

Linking gender justice and economic justice

Excerpts of a presentation by DAWN's Regional Co-ordinator for Anglophone Africa, Bene Madunagu and DAWN's Research Co-ordinator on political economy of globalisation, Gita Sen, at recent UN Forum

The challenges facing feminist attempts to link gender justice with economic justice come from two directions.

On the one side there are the poorly regulated processes of globalization, the new form of a free-market juggernaut riven by deep and growing inequalities of wealth and income, in which rising numbers of impoverished people, especially women, are being marginalised from access to secure livelihoods.

On the other side is the strengthening of national, religion-based, ethnic or other identities in which the assertion of "traditional" gender roles and systems of authority and control is central. The challenge for women is how to assert the need for both economic justice and gender justice in an increasingly globalised and fundamentalist world.

The conferences of the 1990s were the first significant global occasions when "women's issues" came forward from the margins of women-only conferences to the mainstream agenda. The commitments to gender equality and reproductive health that were reached at the World Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995 were fundamentally based on International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) definitions. The Beijing Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women expanded on three-the Vienna agreements on women's human rights, Cairo

recommendations on reproductive health and rights, and the WSSD macro economic agenda.

These agreements were fraught with controversy although no more so than many other global issues. What was striking about them was the extent to which a small minority of religious fundamentalists and their allies could hold the negotiations to ransom through their attempts to reverse the Cairo and Beijing agreements during the +5 reviews. Although the climate of the 1990s was different from the harsh tensions of bi-polarity in the 1970s and 1980s, some of the actors and tensions had not changed and while the principal text of these negotiations appeared to be women's rights, the critical sub-text was the continuing South-North divide.

In this climate, fundamentalist forces have systematically attempted to emerge as champions of the South. The hard line positions taken by the Northern negotiators on every economic issue from the right to development, to debt, to trade, and to structural adjustment provided fertile soil for a growing closeness between the Vatican and at least some Southern negotiators. More recently, major civil society initiatives for global justice had the Vatican as an ally. Whatever the rationale, the Vatican began to use its growing clout to oppose women's rights and gender equality in every possible international forum.

By the time Vienna conference on human rights took place in 1993, the

Vatican had begun to mobilise its forces against the recognition of women's rights as human rights. In Cairo in 1994, the Vatican allied itself with Islamic fundamentalists to strongly resist the adoption of a reproductive health and rights agenda in the ICPD programme of Action. At the Social Summit in Copenhagen six months later, this alliance worked to oppose every innovative aspect related to gender equality and reproductive health. This opposition continued through the Beijing and Habitat conferences.

What do the fundamentalists really want?

While the conservatives are certainly most virulent (and the Vatican nearly hysterical) on abortion and sexual orientation, this is only symptomatic of their core objection to gender equality itself. They are adamant in their refusal to recognise the brutality of domestic violence against women in all societies and in their vehement assertion of the sanctity of 'cultural' and 'religious' beliefs and practices however harmful to women.

In Cairo + 5 and Beijing +5 the fundamentalist insisted on full respect for religious beliefs and cultural diversity while refusing to accord the same respect to the diversity among women.

Resilience, energy and imagination: women's organizations rise to the challenge

(Continue on p. 23)

Linking gender justice and economic justice

(Continue from p. 22)

Despite these unfavourable conditions, both the Cairo + 5 and Beijing +5 reviews ended with the gains of Cairo and Beijing intact, and with further progress on some key fronts. In this light, the political progress observed in the 1990s conferences must be credited to the strategic capacity of global feminist networks to navigate between the Scylla of fundamentalism and the Charybdis of the Northern economic agenda. To do this, women's organisations and networks had to overcome their own internal disagreements and build strong coalitions across the global divides.

In the 1990s, tensions at play within the feminist field itself, particularly in regard to the differences between Northern and Southern women's agendas, were

gradually resolved through sustained efforts at building alliances. Women's organizations played multiple strategic and tactical roles during Cairo +5 and Beijing +5, essentially given the weakness of delegations and the presence of a "do or die" fundamentalist opposition. The extremely important strategic and tactical role played by women's organizations and NGO activists inside and outside government delegations in negotiating the ICPD Programme of Action itself had given them considerable experience and credibility.

In both cases however, women had their work cut out in terms of bringing inexperienced delegations up to speed on the complexities, both technical and political, of the negotiations. Women also worked strategically to analyse the political direction of the negotiations and to support the building of key coalitions

among governments. One such crucial coalition that emerged was SLAC (Some Latin American Countries), that began to distinguish itself from more conservative G77 positions during the May Beijing+5 inter-sessional meetings.

Although SLAC itself may have been a short-term tactical phenomenon, its emergence was a signal of major importance. For the first time, a significant bloc of Southern countries was willing to stand simultaneously for global economic justice and gender justice. By doing so, this bloc challenged others within G77 to show their true colours.

In the period after Beijing +5, SLAC has metamorphosed into GOR (the Group of Rio) in more recent negotiations. What is clear is that there is a strategic need for a global negotiating bloc positioned in the South that consistently links economic justice to gender justice and participatory democracy.

A final word to other development NGOs and networks. Unfortunately, there are still far too many at global and other levels whose commitment to gender equality is weak, and whose beliefs and political practice are fraught with patriarchy. But for too long, the tendency among even the more progressive development NGOs is to leave gender equality to be struggled over by women's organizations alone. It is high time they recognized that women's struggles for gender justice, economic justice and participatory democracy are central and may be key to the energy, strategic thinking and innovative wisdom this era of globalization and fundamentalism demands.

Culled from *DAWN Informs*, March 2002

PHOTONEWS



● GPI S/E Co-ordinator, Bene Madunagu makes her speech during the last International Women's Day celebration in Calabar recently