

# Human Rights & Human Welfare

---

Volume 11

Issue 5 *April Roundtable: Responsibility to Protect and Human Rights Protection in the Ivory Coast*

Article 2

---

4-1-2011

## A Rights-Based Approach to Global Injustice

Brooke Ackerly

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw>



Part of the [Human Rights Law Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [International Humanitarian Law Commons](#), [International Law Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), [Military, War, and Peace Commons](#), and the [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Ackerly, Brooke (2011) "A Rights-Based Approach to Global Injustice," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 11: Iss. 5, Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol11/iss5/2>



All Rights Reserved.

This Roundtable is brought to you for free and open access by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Rights & Human Welfare by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact [jennifer.cox@du.edu](mailto:jennifer.cox@du.edu), [digitalcommons@du.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@du.edu).

---

## A Rights-Based Approach to Global Injustice

### Abstract

Is reflection on global injustice part of the everyday lives of those who live in global privilege? Or does privilege let us wait to raise concerns about justice only when the media bring the graphic images of genocide and tragedy to our family rooms?

### Keywords

Human rights, Ivory Coast, Genocide, Global politics, Universal human rights

### Copyright Statement / License for Reuse



All Rights Reserved.

### Publication Statement

Copyright is held by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver. User is responsible for all copyright compliance.

## A Rights-Based Approach to Global Injustice

by Brooke Ackerly

Is reflection on global injustice part of the everyday lives of those who live in global privilege? Or does privilege let us wait to raise concerns about justice only when the media bring the graphic images of genocide and tragedy to our family rooms?

In her opinion piece about the invocation of the Responsibility to Protect as a justification for intervening in the Ivory Coast, Corinne Dufka characterizes the issue as twofold: 1) the need of the democratic citizenry of Western powers to know about the injustice of a state to its citizenry and 2) the willingness of their states to act against it.

Dufka's characterization of the problem of genocide echoes back to the work of [Lemkin](#), the prime advocate for the [genocide convention](#), whose story is retold by Samantha Power in *The Problem from Hell: America in the age of genocide*. The history's two narratives – first, that Americans don't know about the extent or nature of genocides and second, that they know and are unwilling to act – are mutually inconsistent. Together these narratives have proven no match for another familiar American argument of the last century that recurs at the dawn of the new millennium: What would you have us do, play the “world's police force? These second, instrumental interest-based arguments carry the day.

While I share their horror at genocide and appreciate the moral view behind the arguments of Lemkin, Power, and Dufka, we could turn to another norm that emerged through the 20th century- that of human rights - and ask what a rights-based analysis of global injustice and a corresponding international political response would entail. It might mean focusing on the injustices we affect, not just those we observe from afar.

The human rights approach makes us look backward and forward to comprehend the context of human rights violations and to envision necessary action. However, we enumerate the list of [universal human rights](#), these rights are indivisible, interrelated, and sustained or threatened through social, economic, and political institutions, values, practices, and norms. This means that labor rights and rights of political association are indivisible. We can support labor rights at home and around the world through economic agreements, fair trade practices, and [code of conduct compliance](#). This means that the rights of journalists abducted while covering political movements, labor rights unrest, or political corruption of elites are interrelated with the rights of those in popular movements. Through the rights-based lens, genocide is one horrific manifestation of human rights violations. Other manifestations of global injustice include global poverty, inhumane working conditions, child labor, gender-based violence, and resource-extraction related oppressions.

In the Lemkin, Power, and Dufka account, moral responsibility is reactive, typically with military force. In a rights-based approach, the broader landscape of global injustice is visible.

Without threatening sovereignty or waiting for graphic images to provoke a willing use of military force, a rights-based approach to global injustice –be it genocide, gender-based violence, worker oppression, or poverty – goes beyond allowing our tax dollars to support military

violence. Instead, we are called to support nonviolent popular movements, both directly through rights-based [philanthropy](#), and indirectly through political and economic support of popular movements through [local activism](#), [letter writing campaigns](#), and decisions to support [fair trade practices](#) through purchasing choices.

In both models, citizens need to know about global injustice. In the Lemkin, Power, and Dufka model they need to know about acts of genocide and crimes against humanity. They need a media who are able and willing to broadcast images of genocide around the world and to offer analysis about its causes. In the human rights-based approach to crimes against humanity, citizens need to know about injustices that are more difficult to portray because they are hidden in the everyday familiar practices that support global poverty, global inequality in labor conditions, and other forms of global injustice that are invisible to all but those who suffer from them. Analysis of these is more difficult and they do not lend themselves to telling graphic images.

The rights-based approach to vulnerability defines vulnerability as the inability to be part-author of a political response to the injustice against which one struggles. Military intervention is inconsistent with a rights-based approach because it disempowers popular nonviolent social movements. Rather, a rights-based approach to injustice invites a long-term perspective that supports women's movements, labor movements, and other nonviolent popular movements. From this perspective, we should be informed not only about the violence taking place in the Ivory Coast, Libya, and Syria but also about the broadening popular movements (including youth, labor, and women's movements) in these countries and in Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Syria.

There has already been a military response to the Ivory Coast. Should we wait to reflect on global injustice until we see the graphic images of genocide and tragedy elsewhere, or can we use a rights-based lens to care about global injustice as part of our everyday lives?

---

*Professor Ackerly's research interests include democratic theory, feminist methodologies, human rights, social and environmental justice. She integrates into her theoretical work empirical research on activism. Her publications include Political Theory and Feminist Social Criticism (Cambridge 2000), Universal Human Rights in a World of Difference (Cambridge 2008), and Doing Feminist Research with Jacqui True (Palgrave Macmillan 2010). She is currently working on the intersection of global economic, environmental, and gender justice. She teaches courses on feminist theory, feminist research methods, human rights, contemporary political thought, and gender and the history of political thought. She is the winner of the Graduate Teaching Award and the Margaret Cuninggim Mentoring Prize. She is the founder of the Global Feminisms Collaborative, a group of scholars and activists developing ways to collaborate on applied research for social justice. She advises academics and donors on evaluation, methodology, and the ethics of research. She serves the profession through committees in her professional associations including the American Political Science Association (APSA), International Studies Association (ISA), and the Association for Women's Rights and Development. She has been a member of the editorial board for Politics and Gender (Journal of the APSA, Women and Politics Section) since its founding.*