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Alison Brysk

*The Struggle for Freedom from Fear: Contesting Violence Against Women at the Frontiers of Globalization.*

Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018, ISBN 9780190901516386 (hardcover), 386pp.

**Reviewed by:** Daniel Sailofsky, Ph.D. candidate, McGill University, *Canada*

In *The Struggle for Freedom from Fear: Contesting Violence Against Women at the Frontiers of Globalization*, Alison Brysk presents a vast and thorough examination of the prevalence, patterns, and drivers of violence against women throughout the world. She accomplishes this through an analysis of international and national treaties and legal reforms, public policy, social justice campaigns, and norm changes across a variety of rapidly globalizing countries. Framing violence against women as a “gendered form of human rights abuse” (p.27), Brysk’s goal is to “map pathways of response” to this violence for countries that fall into what Brysk labels “semi-liberal gender regimes” (p.6), in order to better understand how to reduce and prevent gendered violence and other human rights abuses. The book is largely successful in this ambitious endeavor.

States with “semi-liberal gender regimes” (p.13) are used as the sites for this study, due to common characteristics of “rapid growth, inequality, neoliberal political economy, weak democracy and limited citizenship, diminished state capacity, and contested gender roles” (p.27) that are linked to higher rates of violence against women. These states and gender regimes are situated between Brysk’s categorization of “patrimonial” regimes and “developed” democracies. Patrimonial regimes, found in North Africa and Central Asia, are historically illiberal, and gendered violence is “pervasive, disciplinary and widely legitimized” (p.13). On the other hand, in liberal “developed” democratic regimes such as Canada, the United States, and those in Western Europe, “women’s public labor and citizenship serve essential functions” (p.14), and while violence against women still exists, it is legally sanctioned and at least theoretically delegitimized. Semi-liberal states present a middle ground, where the role of the patriarchy seems to be diminishing, economic production is increasing, and social and political incentives for increasing women’s autonomy are rising. However, they are also still marked by inequality, uneven gender roles and citizenship rights, and rigid norms surrounding female empowerment. These states, which include BRIC countries Brazil, Russia, India and China, as well as Turkey, South Africa, Colombia, Mexico and the Philippines, are also culturally, regionally and religiously diverse. This allows for an analysis of violence against women trends related to state-specific legislative, policy, and norm changes in the context of globalization.

Using a human rights and feminist framework, Brysk examines gendered violence in these semi-liberal states through a nested ecological model. This approach analyzes the effects of globalization on violence at the state, community, household and individual level. Chapters 2 and 3 – focused on international and national level factors – begin the building of this ecological model. In chapter 2, violence against women is framed as a human rights abuse, highlighting the importance of campaigns and legal changes to ensure these rights are upheld. In chapter 3, Brysk examines the effects of global institutions and organizations, advocacy groups, and policies in combating violence against women. International and state level activism, recognition of gendered violence, and advocacy are important, but must also interact with and account for individual actors and social and religious norms at the community, household and individual levels.

The remaining chapters focus on unpacking different manifestations of gender based violence and how to reform them, repeating the importance of multi-level solutions and of non-legal, non-policy interventions. Each section examines a specific human rights violation, more particularly

violations of freedom through child marriage and trafficking (chapter 5), of the right to life through honor killings and femicide (chapter 6), or of the right to bodily integrity through rape and sexual violence (chapter 7). Brysk consistently notes the importance of legal, policy and norm change at every level of interaction in response to these issues. For example, treaties recognizing human trafficking as a violation of the right to self-determination and comprehensive anti-trafficking legislation are important steps towards trafficking reduction. Community-based organizations promoting the right to self-determination, social media campaigns, and individual ‘cause célèbres’ can also spearhead change. Malawi, a country that has traditionally had one of the highest child marriage incidents rates in the world, was able to pass successful marriage reform by leveraging both grassroots activism (in the *Girls Not Bridges* campaign) and ‘cause célèbre’, youth activist Memory Banda’s TED talk. This activism and heightened visibility led to norm change that ultimately allowed for the enactment and enforcement of laws forbidding child marriage. The importance of engaging multiple levels and multiple stakeholders is discussed often, and while Brysk highlights the multitude of means of effecting change, it is unclear whether some modes or levels of change (e.g. legislative change) are more necessary or effective than others in reducing violence.

Whereas social mobilization for increased women’s right of self-determination and for a life free of violence is a “strongly emerging [phenomenon] in semi-liberal emerging economies” (p.275), it is far from a linear and universal trend. In addition to information regarding the still pervasive nature of issues like sexual violence (p.161) or the backlash against women’s activism by patriarchal elites (p.220), Brysk focuses on the citizenship gap that exists in semi-liberal states. Defined as “the extent and quality of gendered membership” (p.278) in a state, she describes how this gap affects access to the rights discussed throughout the book. Women’s access to justice and human rights protections are “influenced by migration, class, race, ethnicity, sometimes religion, and marital status” (p.278). In Lebanon, for example, there are 15 separate personal status codes. These codes are delineated by religious denomination and include a wide range of protections (or lack thereof) for abuses.

While much of Brysk’s analysis is anchored in legislative and norm changes, public policy, and violence statistics, she also gives a human face to gendered violence, using personal accounts of both victims and those mobilizing against gendered violence. These personal accounts include such cases as the abduction and repeated rape of a 13-year-old girl in a conflict zone in Colombia (p.168) or stories of sex suppression through female infanticide and neglect in India and China (p.142-143). Individual stories humanize and provide agency to the victims of this violence by highlighting their successful activism, campaigning, and the positive changes brought about. Maria da Penha’s heroic story (p.97) of courageous activism, culminating in the passing of Brazil’s landmark Maria da Penha Act for domestic violence, or Malala Yousafzai’s global leadership in standing up to the Taliban and pushing for girls’ freedom and education (p.94), are brought up in order to put faces and stories onto the issues presented. These cases also demonstrate the power of individual stories, viral media campaigns, and ‘causes célèbres’ to inspire others and provoke change.

This book is engaging and informative, mixing an impressive breadth of research on the perpetuation of gendered violence, and its structural and cultural drivers, with vivid and often heartbreaking individual stories. However, in constantly highlighting the need for a variety of interventions at multiple levels of interaction, it can be overwhelming for those looking for tangible, specific solutions to the pervasive issue of violence against women. This book is nevertheless an impressive feat of scholarship, and valuable for anyone interested in human rights and globalization, gender based violence, and public policy.