality as key for the fierce new world towards which readers are invited to journey.