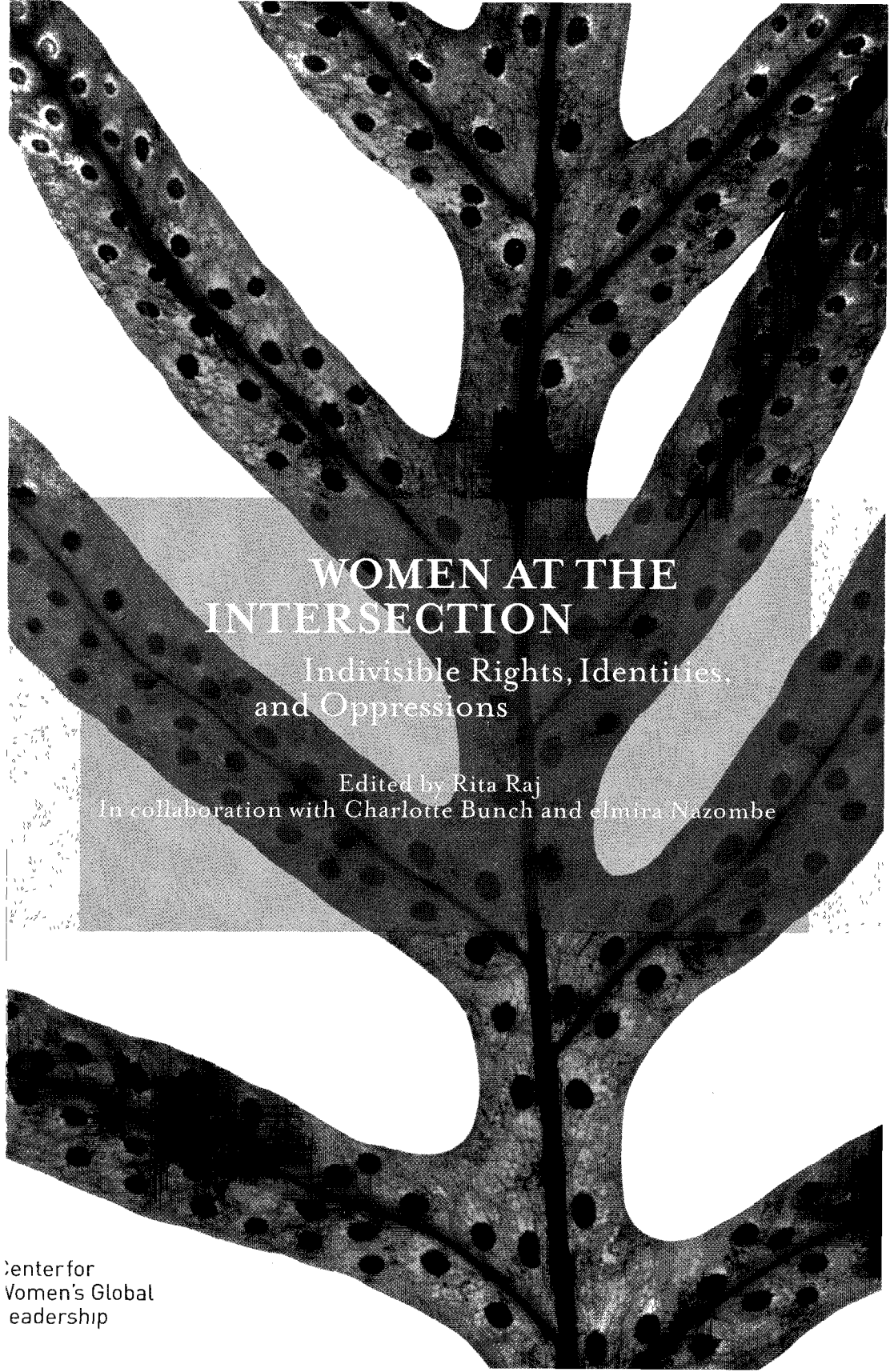

WOMEN AT THE INTERSECTION

Indivisible Rights, Identities, and Oppressions

Edited by Rita Raj
In collaboration with Charlotte Bunch and Elmira Nazombe

Center for
Women's Global
Leadership

Women at the Intersection:
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@Center for Women's Global Leadership
Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey
160 Ryders Lane
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8555 USA

Phone: 1-732-932-8782
Fax: 1-732-932-1180
E-mail: cwgl@igc.org
Website: www.cwgl.rutgers.edu

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Table of Contents

Foreword....iv
Rita Raj

Acknowledgements....vii

Part One: The Hearing

Welcome....1
Charlotte Bunch

Opening Speech....3
Joyce Piliso Seroke

Introduction to the Hearing....5
Abena P A Busia

Bodily Integrity and Sexuality

South Africa: HIV/AIDS Challenges and Sexual Orientation....10
Nobantu Prudence Mabele

Nepal: Dalit Trafficking....16
Indira Ghale

Serbia: Roma Racial and Sexual Discrimination....21
Vera Kurtic and Slavica Vasic

United States: Criminal Justice System....27
Tonya McClary

Commentary....31
Betty Murungi

Migration and Immigration

Dominican Republic: Discrimination against Haitian Migrant Workers and Their Descendants....34
Solange Pierre

Malaysia: Foreign Domestic Workers – the Obstacles....39
Meera Samanther and Rozana Isa

Germany: Women Migrants Organizing for Their Rights....46
Behshid Najafi

United States: Experiences of Immigrant Women Workers and Asylum Seekers....51
Nahar Alam

Commentary....57
Ruth Manorama

War, Conflict and Genocide

Palestine: Women's Lives in Refugee Camps....59
Manar Faraj and Vivian Stromberg

Republic of Congo: War, Conflict, Sexual Violence and Ethnicity....65
Doris Mpoumou

Guatemala: Genocide and Ethnocide of Indigenous Peoples....70
Maria Toj Mendoza

Indonesia: Mass Rape of Indonesian Chinese Women....74
Ita F Nadia

Commentaries....78
Ruth Manorama
Betty Murungi

Part Two: Reflections

WCAR Impressions....83
Anita Nayar

Guidelines to Integrating the Outcomes of the WCAR into Women's Human Rights Organizing....86
Susana Fried

Women at the Intersection of Peace, Justice and Human Rights....101
Radhika Coomaraswamy

The Light of History: Reflections on Durban and September 11th....106
Linda Burham

Human Rights at the Intersection of Race and Gender....111
Charlotte Bunch

Glossary....119

Appendices

Appendix A: A Women's Human Rights Approach to the World Conference Against Racism....123
Center for Women's Global Leadership

Appendix B: Statements and Declaration....127
Statement of the Women's Caucus
Statement of the Race, Poverty, and Globalisation Caucus
Statement of the Sexual Orientation Caucus
International Youth Summit Declaration

Appendix C: Outline of the POA with Paragraph References....133

Appendix D: Gender-specific Paragraphs in the POA....135

Foreword: Challenging Discrimination and Categories of Identities

To be discriminated against because one is a woman is bad enough. But to be discriminated against because one is not a man, not heterosexual, not white, not a citizen, not Christian, not rich, not young, and not ethnically correct is worse. It is an act intended to negate an entire human being. And I mean, negate, for after all, don't these identities constitute a critical part of what a human being is and how she relates to her world?

A woman is far from a one-dimensional creature. To the census and population bureau, she needs to belong to clear-cut categories – an economic class, an age group, an ethnic group, a religion, a caste, a marital status. To the social security system, these categories – or the absence of particular categories such as sexuality – determine who can claim benefits, what sort of benefits, and how much of these can one claim. To the judiciary system, these categories influence whose rights are protected and fully exercised, and in whose interests justice is served. To the law enforcement system, these categories are decisive in terms of who gets arrested, who goes to jail, and who is eventually freed. And to the health system, all these categories are part of determining who gains access to medical services.

Categories are so central to our lives that we do not even challenge them in the same manner that we do not challenge the multiplication table. Yet, they are the pathways, the mechanisms through which societies assign and attribute identities. They determine the way we think, the way we frame the world, and the way the world perceives and treats us. Thus, categories exert a profound influence on our lives because some categories are given more importance than others; some categories wield more influence and are more powerful than others; and some categories marginalize other categories and silence their points of view.

Who developed such categories, why such categories came into existence, and what systems have been supporting these categories ought to inform our strategies and advocacy. It is not sufficient that we acknowledge our multiple identities. It is critical that we also recognize that categories perpetuate the values assigned to identities.

We need to reflect and take appropriate action on categories that contain our multiple identities and examine how we have been discriminated against because we belong to one or more of these categorized identities.

Women have already started to take such action.

Women have been organizing around international meetings of heads of states and leaders of governments to make our voices heard and to ensure that our concerns have informed and have become part of the agendas, declarations, and plans of action of these meetings.

In 1993, the UN World Conference on Human Rights affirmed that Women's Rights are Human Rights. The International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 further affirmed Reproductive Rights for all women. Heads of state and government leaders met again to strengthen these commitments in the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995.

In all these international meetings, the Center for Women's Global Leadership, together with its partners around the world, organized hearings to hold the world's attention – even for a day – to what women had to say.

And in 2001, at the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR), the Center organized a hearing on the Intersection of Women's Human Rights and Racism and Related Intolerances. The hearing provided insights and a deeper understanding of the compounding negative effects of race, gender, and other categories of identities on our human rights. And it highlighted some of the organizing for change that women around the world are engaged in doing.

This publication, a result of the hearing and other work done at the WCAR, is a collection of women's testimonies and reflections on the impact of overlapping and intersecting forms of discrimination.

Part I consists of women's testimonies on bodily integrity, migration and immigration, and on war and conflict.

Part II is a collection of reflections on the WCAR, the issues it raised, and the future steps we have to take to continue challenging these multiple categories of identities.

This publication brings together the stories of women, the atrocities they have survived, the traumatic fears and anxieties they have to live with, and some of the strategies they have devised to change those realities.

But this publication contains more than a recollection of the past. It has within its pages the beginnings of a collective challenge to the categories which not only have given these women so much pain but which have also invalidated and negated them. This publication is an affirmation of faith in women's strength and in the battles they still have to win.

Rita Raj, *WCAR Hearing Coordinator and Editor*

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