

## Globalising women's rights: Confronting unequal development between the UN rights framework and the WTO trade agreements

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### 2. KEYNOTE SPEECH AND DISCUSSION

#### 2.1 Keynote speech:

#### **Women's rights between the UN human rights framework and free trade agreements**

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There are many ways in which the topic of this conference can be interpreted. In the abstract that I sent ahead of this moment, I had suggested that it was not only the WTO trade arrangements that had overpowered the UN rights framework, which in turn affects the movements to expand the scope and impact of the struggle by women for their rights, but many other external and internal factors, such as:

- § the unipolarity of the current global political landscape; the re-emergence of the Empire in a new avatar, or form; the unilateral overpowering of multilateral regimes across the globe by this Empire;
- § the unbudgeability of the modernisation project, which is still the ruling economic paradigm even after 50 years of attempt both by the developing countries and the women's movements;
- § the re-emergence of the dark ages, religious bigotry of the Crusaders' kind, not surprisingly linked to conservatism in politics and economic orthodoxy.

I would add here:

- § the fragmentation of societies, with narrower and narrower affirmations of identity, which I suggest is an outcome of the increase in disparities across the board, in confrontation with consumer-driven and market-driven lifestyle aspirations.

The brief given me by the organisers of this conference was to review the subordination of the human rights framework to the free trade agenda and of women's rights to economic policies, and to map out which democratic spaces can be opened, and how political sovereignty can be reclaimed to eradicate poverty, to secure women's livelihoods and to give social environmental and gender justice preference to liberalisation and free trade. Taking note of this, I have found the material in the *South Letter*,<sup>1</sup> a publication of the South Commission, of which I was a member; the DAWN newsletter *DAWN Informs*, as well as the International Gender and Trade Network (IGTN) material, particularly useful. I have also just come out of a research experience, part of an effort to write a book on the intellectual history of the United Nations, with special reference to its work with and for women.<sup>2</sup> My overall thesis and propositions emerge from these learnings.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.southcentre.org](http://www.southcentre.org)

<sup>2</sup> Devaki Jain, *Women enrich the United Nations and development*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, to be published in 2005. See also [www.unhistory.org](http://www.unhistory.org)

## **Feminist engagement with the macro**

It seems that the engagement of the feminist movement with trade, its liberalisation and the workings of the WTO, knowledge-based and specialised, reveals the shift in the purpose and priorities of women's participation in policy making. There is an identification with the coalitions of Southern states, an attention to the detailed protocols and the asymmetries. In other words, one does not read the word 'women' and their rights as much as the overall challenging along with the states which are spearheading resistance to the domination by the North.

Do we see this as a weakening of the thrust for women's rights, due to the overpowering hold of the trade liberalisation agenda, or do we see it as the political maturing of the women's movement, another level of understanding where our rights are under threat, an identification with the majorities who will be and are affected by these processes? Taking the role of the devil's advocate, I would say this is a claiming of rights where they need to be claimed, against the Empire. Dismantling the Empire seems to be high on the agenda of the women's movement almost as a necessary condition for women's rights, or for their aspirations for their communities and their nations to be affirmed.

But making such linkages as informed analysis is not new. In fact it resonates what has been a regular feature of this interaction between macro policies and women's special concerns – starting from Nairobi 1985, where the network DAWN tried to reveal the link between the overall crisis and macro responses in various regions of the South and the situation of poor women. This was further expanded at the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995), when the right to development drew in all the various lobbies – women, workers, indigenous peoples – to a common platform to claim justice from the global economic forces.

A pure human rights framework, and isolated proposals such as 'Women's rights are human rights' with the thrust on individualised rights, has always been problematic in the South – not only the economic South but the civilisational South. The tapestry that we have woven, in gendering spaces and issues, is so rich, but also so lined and crisscrossed, that we ourselves are challenged to find ways to pull a thread called 'women's rights' out of it.

Reviewing the journey of human rights language over 55 years as part of the volume I mentioned above,<sup>3</sup> it is clear that rights was the womb, the fountainhead of a wide range of issues with which women were dealing. It was not only the location of a range of women's advocacy right through but they saw it in its complex wholeness. In fact, development which is now seen as freedom<sup>4</sup> was seen as an extension of the rights agenda by the women's lobbies right from the 1950s, when development came on board the UN. Further the division of rights into civil as distinct from social, cultural and economic rights was never part of the women's conceptualisation. Thus if one reads CEDAW closely one sees the brilliance of women's thinking and drafting, being inclusive as well as substantial and practical.

Some argue that the greater diffusion of information across national and state boundaries produced by information technology actually makes the state visibly accountable, especially in international forums, for growing and persistent inequalities.<sup>5</sup> Feminist arguments have gone further, analysing the role of the state as an actor in the enforcement of human rights and

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Amartya Sen, *Development as freedom*, New York: Anchor Books, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret E Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond borders. Advocacy networks in international politics*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1998.

questioning early attempts to use male standards to define violations of human rights.<sup>6</sup> However, feminists have faced contradictory pulls. For example, governments and institutions in the North are criticised, on the one hand, as intrusive and manipulative when they stipulate that aid to the poorer states of the South be granted on conditions of harsh financial reform which often impacts much more negatively on women than on men. On the other hand, these same governments and institutions in the North are urged to interfere in the policies of aid-recipient states to ensure that women have equal access with men to the benefits of their loans, and to enact sweeping legal reforms to regulate people's activities in the 'private sphere' in families or households as fully as activities in the public sphere. This is to ensure that women have rights as individuals, related to the universalisation of rights.

## Human rights flavours

'The search for the correct viewpoint which is superior to all other viewpoints is an error in itself.' (Akira Kurosawa)<sup>7</sup>

As many of you may recall, Akira Kurosawa, in his famous film *Rashomon*,<sup>8</sup> considered the best-known Japanese film in the world, argued that there can be a variety of perceptions when evaluating contributions over time – the same event may appear differently depending not only on its location in space, but on the social, political and personal 'context' of the viewer. So did Lawrence Durrell in his famous novels, the Alexandria Quartet. Basically both are arguing that the same set of events is described or perceived differently depending on the location or any other attribute of the beholder. In a sense, the famous story of the six Chinese men who surrounded an elephant and gave differing views on it is making the same point as are the linguistic philosophers, including Wittgenstein – that there is no such thing as an objective fact, or a single truth.

The same can be said of the international women's rights covenants when perceived from different angles. Here is a quote on CEDAW from Vida Tomsič, a feminist from the old Yugoslavia, who was the principal architect of bringing women's leadership and voice into the forums of the Non-Aligned Movement:

'The acceptance of this Declaration can be seen as a summary of the period of defining women's rights in relation to men and society; the period when it could be felt from the subtexts of the discussions on women as if all men already possess the rights which are denied to women either by the state – or by men. Thus the Declaration concentrated primarily on the personal and civil rights of women, following the criterion of the legal status of men to whom women should become equal. The general socio-economic and social status of men, class differences in society, as well as the conditions for the enjoyment of human rights by both sexes, are to be hardly noticed. This notion was influenced in many respects by the struggle for women's equality in developed countries.'<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Donna J. Sullivan, 'Women's human rights and the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights', *American Journal of International Law* 88 (1994), 152–67; Donna Sullivan, 'The public/private distinction in human rights law', in *Women's rights, human rights: International feminist perspectives*, New York: Routledge, 1995; Alda Facio, 'What will you do? – women's human rights. Excerpts, statement by Center for Women's Global Leadership, 13 September 1995', *Women's Studies Quarterly* 1/2 (1996), 66–8.

<sup>7</sup> Akira Kurosawa (director), *A Film Review* by James Berardinelli, 1998, Japan, 1950, US release date: 26/12/51. In Japanese with subtitles  
[http://www.cafepedagogique.net/disci/index.php?t=Anglais&url=anglais/archives/2003/anglais\\_41\\_03.html](http://www.cafepedagogique.net/disci/index.php?t=Anglais&url=anglais/archives/2003/anglais_41_03.html)

<sup>8</sup> <http://jmovie-reviews.colosus.net/movies/r/rashomon.html>

<sup>9</sup> Vida Tomsič, 'Policy of non-alignment, struggle for the NIEO and the role of women in development', in Saradamoni, *Women, work, society* (New Delhi: Indian Statistical Institute, 1985), 3–29.

This view that the priorities for UN outcomes are set by feminists of the North appears again during the discussions towards the UN conference on human rights in Vienna in 1993, and at other times as well.

Sunila Abeyesekera, Director of INFORM, a human rights organisation in Sri Lanka and the winner of the United Nations prize in the field of human rights in 1998, comments:

‘Those of us who were involved in the lobbying and campaigning for women’s human rights up to Vienna have not evolved any clear agreement as to what strategies and methodologies we would adopt in order to continue working on women’s human rights issues as a collectivity vacuum still exists in terms of a collective strategy to deal with issues of women’s human rights at the international level. There is also no process of consultation or discussion about issues related to women’s human rights that could be of common interest and could lead to collective action. This lack of a “process” can only lead to further fragmentation among us, as well as heightening mistrust regarding questions such as “who determines the agenda”...

‘We cannot embark on the process of setting in place a mechanism for monitoring the implementation of the Vienna Declaration without addressing the struggle for power that exists within our circles.’<sup>10</sup>

This view reflects the *Rashomon* concept again in 1995, ten years after Vida Tomsič in 1985.

Such dissonance has become even sharper with the arrival of post-modernist critiques of the international women’s movements.<sup>11</sup> Here there are explicit statements about white feminist agendas being imposed on the South, and the problems they bring with the emphasis on individual rights. It is argued that in the Southern countries collective rights or socially connected rights are more relevant.

It appears as if the larger issue of asymmetry in the free trade agenda, some of which is being fought against by groups of South countries, has become, in some sense even more important than what can be called the subordination of the human rights framework. Other spaces at regional and political levels are spaces where women are redefining their rights as appropriate to the context and the affirmations.

Further, human rights as a vision and an aspiration has become less shiny, less of a bright highway, owing to the human rights violations in the democracies of the North. As they wage unjust wars, illtreat prisoners, and break rules, and as the UN is overpowered, the language of human rights does not resonate well in the South. It is seen also as an asymmetrical regime.

## **The UN goes home**

While rights are critical for emancipation, they have to be rearticulated in new ways, beginning perhaps this time at the bottom, and then being internationalised, as is being done in Africa. Moreover, the claiming of rights has often shifted from the international arena to other spaces in other languages and with other priorities.

For example, the inclusion of a women’s charter in the African Union’s constitution has emerged from the energy and mobilisation of African women’s networks towards this particular economic and political club, which is hoping to rebuild the African continent with some amount of self-conscious self-reliance. Such an intervention could be seen as a victory for the women’s rights movement, even under the overpowering pressure of the free trade regime.

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<sup>10</sup> Sunila Abeyesekera, ‘Consolidating our gains at the World Conference on Human Rights: A personal reflection’, *Canadian Woman Studies* (Spring/Summer 1995), <http://www.lolapress.org/artenglish/abeye4.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Marianne H. Marchand and Jane L. Parpart, *Feminism Postmodernism Development*, London: Routledge, 1995.

The African Union adopted the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa on 11 July 2003 as a supplementary protocol to the 1981 African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. Advancing the human rights of African women through creative, substantive and detailed language, the new Protocol covers a broad range of human rights issues.<sup>12</sup>

Efforts by Equality Now<sup>13</sup> and African women's rights activists, and concerted lobbying of African governments by NGOs and networks all over Africa on a consensus text, resulted in significant gains to the original draft. The Africa Office of Equality Now in Nairobi issued a statement saying that the final Protocol is indicative of the achievements that can be made when governments and civil society use their collective resources to advance the cause of human rights.<sup>14</sup> And the speech by the President of South Africa on the tenth anniversary of its liberation had this to say:

'As we engaged in struggle to end racist domination, we also said that we could not speak of genuine liberation without integrating, within that, the emancipation of women. This very amphitheatre where we sit is home to a monument that pays tribute to the contribution of the women of our country to the struggle that made it possible for us to meet here today to celebrate our 10th anniversary of democracy.

'Our last general elections confirmed the women as the largest number of voters and the strongest voice in favour of the fundamental social transformation of our country. No government in South Africa could ever claim to represent the will of the people if it failed to address the central task of the emancipation of women in all its elements, and that includes the government we are privileged to lead.'<sup>15</sup>

Another local case comes from India, and shows how the claiming of reproductive rights at the level of delivery of health services, namely the village, was linked to the political structures of local self-government in a central-government-driven programme.<sup>16</sup> The argument from which this scheme emerged is that unless there is a structure from which rights can be claimed or articulated, a rights-based programme cannot be actually delivered at the village level. A vindication of democracy and affirmative action was the reservation of seats for women.

Could these then be the sources from where another road or perception of women's rights could emerge? Could it be different from the old definitions of human rights, political or social and economic, embracing emancipation, liberation and resistance to every kind of domination – from the spheres of international trade to the spheres of the domestic?

## **Responding to the changing global landscape**

Owing to the many awkward, if not contradictory, elements in the current economic and political landscape, many of the conventional linkages that we in the feminist movement tend to make need, reconsideration. I suggest that there is a need to rethink our normal assumptions. While saying this I do acknowledge that there is an enormous amount of

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<sup>12</sup> 'African Union adopts protocol on the rights of African women', *DAWN Informs*, September 2003, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Network of national human rights organisations and individual activists, founded in 1992.

<sup>14</sup> 'African Union adopts protocol on the rights of African women', Equality Now For Immediate Release July 14, 2003, (<http://www.hrea.org/lists/hr-headlines/markup/msg01141.html>)

<sup>15</sup> Thabo Mbeki, President of the Republic of South Africa, on the occasion of his inauguration and the 10th anniversary of freedom. Pretoria, 27 April 2004.

<sup>16</sup> Devaki Jain and V. S. Elizabeth, 'Enabling population stabilisation through women's leadership in local self-government: A proposal for the department's new scheme' (New Delhi, Institute of Social Sciences, 17–18 February 2003), Annexure II D, 56–62, in *Proceedings of the consultative workshop on role of local government institutions in population stabilization*, organised by Department of Family Welfare, Government of India and UNFPA.

rethinking going on across the globe on all issues, including the basis of economic theory.<sup>17</sup> Feminists also have made, and are making, valuable contributions to this quest right now.<sup>18</sup>

Acknowledging all this activity, and learning from it, I suggest that the logic of our reasoning on cause and effect, for example the links we make between human rights affirmation, women's rights and trade areas may have to be remodelled from other premises, perhaps even starting with us, the women's movements. What do we mean by women's rights? or better still the rights of women? How do we decode this to be universal in the midst of these fragmentations? How do we unravel its intersections with other struggle and other 'enemies'? How do we shift the focus from security – which has now become the buzzword to embrace all kinds of militarisation and related expenditures, translated also into 'human security', which tries to link development to security language – to straightforward, old-fashioned terminologies of equality, development and peace? or to the language of emancipation, liberation and justice?

What kinds of moral or philosophical reflection and proposition need we consider for making the rights of women unique as well as revolutionary? What kinds of economic theory and institutional arrangement would enable our revolutions? And how to bring this into the realm of possibility, taking it beyond dreams?

While some rights are specific to women's bodies, such as the right to freedom from violence, whether in the home or in a theatre of war, as a refugee or a victim of genocide, many of the rights that women – especially those who are living in poverty zones – need are related to basics such as food, health, political voice and so on, rights which cannot be exclusively for women. These require strong shifts in economic reasoning – and neither can all blame be laid at the door of the WTO or globalisation, nor is it only a North–South battle. Even those who have tried to resist the North's domination of the WTO regime, as we witnessed at Cancún in September 2003, are still subservient to the overall agenda or theories. Even those who unite in spaces such as the World Social Forum, including feminist coalitions, are divided on the detail.

For example, one of the outcomes of the free trade agenda and globalisation has been an upward trend in women's opportunities for income earning, for livelihoods. While this trend is not occurring for good reasons, since the increasing shift of work opportunities from the formal to the informal economy offers less security of work and less worker protection, while the slowing down and decline in male employment leads to greater responsibility and the doubling of the load on women, it still mutes our call for livelihoods for women.

True, there is a downside to it, as this further quote from DAWN argues, but the reality is that programmes targeted at poverty eradication with special reference to women see the opportunities provided by the free trade agenda as the Milky Way, and it is becoming a roller coaster on its own:

'Structural reforms and policies linked to trade intensification and financial liberalisation are peddled as engines of women's increased access to incomes and employment. However, studies show that these policies and reforms have generated a host of concerns over poor women's rights and welfare. The rapid opening of the economies of developing countries, associated with decreased real incomes, lack of labour protection, and retreat of states from

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<sup>17</sup> Ben Fine, 'The new development economics', 11 February 2004; Louis Emmerij, 'Development thinking, globalization and cultural diversity', paper prepared for the North–South Round Table on Imperatives of Tolerance and Justice in a Globalized World, Cairo, 26–27 November 2002; Kum-Kum Bhavnani, John Foran and Priya Kurian, *Feminist futures: Re-imagining women, culture and development*, London: Zed Books, 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Neera Chandhoke, 'Governance and the pluralisation of the state – implications for democratic citizenship', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. XXXVIII, no. 28, 12 July 2003, 2957–2968.

their welfare-providing responsibilities, has compromised the provision of care and social services at the macroeconomic level. At the same time, it has increased the vulnerability of women's health, bodily integrity, and well-being as they are forced to manoeuvre both the productive economy and the socially reproductive care economy. As women gather at the planned International Women's Forum, concern must be raised over the lack of women's perspectives and participation in the politics and leadership of progressive mass organisations. We must unite with our sisters and brothers in global social movements and NGOs that are using critical, feminist constructivist engagement in fighting for our rights within a volatile economic system.'<sup>19</sup>

I would also like to argue that the fragmentation, the affirmation of narrower and narrower identities, into which women are intertwined, muting their own gendered identity and adding to the challenges of forging large powerful political platforms on women's rights, using women as a legitimate identity, is due to the rapid increase in inequality in obscene and amazing proportions.

This deepening of inequality is attributed to the overwhelming power of the current economic paradigm called the modernisation project. But the modernisation project just refuses to be budgeted. Even as the South goes into resistance mode, as was seen at the WTO meetings at Cancún in September 2003, the overall paradigm is not being challenged by the South. It only wants other terms. Yet it has been applauded as a worthwhile step by feminist networks

Says Louis Emmerij:

'What is amazing when it comes to development thinking by and within the United Nations system, is the dominance of Western ideas in an organization that is now composed of almost 200 nations and even more cultures. Starting with modernisation theory, all the development approaches are "Western" and are dominated by economists. This remains true even with strategies conceived by thinkers from the South or the East.

'None of the theories – whether of the modernisation, dependency, neo-liberal or Marxist variety – seem to be working in the sense that they have all run into trouble, even if initial successes were secured. During the 1980s and 1990s the theories have been supplanted by a hegemonic neo-liberal view development based on "globalisation" and "free markets" that effectively dismisses questions of ethnicity, of culture, and does not try to understand nationalism, fundamentalism and terrorism. It can be maintained that the whole Western model of development, the "paradigm of modernity", of a secular, industrial nation state, is now in question and that a coherent and persuasive alternative model is yet to be found.'<sup>20</sup>

One of the networks that has been deeply engaged in understanding the links between the trade discourse and women, and participating in UN conferences such as the Financing for Development Conference in Monterrey and the WTO Ministerial Meeting at Cancún, is DAWN. I give below some quotations from DAWN's newsletters which reveal the value of knowing and participating in the bigger picture, in forming alliances with like-minded people on trade regimes.

'Increasingly this global governance complex is showing cracks and fissures in its ability to respond to new issues and tensions arising from the aggressive expansion of transnational corporations and of a system of uni/multipolarity. Instead of being terrorised into taking a position of "stepping back and seeking piecemeal opportunities within a multilateral framework that doesn't work", developing countries should continue their vigilance in the face of unilateralism and to seek alternative regional trade agreements among themselves.'<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> 'Protesting WTO at Cancún', *DAWN Informs*, September 2003, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Louis Emmerij, 'Development thinking, globalisation and cultural diversity', paper prepared for the North-South Round Table on Imperatives of Tolerance and Justice in a Globalised World, Cairo, 26-27 November 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Gigi Francisco, in *DAWN Informs* March 2004.

'The multilaterals, which were set up to guard these rights and monitor their violations, has been disabled by the same "coalition against terror" group. As the Multilateral Trading System (MTS) approached the fourth Ministerial, scheduled to take place in Doha in November, against a backdrop of the war on terrorism, the USA and the EU would seem to have closed ranks on agriculture and other extant disagreements between them that contributed to the tense situation at the Seattle Ministerial. Under the guise of a multilateral war on terrorism, and with the complicity of Japan, Switzerland, Canada and some developing countries, they are together attempting to shepherd the members of the WTO towards an agreement on a Ministerial Declaration that will deliver their trade liberalisation agenda while ignoring the needs of the South. To this end, they are exerting tremendous pressures on developing countries to forgo their national interests and sign on to a new round, variously defined as a "comprehensive", a "development round", or a "development compact".<sup>22</sup>

'However, as the Doha Ministerial draws closer with the intensified pressure of the QUAD<sup>23</sup> in the context of the "you are either with us or you are against us" war on terrorism mantra, the developing countries would seem to be less stringent than they were in their pre and post Seattle stance.<sup>24</sup>

'The alternative is to re-claim "gender" and re-position it as a source of sound analysis and sharp critique of the mainstream's politics, perspectives, documents, rules and programs. Such a gender analysis and critique interconnect women's organisations and networks to a broader range of civil society groups and social movements that continue to challenge and resist unfair and undemocratic WTO rules and processes, and to explore alternative trade, development and governance arrangements. This – and not the mainstream – is the genuine place of gender, if it is to be a truly transformatory project and process.'<sup>25</sup>

What these comments seem to reveal is that the unfair undemocratic and opaque trade negotiations have to be dismantled as part of the quest of the women's movement for women's rights.

### **Is there a chink in this armour and can the feminist rights movement break through it?**

Over the centuries and from different places, including the women's movement itself, there have been voices which identify 'women', movements of women, as the factor that can turn the tide. Mao Zedong is often quoted as saying that 'women hold up half the sky'.<sup>26</sup> Gandhi felt women held the key to a just and peaceful world, and gave them a moral stature higher than that of men. 'The women of India should have as much share in winning *swaraj* [freedom] as men. Probably in this peaceful struggle woman can outdistance man by many a mile.'<sup>27</sup>

Women leaders have often seen their revolutionary efforts as being the thin end of the wedge that can, like the tidal wave,<sup>28</sup> wash the earth clean of all its impurities. Bella Abzug, one of the most revered women leaders of the Beijing era, says, 'Our struggle is about resisting the slide into a morass of anarchy, violence, intolerance, inequality and injustice. Our struggle is

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<sup>22</sup> 'Imbalances, inequities and the WTO mantra', DAWN Discussion Paper II on the WTO, prepared for World Trade Organisation, Fourth Ministerial Meeting in Doha, Qatar, 9–13 November 2001, 2.

<sup>23</sup> The QUAD countries are: the USA, the EU, Japan and Canada.

<sup>24</sup> Op. cit., 5.

<sup>25</sup> 'Gender mainstreaming in trade policies', *DAWN Informs*, September 2003, 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Human Development Report 1995* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 32, box 2.1.

<sup>27</sup> Mahatma Gandhi, *Young India*, vol. XXII (CWMG), 15 December 1921, 21–24.

<sup>28</sup> Devaki Jain, 'Can we have a women's agenda for global development? 5 years after Nairobi conference', NIEO Association, Netherlands, 3 November 1990 (published in *Development*, 1991:1).

about reversing the trends of social, economic and ecological crisis.<sup>29</sup> Ideas like the Gift Economy<sup>30</sup> also build on these valorised self-perceptions. There is an underlying assumption in all these ‘celebratory statements’ that an identity exists which supersedes all the other layers of identity.

But despite these claims from the inside and from the outside, women worldwide have not been able to become that political presence that can command attention to its ideas. This unassailable, broad-based, globally mobilised revolutionary collectivity that could heal and rebuild a scarred planet has not been able to play its role or encash its intellectual achievements. The sky, half of which is supposed to be held up by women, sometimes looks as though it is falling down over women, and other times it looks as if, like poor Sisyphus, women keep pulling up the weight, exclusively and endlessly, without breaking the spell.

Part of the reason for the freeze, for the failure of the extraordinary momentum, sense of self, and global recognition of a worldwide *toofan* [storm] that was built up in the 1980s and 1990s, is the interrogative mind and restlessness of the women’s movement.<sup>31</sup> For instance, any valorisation of the ‘woman’ identity is given a name, essentialism. Or it is placed in a political context as the ‘white feminist agenda’, the ‘other’ who sets one agenda when there are many agendas, because of the diverse conditions and stratifications of the constituency. Such namings and placings almost immediately ‘put away’ such aspirations, such claims as untenable and unwanted.

This knocking away of every attempt at building unity has been one of the most difficult bridges to cross. It has blocked the capability of the constituency to strike back at the empire — not only the Empire<sup>32</sup> as notified in the recent coalitions of the World Social Forums, but at the multifaceted empire which includes the other dominations, within the meta-domination of economic models and forces. Reports of the experience of women, and their ‘intersections’ with other global ‘resistance’ coalitions from the World Social Forum meeting in Mumbai in January 2004,<sup>33</sup> provide a closeup of the wall, the external, impenetrable power domains, held by men and conventional political ideas, as well as the difficulties inside the ‘women’s tent’ in finding common ground. It also reveals that there is work to be done to climb out of this impasse.

The beginnings of coalitions of people’s movements, something that was striking at the World Summit for Social Development in 1995, has taken off. Coalitions to show power, to voice collective protest, have in some sense replaced or superseded the ‘NGOs’ in terms of visibility and mobilisation. And the women’s movements are allying themselves, albeit with difficulties, with these broad-based protests. Women put up a peace tent in Nairobi, though I argue that women have always had a peace tent in their efforts to tame development, locally, globally and from time immemorial. The peace tent, rich with energy and ideas, is a moral high ground which has been predominantly occupied by women, across traditional divides of

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<sup>29</sup> Bella Abzug, ‘Women will change the nature of power’, in Bella Abzug and Devaki Jain, *Women’s leadership and the ethics of development*, Bradford Morse Lecture, 1995.

<sup>30</sup> Genevieve Vaughan, ‘The enigma of the gift and sacrifice: Mothering, communication and the gifts of language’, for Rice University conference, 1999.

<sup>31</sup> Devaki Jain, ‘Capitalising on restlessness: women’s opportunity to transform leadership’, inaugural address delivered at Commonwealth Universities Meet, SNDT Women’s University, Mumbai, 15 November 1995 (New Delhi: British Council Division, 1996), 25–34.

<sup>32</sup> Devaki Jain, ‘The Empire strikes back’, *Economic and Political Weekly* (11 January 2003); Arundhati Roy, ‘Confronting Empire’, in Jai Sen, Anita Anand, Arturo Escobar and Peter Waterman (eds.), *World Social Forum – challenging empires*, (New Delhi: Viveka Foundation, 2004), 51–4; Ezequiel Adamovsky and Susan George, ‘What is the Point of Porto Alegre?’, in Sen et al., op. cit., 130–5.

<sup>33</sup> See DAWN website ([www.dawn.org.fj](http://www.dawn.org.fj)) and WICEJ website ([www.wicej.org](http://www.wicej.org)).

North and South, race and class. Like the peace tent, the women's tent has become another traditional element of world gatherings, including the World Social Forum spaces.

Its existence and its articulation, reflections on its values, its collisions with the bigger space, all resonate both the values of 'a room of one's own', a source of strength as described and cherished by Virginia Woolf,<sup>34</sup> as well as Hamlet's burning question, 'to be or not to be?'. Is the women's tent a ghetto or a room of one's own? This is a continuing question. Some views hold that there is a value and a need for a women's tent, just as there is a need to strategise and intervene as one voice. It is the mode of the excluded, but it also excludes. The women's tent, like the peace tent, is sometimes in a corner, but sometimes it is central and some of this expansion and contraction depends on how well the tent strategises itself to expand the space it occupies. It offers a good model for another very discriminated-against group, minorities, who are now a serious and challenging issue in most countries, owing to polarisation across religion and other old-fashioned categories.

Another value of the tent or the ghetto, whichever way you see it, is the enjoyment by women of their own company, a celebration of difference. One of India's most articulate feminists, Madhu Kiswar, founder and editor of the journal *Manushi*, finds the ladies' compartment, a feature of Indian trains, to be a marginal space. Most women who travel in those compartments, usually the less well off or those who are managing children and every other activity, embrace the compartment, as it gives them shelter and camaraderie. Women's shelters are another example of this bonding and need for the women's tent.

Celebration of diversity, pluralism, affirming of identity based on colour, caste, class, gender, as well as multiple identities, and analysing the intersections as well as the distances, is another such currency. It seems to reflect the pressure for representation, for democracy; but it also could be the outcome of the increase in disparities, based on colour, class, religion, caste, gender and location. Disparities, especially if coupled with deprivation, generate a search for ladders with which to climb out; and building solidarity on ethnic, religious and similar identities and using them for political articulation and power has been one chosen route. This trend has invaded the women's movement, and in parallel the governmental positions – thus making it more difficult to build consensus. Fragmentation of identity based on sex has also led to some slight withdrawal in the UN from emphasising gender as a superseding identity over race, class and other stratifications. This trend also leaves room for expressions of cultural relativism – an unwelcome trend.

Hence I come back to my old questions:

What do we mean by women's rights? How do we understand them as universal in the midst of their fragmentations and unravel their intersections with other struggles? What makes them unique? How do we shift the focus from 'human security' to equality, development, peace, liberation and justice? What propositions would encompass our revolutions, and what economic theories and institutional arrangements would make them possible?

Treatises have been written, by Nobel laureate Amartya Kumar Sen among others, showing that unless the voices and strength of collective public action are included as a shaping element in our economic models, there is no way of generating equity with development. This is the political element in economics – the space for negotiation in making the choices at the macro level.

Poverty is a political issue. Poverty eradication cannot take place unless political institutions are built which represent the voices of the poor, and those institutions in turn become vote

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<sup>34</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A room of one's own*. Granada, 1977; first published 1929.

banks which in their turn transform the political leadership, making them representative of the poor. Of the political and social forces in the world today, the women's movement is the most effective, possibly the least tarnished, and the most united across divides. Hence, it could be the ideal vehicle to spearhead transformation and poverty eradication through political participation. For women, democratic spaces are crucial, as their resistance to oppression from family, culture and patriarchy requires open spaces with firmly embedded laws that safeguard individual rights.<sup>35</sup> Electoral politics has found vibrant support in India, as everyone witnessed even recently during our general elections 2004.

Yet in a strange and incomprehensible way the Indian women's movement does not plunge into the movements for improving the quality of representative democracy, or the nitty-gritty of enabling women voters to exercise women's choice, building women's vote banks. Nor does it jump in and adopt the groundswell movements even if they are led by women.

Interestingly the most significant and effective mass movements in India today are led by women. The movement for the right to information is led by Aruna Roy,<sup>36</sup> and now this movement is combined with the right to food, with Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen. The right of the peoples of the Narmada Valley to survival is led by Medha Patkar, the right to seed is led by Vandana Shiva,<sup>37</sup> and the right of home-based workers to legal protection is led by Ela Bhatt.<sup>38</sup> These cannot be said to be part of the feminist movement. Nor would all the women spearheading these groundswell movements easily call themselves feminist.

There are many local struggles: the powerful sit-ins of women in Nigeria against oil pipelines, and in Colombia against the narcotics mafia are only two of them. These appear on the global screen and are applauded by vibrant networks, but they cannot be sustained or enlarged in space to overpower the empire. It is necessary to build an ideological solidarity and institutional mechanisms to be able to support such local efforts more effectively; to sustain and enlarge the space women have occupied in many 'local' places, so that they encompass the public and political sphere to the full. They define development and the 'desirable' political economy, but we are not able to make out of them the theory, the concept or the paradigm so that it becomes the macro idea.

## **Towards the future**

This redefinition of politics and development by expanding the local spaces is one of the areas we need to bring up front, claiming formal power but transforming its characteristics both morally and institutionally.

At an informal gathering on the periphery of the 8th Women's World Congress in Kampala in 2002, after three evenings of sharings an idea emerged which was called 'revitalising the international feminist movement'.<sup>39</sup> Since one of the points of departure that had led to the

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<sup>35</sup> Devaki Jain, *For Women to Lead ... Ideas and Experience from Asia*. New York: UNDP, 1997.

<sup>36</sup> K. Srivastava, N. Dey and N. Mishra, 'Taking democracy forward: The right to information movement in Rajasthan', paper presented at the Technical Workshop on Indigenising Human Rights Education in Indian Universities, Karnataka Women's Information and Resource Centre, Bangalore, December 2001.

<sup>37</sup> Vandana Shiva is a Director of Navadanya. An international Conference was organised by Navadanya, New Delhi India International Centre, New Delhi; 29 September – 1 October 2001.

<sup>38</sup> Renana Jhabvala, 'SEWA and home-based workers in India: Their struggle and emerging role', paper presented at the Workshop on Indigenising Human Rights Education, Bangalore, December 2001.

<sup>39</sup> 'Revitalising the international feminist movement', report of the consultations held at Kampala, Uganda, 22–25 July 2002, written by a group of women who initiated what was called the Wise Women Process.

consultation was a reflection I had shared at the Beijing+5 meeting of CONGO<sup>40</sup> in New York in 2000, jokingly saying that as one Secretary-General (Boutros Boutros Ghali) had put together a council of ten wise men we could ask the current Secretary-General to put together a council of ten wise women. These women would harvest the experience, the ideas and the voices of all the rebellions, revolutions and proposals that have emerged from the various women's struggles and draw a platform paper or agenda out of that lived experience. Such a draft platform paper could then be the basis for a world conference, where the UN and the government delegates would be invited to respond, rather than the way it is organised now, where the governments put forward their reports and the brilliant women's movement becomes a supplicant or adversary or negotiator on the edge. We would be upturning the current hierarchies and getting the gold from our own mines.

Conventionally writing development history inclusive of what is conventionally called the gender dimension meant that in economics the task was to show that women were contributing to productive activities, while in politics there were many exercises in mapping 'women's participation in the traditional political arenas and to reveal women's participation in various historical events'.<sup>41</sup> Within development, too, the Women in Development (WID) paradigm that gained acceptance in the mid-1970s sought to redress the 'fading out or overlooking of the productive role of women [which] appeared to be a key to understanding the failure of development processes.'<sup>42</sup> This need to include women was at first aimed at opening the discipline to take women on board – that is, keeping more or less intact the basic premise of the endeavour. Women had to be 'counted in' and this effort was undertaken in many countries and by the UN statistical offices.

This was the fault line. It is now recognised that there is no way of transforming this wall, except bringing it down. The reconstruction of theory can be a unifying agenda for the women constituency. As has been pointed out by several commentators, especially Paul Streeten, Louis Emmerij and John Toye, most so-called changes in the development paradigm have not touched the core theory of development. The various stages of the Washington consensus are basically new wine in old bottles.

'An overriding issue is whether in the future "development economics" is to be regarded simply as applied economics or whether the nature and scope of development economics will constitute a need for a special development theory to supplement general economic theory.'<sup>43</sup>

Many efforts have been made to rewrite theory. For example, the three years of reflection and consultations of the South Commission tried to challenge the North (though it was called 'challenging the South'),<sup>44</sup> but it could not shift the ground from which the critique emerged.

Women's path-breaking shifting of the sands of development could lay the basis for developing new theory. Whatever may be the belief in practice, it is ideas and theory that are the power behind the action. With both Marx or Gandhi, both of whom were revolutionaries

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<sup>40</sup> Devaki Jain, 'Women's conference journeys: What have we not done? Where have we gone wrong?', CONGO presentation, 3 June 2000.

<sup>41</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, Introduction, in Scott (ed.), *Feminism and history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); M. Githens, P. Norris and J. Lovenduski, Introduction, in Githens et al. (eds), *Different roles, different voices: Women and politics in the United States and Europe* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), ix.

<sup>42</sup> Marianne Braig, 'Women's interests in development theory and policy, from "women in development" to "mainstreaming gender"', Deutsche Stiftung für internationale Entwicklung (DSE), Frankfurt (<http://www.dse.de/zeitschr/de300-5.htm>)

<sup>43</sup> Paul P Streeten, Comment for Kaushik Basu, 'On the goals of development' in Gerald M. Meier and Joseph E. Stiglitz (eds), *Frontiers of development economics. The future in perspective* (Washington DC: Oxford University Press / World Bank, 2001), 87–93.

<sup>44</sup> Report of the South Commission, *The Challenge to the South*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

who changed the ground, it was theories, ideologies and philosophies that made the difference. From their work with alternatives, from their critique of the given, and their overwhelming experience of discrimination, women can develop a theoretical frame for development with justice, linking economics to politics and society.

Women's experience has also revealed the key links between political restructuring and social transformation, a research agenda of the DAWN network. It has also shown the links between political arrangements and economic justice. The critical importance of spaces for creativity as well as resistance have also been revealed by the struggles and the development initiatives such as SEWA.<sup>45</sup>

As discussed in Kampala and other places, the theory can emerge from mass movements. A draft of such a paper can then become the basis of a UN conference which is another kind of world conference, called to pledge a plan of action drawn from women's experience of resistance, struggle, creation and collectivity.<sup>46</sup>

Some inspiration for such demolition and rebuilding can be drawn from Gandhi's political and economic strategies for India's reconstruction. They are the most doable and well-argued ideas and there is need to consider his ideas for the philosophical underpinnings of approaches to bring equality and banish poverty. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, at a function related to the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) in Geneva in 2004, quoted one of Gandhi's ideas, his Talisman, and suggested that it says it all as far as a poverty eradication programme is concerned. Gandhi's Talisman says: 'Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test: Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man or woman whom you may have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him.' My friend the late Mahboob ul Haq has also given the Talisman pride of place in his South Asia *Human Development Report*.<sup>47</sup>

While orthodox socialism addresses itself to inequality based on ownership of means of production, Gandhi focused on inequality in consumption. He wanted change to be initiated at the bottom, what he called the last person. Gandhi's proposal lends itself to becoming a modern economic principle or method. It could be called the 'bubbling up theory of growth' to counter the old 'trickling down theory of growth'. The bubbling up theory argues that the process of removal of poverty can itself be an engine of growth, that the incomes and capabilities of those who are currently poor have the potential to generate demand which in turn will fire the engine of production, but of goods that are immediately needed by the poor and which are currently peripheral in production. The oiling, then, of this engine will bubble up and fire the economy in a much more broad-based manner. Unlike export-led growth, it will not divert production and trade into the elite trap which is accentuating disparities and creating discontent.

It is this kind of revolution of thought, backed by a political mass movement like the feminist movement, that might prevent the sky from falling down over the poor.

Another area where women can stimulate and strategise is to make their peace tent combine with their women's tent and then combine to encroach upon and occupy the entire global governance landscape. Peace is still the most unifying and mass-mobilised of the worldwide women's movement. It is still the moral high ground almost uniquely occupied by women. And what is more, they have brought powerful reasoning into the debates. Recall Alva

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<sup>45</sup> Renana Jhabvala, 'SEWA and home-based workers in India: Their struggle and emerging role', presented at the Workshop on Indigenising Human Rights Education, Bangalore, December 2001.

<sup>46</sup> Devaki Jain, 'Women's conference journeys', op. cit.

<sup>47</sup> Mahboob ul Haq, *Human development in South Asia* (Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 1997), 27.

Myrdal<sup>48</sup> then and millions of women now. Yet in the international arena, including that which the UN drives, women are not taken into frontline positions in war and peace negotiations or in the prevention of conflict. Another wall. But by battering at that wall with arguments, knowledge and historical experience, the women's movement can become a roaring mass that breaks the wall.

The UN is battling to hold its own against a unipolar world where economic power is concentrated uniquely in a club which is also identified with the European and Christian traditions and shows conservative leanings in the field of women's rights. From being a guardian of sovereignty and a place where great ideas were born or allowed to flower, it has become a social service organisation, a humanitarian aid conduit. Nothing more and nothing less.

## 2.2 Discussion

Discussion after Devaki Jain's keynote speech and the contribution from Ursula Schäfer-Preuss revolved to a large extent around questions of the dilemma of finding unity among the diversity of the international women's movement or movements. In the view of one participant, the women's movement is 'fractured by multiple identities which we have made ourselves'. How to get a dialogue among women all over the world so as to fight common causes? Devaki agreed that the present conjuncture throws up strategic ambiguities: although we must celebrate diversity, we need to find ways to pull together. She suggested that there were perhaps some things we need not do any longer – such as monitoring UN processes – thus making space for more profound, even revolutionary approaches, looking critically at the current systems of production and consumption, of which inequality is a basic feature. Some fresh theory building specifically referring to women is also necessary; this would be a way of digging more deeply into the roots of inequality than exercises such as gender budgeting.

Some specific points were also made about the capacity of political institutions to promote women's rights or equality. It was noted that development and trade ministries do not always cohere in their policies. The fluctuating influence of civil society on political institutions was also raised, with the example of Kenya, where civil society and women's organisations had worked for more than 15 years to bring civil society into the political system, only to find themselves disarmed by the granting of some of their demands. There are other ways in which the deep ingraining of inequality not only between people but between nations appears: for instance, as Devaki pointed out, opposing violence against women is now universal, and this is certainly a great advance; but, on the other hand, it has been relatively easy to get governments to take the fight against violence on board precisely because it is not an agenda that involves any major transfer of resources from North to South.

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<sup>48</sup> Winner of the 1982 Nobel Prize in Peace.