

# Current neo-liberal development: Feminist alternatives

*A presentation by Bene Madunagu, Chairperson, Girls' Power Initiative and Coordinator, DAWN Anglophone Africa, at the opening plenary session of AWID'S 9th International Forum on Women's Rights and Development in Mexico, October 3-6, 2002*

## Preamble:

**T**his Forum is about "Re-Inventing Globalization." This theme is seen as appropriate for discussing women's rights and development at this stage of world history.

I will resist the temptation of going into definitions. For instance, how can I satisfy participants at this forum with my definition of globalization?

The definition of globalization is varied. First, it varies with one's geographical location since the reality it manifests on people differs in this regard. It varies on the basis of sex, since females largely, but unwittingly, accept their characterization of being the most vulnerable, the poorest of the poor and the most marginalized segment of world community. The perception and definition also vary between the rich and the poor. It varies within countries and among countries. It also varies on ideological grounds, etc. It could have been a herculean task for me to accept the invitation to address issues on this topic, if I did not find the marginal line of commonality in this structured and unstructured mesh of diversities.

My saving premise, however, is that I found one word "feminist" which although with its own diverse definitions - Radical, Socialist, Marxist, African, Existentialist, etc - still shares important parameters of Women, Rights and Gender. Hence, I created the niche out of this complex and that is to look at women's rights through the niche of women's empowerment, the magic wand that has itself been bastardised by the forces of globalization. My own definition of women empowerment, which informs this presentation, is that it is the ability of women to re-discover and increase their own self-reliance and internal strength and the mental, social, and

political will, derived from this strength to accept their rights to determine the choices they need and have to make in life in order to influence the direction of self-fulfilling chance through the individual and collective efforts. Women empowerment also means women's capacity to gain control over their bodies their lives and the power, materials and other resources for sustaining these changes.

This definition of empowerment is at the same time, the central thesis of my presentation. My consideration of feminist alternatives to the current neo-liberal model of development will derive from this thesis of radical activism to effect fundamental changes rather than reformist conciliatory advocacy actions that do not challenge the status quo.

## Introduction: An overview:

Permit me to digress a bit to present the tip of the lens of women's realities to enable us to seek for the right alternatives to solve the problems. The current deteriorating levels of poverty, violence against women, gender discrimination, and

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injustices, male dominance and power in interpersonal relationships, and other forms of inequalities between women and men, within nations and among nations as documented in the various contemporary UNDP's Human Development Index, have been the results of failure to invest in social development.

Globalization lays emphasis on economic growth for the Southern hemisphere and conspicuous consumption for the North, through the market system of governance. As observed by Antrobus (2001), "in the 1960's the state played the major role in promoting the well-being of the majority of people in developing countries. Poverty reduction was at the centre of development planning and there was an emphasis on an approach to development which was broad-based and integrated."

Much research and documentation as well as debates on globalization have focused on macro-level issues such as delineating how globalization can and should be measured, the impact of globalization on the sovereignty of the nation state, etc. (Zine Magubane, 2001). References to impact of globalization on a micro-level rarely goes deep on the impact on the lives of poor women everywhere. Women often get subsumed under "people living in poverty," rural or urban poor as articulated by Dembele (1999). The fundamental goal of globalization is to lay the ground for the total domination of the world economy by giant multinational corporations and international financial speculators. Hence, globalization is essentially about the absolute and indisputable freedom of markets to determine all essential economic, financial and social decisions around the world, such

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as investment, exchange and interest rates; employment and income distribution.

The essence of globalization is, thus the promotion of unfettered capital movements, the removal of any form of protection for local industries, the maximum deregulation of labour markets, the privatisation of all economic and social activities where the state still has a stake, and the adoption of global-free trade and open market competition.

For the pursuit of these objectives of globalization, state controls and intervention of any kind had to be destroyed-the phenomenon now described as the "weakening of the state." This "marketization of governance" (Taylor, 2000) results in the partial or total privatization of public services like health, education, transportation, and public utilities like electricity and water supplies, particularly in African countries. According to Aina (1996) and Dembele (1998), the overall result has been a widening gap, deterioration in the quality of the remaining public services; the decay in basic infrastructure, most of which are in disrepair, increased poverty and vulnerability for millions of citizens - mostly women - in both urban and rural areas.

In the 1980s many countries of the South, experimented with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF)

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perception of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) which started the current erosion of human well-being, almost throughout the Southern hemisphere. But SAPs came into existence within the socio-political context of patriarchy, neo-colonial globalization, new forms of imperialism and capitalist exploitation which already placed women in a huge social disadvantage; (Madunagu, 2001). SAPs' most devastating impact was on the average family income, the primary institution of women oppression and exploitation. By the late 1980s, the consequences of SAPs as well as opposition and protests to SAPs were all too evident. SAPs represented the first step in the process of many countries of the South losing the capacity to maintain and reproduce themselves.

Furthermore, in the aftermath of the independence of African countries in the second half of the 20th century, the erstwhile colonialists could not tolerate the eventuality of simultaneously losing territories and resources that were vital for the survival of their home countries. So, they designed the vicious but subtle policies through the World Bank and IMF to tighten and sustain their political and economic control over their colonies. They also tightened their linguistic imperialism through the colonial language of French and English to maintain their divide and rule tactics. This has continued to pose challenges in the solidarity of African women feminists. In addition new forms of religious fanaticism are being introduced, financed and marketed widely in our poor communities under the cloak of globalization to sedate the people particularly, women and majority of our people against every drive for critical consciousness and resistance (Madunagu and Aken'ova, 2001).

Incidentally, while this "opium of the people-religiosity-is widening and deepening, and products such as second-hand, environmentally - destructive, refrigerators and destructive technologies are being globalized, computers, new

information technologies are only affordable by a few in the same communities receiving these degrading products. In the same vein, clean water, clean environment, health service, education and other social services, are globalized out of the reach of poor women and men.

## Globalization and women's health

Ninety-nine per cent (99%) of maternal deaths occur in developing countries, where fewer than fifty per cent (50%) of women give births in health-care facilities. In the rural areas, where health services are scarce, pregnancy complications cannot be properly managed. It is scandalous that this is the case in 2002 when most governments in developing countries have established elaborate policies and programmes on safe motherhood. Such policies are good and affordable, but why have they not worked in nearly two (2) decades of "implementation?"

More than three million of the five million people who were newly infected with HIV in 2001 live in sub-Saharan Africa, according to UNAIDS. In a study in 2001, it was found that HIV was six times more prevalent in women than in men. Yet, no commensurate actions have been taken to address this burden.

American President, George W. Bush's version of globalization appears to be "A war against women and the poor." We thought we won the battles of Vienna 1993, Cairo, 1994, Beijing, 1995 and their + 5s. But hold it. How about the neo-Bushian ideology of terrorphobia; of repressive international policies, that have turned all these gains upside down? What of the global gag rule forbidding any funds to support health services that as much as offer information on abortion services for girls and women who need it? How about the efforts to eliminate all contraception except abstinence and the rhythm method, while the violent sexual crime of rape and human trafficking is on the increase? Have we asked ourselves why although it has

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been shown that abortion is one of the safest surgical procedures - even 10 times safer than childbirth - it continues to receive such opposition, including harassment, physical violence and threats to providers? Even where such unwanted pregnancies originate from rape committed by professed celibate priests, the opposition is still mounted against the "Holy" pregnancies? To whom do we address our advice on raising awareness about violations of women's rights? Would these oppositions remain if men were the ones having to make the choice of abortions? How do we raise our sons and other boys in our lives to learn about respecting women's right and accepting responsibilities for their sexual behaviours, thereby effectively reducing the need for abortion?

With justification, we rejoiced and celebrated when the required number of nations ratified the treaty creating the International Criminal Court (ICC). The hardwork of feminist advocates led to the inclusion of rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilisation and sexual violence as war

crimes and crimes against humanity in the governing statutes of the court. The court's jurisdiction was scheduled to take effect from July 1, 2002, but the Bushian ideology would not accept justice for women.

By May 6, the multi-faceted yet dumb form of globalization of War Against Women renounced the treaty which President Clinton signed in 2000. The preference of this terrorist anti-women tendency is for ad hoc tribunals of the Rwanda and Yugoslavia-type which Bush would convene to protect his imperialist soldiers against the rights of women. When shall we take charge of our lives? Should we remain peacemakers when anti-women ideology has been globalized to our doorsteps? Will supplication, advocacy and lobby, change these inhuman attacks on women?

**What kinds of development alternatives do feminists want?**

**BASIC PRINCIPLES: WE, ADMIT:** That women do not form a homogenous group, just as men don't. We are diversified by economic and political contexts, by age, race, class, culture, tradition, language, ethnicity, ideology,

religion, etc. But we are united in the exploitation that all women suffer the capitalist neo-liberal, post-modernist process of globalization on the basis of being female. This gives us the right of collectively developing strategies against gender discrimination, exploitation and poverty.

**WE KNOW:** That gender inequality, patriarchy and the male-value system, male-institutionalized structures, culture and tradition under globalization have worsened the devaluation of women's contribution, inequality in remuneration patterns, denial of full citizenship to women and being seen as "the other" in the society.

**WE OBSERVE:** That although it took a world conference to roll back the slogan of "women's rights are human rights" it will remain a slogan since 1993 which means that feminists have to more forcefully demonstrate that all women are human beings. It is not and has never been a "Man's World." It is and should be a world for all human beings in mutual and equal interactions with the environment.

**WE NOTE:** That everywhere, even among male allies, many people stand against every feminist aspiration and notion of equality. For them, gender equality is just a slogan on paper, not for implementation, never to be achieved in practical experiences.

**WE ALSO NOTE:** That there are many women, educated and not so educated, who still consciously feel obliged to fulfil their "traditional obligations" of submitting to male power in their relationship, blind by the belief of benefiting from the "protection" that this offers. We have a job in assisting such people to overcome the disease of false-consciousness.

**Our strength and opportunities in struggling for alternatives:**

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## PHOTONEWS



• **Fidelia Omonuwa, President of the GPI Benin Centre of Alumni Association, presents her address at the last graduates forum in Benin City**

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We have come a long way in our innovative and creative strategies to break out of sexist patriarchal clutches. Women have more and more broken into formerly male-dominated professions, demonstrating that what any human being, male or female, has the interest and opportunity to learn, the person can become skilled, and an expert, in such a profession. We have more and more women in politics and decision-making positions.

We need to focus on educating such women in feminist ideology to change patriarchal politics and introduce feminist popular democratic ideology. We now have women entrepreneurs and women professionals in all fields. We should mobilize them and share with them our feminist principles. We need to shed the patriarchally driven values of hating ourselves and undermining ourselves. We need to develop new lenses of looking at women and acknowledging that having been born and raised in capitalist globalized patriarchal values, reinforced by male religious interpretations, we need awareness rather than alienate some within our ranks, just because they reject and abuse feminism while protecting patriarchal values. We need to admit that we all need some forms of orientation for patience to assist our "other women" see through feminist lenses.

We now have many women as heads of households and even heads of religious institutions. We need to utilize this fact to debunk the "sanctity and exclusiveness" of male-dominant roles. This would assist women to regain their humanity by fighting against their vulnerability engendered by the appendage position they occupy. Women in all spheres of life - at community, rural, semi-rural or urban areas; whether in the North or in the South - are daily, through their conscious and unconscious actions responding to the neo-liberal paradigm of globalization and visibly providing alternatives to globalization and constituting the human agency for change.

Our duty as regard the imperative of developing an alternative strategy is to consciously insert ourselves in the centre of these changes as its intellectual pivot

and vanguard to provide the theoretical back-up to these practical alternatives being undertaken by women responding to globalization. We are endowed with many skills in all spheres of life. We need the artists to remove the water pots and loads of firewood from the heads of women, babies from the backs of women and mortar and pestle from women's hands. We need images of shared responsibilities. We

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should celebrate desired and planned pregnancies. We should celebrate breast-feeding. Every other role should henceforth be demonstrated as shared by men and women. Everything else constitutes gender-biased roles.

We need to institutionalize feminist perceptions of women as human beings with rights and responsibilities in different life and career choices, to replace the sexist patriarchal images designed to devalue girls and women over the ages. Those sexist images of girls with tears in their eyes, unwanted pregnancy, dropping out of school, etc, should be replaced with images of male irresponsible sexual behaviour dangling their penises, spreading STIs. HIV/AIDS and unwanted pregnancies side-by-side with those images of mutual respect, shared responsibilities and gender justice.

We need to document the strategies that have moved us in many ways out of social stereotypes and patriarchal roles. We need to document where we have shifted grounds and analyze how we did it and disseminate same widely. We need to learn from such strengths and opportunities to break the barriers that continue to put us in "vulnerable" positions to be assisted through WID, WAD, GAD, and micro-credit programmes. We should utilize the globalized information technology to highlight our success and use such examples with innovative media strategies to create awareness to break the bond of globalized Bushian ideology.

In the last two and half decades, women's status both legal and social has undergone some positive changes. We have made strides in educational spheres in feminist activism nationally, regionally and globally. Indeed, the rapid phase of globalization has also meant general rapid emancipation for women. Many women, irrespective of class, geographical location and ideology, now venture beyond the home and stereotype occupations and roles into reserved male domains in economic, political and social spheres.

We need the feminist guide to institute popular democratic processes of economic, social and political governance. In practical terms, we are daily experiencing some levels of re-orientation and restructuring of women's traditional gender stereotypical roles. Many women have begun to perceive themselves differently and men are beginning to admit-grudgingly of course - and to some extent, accept the differences in women's lives. They do this with antagonism and mixed feelings, on one hand, men benefit from women's contributions but, on the other hand, they resent what they see as an intrusion of women into their "natural" position of leadership and decision-making. Too bad, there is no going back!

### Women's resistance: Echoes from the past

We need to look briefly into the recent as well as the not-so-recent history of the feminist struggle for the inspiration on the

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way forward.

Since the decade for women, 1975 to 1985, feminist struggles have received media attention steadily. Many factors are responsible for this. Feminists have become more organised through NGOs concerned with different aspects of women's life from health, through violence against women, gender, women's environment, sexual rights, reproductive rights, environment, poverty education, etc. Thus, it is the increase in the activism of feminists on the women's question, rather than a sudden revelation or insight among media personnel about women's place in social production, reproduction and development, that has generated the public and media action on women's issues.

So, we need to pose the question: How come that feminists have succeeded in gaining space in a patriarchal institution - the media - but still remain marginalised and perpetual lobbyists and advocates for freedom to exercise their human rights?

In seeking the answer to this question, we need to examine our methods as well as go into history to find out if women had ever achieved fundamental social change and if so how.

Methodologically, we seem to have been doing different things that male-dominated leaderships of our various countries are not doing. We are going into rural communities to study and document the experiences of women and advocate and lobby with such data. But what challenges do this pose to the status quo? We even advocate for, and seek partnership with the male status quo, and let them accept us by assuring them we are just complementing what they do.

Thus, we do not in our action, put ourselves effectively "in opposition" to the status quo, seeking for real changes. We merely solicit and spend our energies for mere pittance of reforms most of which are on paper with no intention of implementation. Contemporary NGO-style feminist struggles have been characterised by supplication, advocacy and near docile attitudes to the state and

male-dominated policy structures, just seeking to be accommodated and looking for spaces rejected by men to insert feminists - usually one feminist among thousands of men. What seems to be lacking in our current praxis is radical criticism, challenging and confronting the status quo.

Let us look into history for guidance. We have witnessed in recent past, just a year ago, what was called the gag rule. Our response included signature collection to appeal to the Bush administration, legal tussles in the Bush-administered courts, etc. In the past, the response would have been different and the achievement would have been a more substantial and sustaining shift. In the book, *Women of Valour, Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America*, written by Ellen Chesler, Margaret Sanger did not just carry the slogan "Women have a fundamental right to control their own bodies," which we do today, but she acted on it by distributing contraceptives to immigrant women in New York physically. She went to jail in 1917 for the action. We are all benefiting today, from her radical actions as opposed to the present day advocacy and lobby method.

There was also the women's war of 1929 in Nigeria when women in rejecting colonial rule and taxation destroyed 10 native courts, and damaged a number of others, attacked the houses of colonially-installed warrant chiefs and some colonial institutions of repression (Mba, 1993). The fundamental changes achieved were as a result of the war and not advocacy.

The Greek woman, Electra Apostolu was only 32 years of age in 1944, during World War II, when she went on a secret mission on behalf of the national Liberation Army of Greece, and was arrested by the Nazis. Her heroic radical action contributed to the clearing of the occupation army three months later from Athens.

In 1977, it was the Argentinian women who constituted themselves, into the "Mothers of the Maza de Mayo," or "May Square Mothers" to defy the murderous

military junta that seized power from President Isabel Peron of Argentina. It was the courageous struggle of these women that became the symbol for the human rights movement in Latin America and a source of inspiration for women throughout the continent in the fight for democracy as recorded by Fisher in *Out of the Shadows: Women, Resistance and Politics in South America*.

It seems to me that feminist response to globalization needs to go beyond advocacy, lobbying and partnership, into radical, or even revolutionary challenges, if there must be substantial social advancement, sustainable human development, social and gender justice.

## Conclusions

It is my strong hope that all of us gathered in this forum share a common vision of the desire of the paradigm of development that will allow all human beings, women, men and children to actualize themselves as full human beings, wherever they may be located.

It is my hope that we all want a world where discrimination in all forms, including those targeted exclusively against women; a world where poverty has been eradicated; a world where the highest priority and quality is given to basic social, educational and health needs of all peoples, - women, men and children. It is my hope that all of us at this forum want development that values the totality of people's talents and contribution and hence the labour of women and men in the realm of private, public paid and unpaid work. It is my hope that our collective vision is rooted in development that has legitimacy in rights, gender and social justice perspectives.

If we are on this basic position, then we must also recognise that our alternative vision of society is impossible to realise under globalization.

Yes, we do urgently need alternative development. We also need to rise above unconscious siesta of complacency in our personal and organisational praxis.

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We need to

- Consciously, collectively and deliberately support each other in resisting the pervasive conformity to social gender stereotypes. The support has to be selfless and unconditional.
- Wittingly assert what we see and claim as our rights as human beings and support the less privileged in asserting their rights.
- Consciously value ourselves, increase our self-esteem, acknowledge our self-identity and reject in our actions and behaviour, all forms of sexist characterisation and gender prejudices.
- Reject and resist being seen as "the other, the vulnerable, the 'second half'" and all sexist philosophical theories that support such. We should insist forcefully on practical mainstreaming of the gender issue in our actions.
- Strive and not just demand passively, to take our equal positions in the march to self-sufficiency.
- Practicalise our autonomy, not just talking and writing about it.
- Recognise that separateness, partnership, autonomy and interdependence, though not mutually exclusive, are strategic choices to make consciously for achieving gender equality.
- Learn to appreciate human differences and similarities and consciously choosing variety in our lives and breaking away from boxed-in gender stereotypes.
- Struggle to reject the assigned position of being victims, poorest of the poor, powerless, but actively demonstrating emotional, social and economic power and strength.
- Take risks without fear of failure. Consciously raising debates and discussions wherever we perceive sexism, to create awareness against gender injustice.

Finally, globalization has not only placed more demands on women, but has in turn, created greater mobility of women. As repressive family ties become loose and less supportive, women should grab this as opportunities to free themselves from this

most oppressive unit of society. As more and more women work longer hours and more women work longer hours engaging in several sectors of social development, this should be turned into interdependency and sharing to radically break away from, sometimes imaginary, economic dependency.

Feminism was not created at the beginning of life on earth. Feminist struggles evolved out of the specific social, cultural, political and economic circumstances of oppressive capitalist mode of development. Thus, feminism represents the ideological response to the social contradictions of capitalist exploitation, power and production relations coupled with patriarchal hegemony, with women being the most exploited, dominated and oppressed.

We are gathered here by virtue of our feminist struggles, our feminist alliances within nations and between nations, joining forces with exploiters in their game by being global in our pursuit of gender and social justice, the end point of feminist struggles. But then, this is not the first but the 9th of the forum. We have made gains in the last decade in global policy, but the architects of globalization have no intention of implementing such policies. It therefore, becomes clear that the only effective alternative is redirecting our energies practically working with us, between us and for us along with our allies in creating popular democratic models of development oriented towards peoples' well-being, with gender and social justice informing policies.

Feminists have no option but to apply their force consciously for radical and fundamental social, political and economic changes and not just reformist palliatives.

The key to re-inventing globalization lies in radical popular democracy.

I thank you all for your patience. I once again express my gratitude to the organisers for giving me this opportunity to share my thoughts and convictions with you.

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