



Women's Human Rights and Culture: From Deadlock to Dialogue

Rikki Holtmaat, Jonneke Naber

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In all parts of the world, the implementation of women's human rights is seriously being hindered by gender stereotypes, religion, custom, or tradition - in short, by 'culture.' Culture is increasingly being used as an excuse to commit serious violations of women's rights. It is also brought forward as the reason why governments refuse to implement them, arguing that their culture forces them to accept limited interpretations of international obligations in this area, or to reject such obligations altogether. Any such 'cultural defense' poses severe difficulties for international organizations, local and foreign governmental officials, and NGOs. These actors - in their work on development co-operation, humanitarian aid, or peace-keeping operations - advocate for the full implementation of women's human rights. Being afraid of the reproach of (Western) neo-colonialism or imperialism, they are inclined to take refuge in a cultural relativist stance, which in fact may undermine women's human rights. This book provides women's human rights advocates with effective strategies to avoid a deadlock between upholding the principle of universality of human rights and the right to preserve and express one's culture. The aim is to help create the right conditions for a fruitful dialogue about this issue. The book places great emphasis on the positive role that the UN 'Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women' (CEDAW) could play in this respect, and on the equal participation of 'women of culture' in the process of the implementation of their human rights.

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