

September 2002

*Giving Meaning to Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.* Isfahan Merali and Valerie Oosterveld (Eds.).

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

**Recommended Citation**

(2002) "*Giving Meaning to Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.* Isfahan Merali and Valerie Oosterveld (Eds.).," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 29: Iss. 3, Article 18.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.2841>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol29/iss3/18>

This Book Note is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



her use of a strengths perspective offers a refreshing alternative approach. Erera also addresses many of the myths that affect diverse families, including the stigmas of single motherhood and the allegedly negative consequences of parenting by non-biological adults.

The discussions in each chapter touch on a wealth of topics. This is an interesting and pioneering book which will be very useful as a teaching resource for instructors in sociology, social work and related fields. It will also be a helpful reference source for social workers, psychologists and family counselors. It should be integrated into substantive courses addressing family issues, at both the undergraduate or graduate level.

Isfahan Merali and Valerie Oosterveld (Eds.), *Giving Meaning to Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001. \$45.00 hardcover.

The struggle for human rights, as exemplified in the adoption of the Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, has undoubtedly been one of the great, progressive achievements of this century. The Declaration brought together diverse nations and peoples, securing an international commitment to ensuring that people everywhere had basic rights which would be recognized and upheld. The Declaration also created a shared cultural ethos that pressured recalcitrant nations to accept human rights, and it provided an impetus for the extension of human rights to specific fields of human endeavor. The institutionalization of a rights approach in social policy and social work is but one example of the way the human rights ethos has been infused into these different fields.

Despite the progress which has been made, this book shows that there is little ground for complacency. It is not only that human rights are widely flouted, or that hypocrisy about the implementation of human rights is widespread, but that the international community has placed far more emphasis on civil and political rights than on social, economic and cultural rights. It is this theme which the editors of this useful book address, and which should be of interest and concern to social policy scholars, administrators and social workers.

The editors point out that the Declaration has a truly universal

ambit in that it addressed a wide range of human rights issues ranging, on the one hand, from a familiar concern with civil and political rights (such as the right to vote, the right to free expression and the right to legal representation in criminal cases) to social, cultural and economic rights (such as the right to an adequate standard of living, education, health care and income protection). However, in subsequent attempts to operationalize and implement the rights enshrined in the Charter, political and civil rights were given priority while social, cultural and economic rights were neglected. As one of the contributors to the volume points out, this was partly a function of the Cold War when the United States and its allies campaigned for priority to be given to political and civil rights, while the Soviet Union and its allies sought to emphasize social, cultural and economic rights. Consequently, two separate international legal instruments, known as the Covenants, emerged with the result that the struggle for human rights has been bifurcated into two separate agendas. It also had the unfortunate consequence that social cultural and economic rights remain of secondary importance.

The book's argument is that the separation of rights into two distinct categories needs to be ended and that in a new, integrated approach, civil political, social, economic and cultural rights need to be given equal emphasis. The various contributors, who come from different countries, address different aspects of this argument, and raise a number of related issues. For example, the book contains interesting material on women's rights, children's rights and housing rights with reference to the situation in Palestine where the occupying forces have consistently flouted the right to adequate shelter by the frequent demolition of people's homes. The book also contains an interesting chapter on indigenous land rights in Central America where commercial logging and oil interests have flagrantly ignored local people and their social and cultural rights.

While the book is in some ways a depressing account of the violation of social, economic and cultural rights in many parts of the world, it also shows that the struggle continues. There have been some successes such as the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. The book also

shows that non-governmental organizations are much more active in the campaign for the extension of economic, social and cultural rights. As governments in many parts of the world have been weakened, mobilization at the community level will be an essential element in the campaign for the extension of these rights. This is an important book which should be widely consulted by anyone working in the social welfare field today. It provides a great of useful information about the legal and procedural aspects of human rights and brings an important perspective to debates about social welfare, particularly at the international level where the need to adopt and implement economic, social and cultural rights is more urgent than even before.

Nancy Morrow-Howell, James Hinterlong and Michael Sheraden (Eds.), *Productive Aging: Concepts and Challenges*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. \$48 hard-cover.

Social attitudes and behaviors towards aging have varied enormously over different historical periods and between different societies and cultures. In Western societies during the 20<sup>th</sup>, attitudes towards aging were characterized by the view that the elderly are a burden on society and that special services were needed to care for them. Demographers spoke gloomily of the high 'dependency ratios' in these countries which required high government expenditures and the intolerable burden dependency placed on younger working people. These themes have been reiterated in recent debates about the privatization of social security. The payment of income support, the demands on the health care system and the widespread use of residential care to house elderly people all contributed to the high costs of aging.

Gradually, these views have been challenged. As many more people live longer lives, it has been realized that aging is not inevitably accompanied by frailty, dependency and financial need but that many elderly people continue to live in their own homes, are well integrated into the community and enjoy excellent health. It has also been recognized that many continue to be economically productive by working not only as employees (both full-time and part-time), but as self-employed entrepreneurs and as volunteers in many different organizations. Many continue to