

Women and globalization – is there a way out?

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I have been given the daunting task of answering the question: "Globalization-- is there a way out?" Many of us speak about the globalization of social movements. We know the processes of globalization have been good for some women and incredibly debilitating for others. Given what we know about globalization, can we get out? No. But do we have to change globalization processes in order to empower women? Absolutely. And particularly when we talk about globalization and its contribution to poverty. The fact is that billions of women today lead such precarious lives, lives without dignity, lives without freedom, lives without security. There are more deaths every month as a result of poverty, more deaths than the horrific Indian Ocean tsunami that we experienced earlier this year. These are silent, unreported and preventable deaths.

I want to look at the actors and the institutions that are supposed to be working to eradicate poverty. Let me start by talking about the United Nations. I have a critical perspective about where the Millennium Summit and where the UN agencies are going viz a viz the Millennium Development Goals. First of all, all our UN outcomes including the Beijing Declaration for Action have been minimalized and subsumed under eight tiny goals. If you talked to anyone within the UN system, they will say that Goal 3 (Empowerment of Women) is barely discussed by policy makers even though the Empowerment of Women is supposed to underlie the process of poverty alleviation. We are all heartbroken, given the decades of analytical work and activism that have looked at the processes to empower women, that the only indicator that the UN agencies and governments around the world are supposed to use to measure women's empowerment is access to education.

Most importantly, the problem I have with the process of the MDG goals and poverty alleviation up to the year 2015 is that the root causes of poverty are not being debated and discussed. The root cause of poverty is discrimination, so the winners of globalization and the losers of globalization have to do with those who face more discrimination and those who have more power. If we look simply at access and control over productive resources, those are the winners, those who have access and control over time, labor, credit, networks, education, all these things that are so valued in our economies. We can see that the discrimination against women clearly cuts the majority of the world's women out of these resources. The other thing is that there is this broad assumption in the majority of the development community, given that the majority of the world's poor are women, that if we just addressed poverty, we are going to help women. There is a conflation between the poor and women, but we know that poverty is gendered. Processes of poverty are gendered because discrimination is. For example, many strategies to eradicate poverty in poor countries focus on labor-intensive strategies. Let's get people into the labor market, but we know that women in the majority of the world have time burdens, so the more labor work in the official economy that you give to women, you are not doing anything to decrease their time burden. We've just seen in Korea that women are working outside of the home and therefore 160% more than men. What does this mean in terms of poverty eradication strategies? That we need to go back to the very root strategies of alleviating women's time burdens. What does this look like? This looks like labor-saving technologies. I bring back concepts that we were dealing with 15 or 20 years ago, but they seem to have been lost. Somehow there's been a huge amnesia of so many policy makers of the ways we tackle poverty at its base.

Let me also talk about the role of NGOs. This is a world that I have to dance within, whether I like it or not, because we know that international NGOs have become extremely powerful actors on the world stage. They in fact directly employ as many people as multinational corporations. When we look to the effectiveness over the past 10-15 years with respect to what we gave in terms of influencing development, we have come up with all sorts of policies to integrate gender perspectives into development and so many have assumed that if institutions just have this policy, then all the projects and programs that they pour through this policy will

somehow at the bottom come out gender-sensitive. However, we know that institutions, whether they are small NGOs or large development agencies, are also gendered. You can have the most progressive policy on gender equality inside any development institutions but unless you have feminists in these institutions insuring that the policy is actually being implemented in order to ensure gender equality at the end of the day, institutions will deliver gender-blind outcomes. We know this as fact.

Let me take micro-credit as an example. Micro-credit is often conflated with poverty alleviation for women. I don't want to bash micro-credit because I think micro-credit provides very extremely valuable resources for poor women, and it is a critical stepping stone to expanding the choices and opportunities for women and their communities. However, the fact is that there is not enough feminism within micro-credit; there is not the use of micro-credit as a subversive tool for transformation. We know that the best micro-credit programs include empowerment and training. But the development industry, the development racket has seen that the only value of micro-credit, the be all and end all goal of micro-credit, is for increasing women's incomes. We know that increasing women's incomes does not necessarily lead to their emancipation, to their freedom, to their human rights. The responsibility of those of us to be actively engaging within micro-credit agencies within the wider development set has never been more important.

Let me talk about the role of our movement and the role of research and activism. Particularly, I am concerned about the lack of a poverty analysis in so much of our work for social transformation. Working toward the eradication of poverty has not remained a central priority in my view of women's movements globally. At this moment, there is a silence around the word "class" and challenging class inequalities. Globalization has enabled many of us, particularly those of us who already have certain privileges and powers, to gain many things. Given this situation, we are quite uncomfortable about challenging our own privileges and powers and looking at how we have to transform our own behavior in a world where global poverty has never been more obscene, inequalities have never been more obscene. There is also unnecessarily a competition between those working toward economic justice and those working for gender justice. But these cannot be achieved separately; they have to be achieved simultaneously. Many of us have interrogated why is it that so many feminists who are either researchers or activists are afraid of economics. Why are not more of us engaging with it and trying to transform it? Are we scared that it is too complicated? That can't be the case. I appeal for more of us to take a very explicit economic justice agenda into our research and our activism. There is competition between those that are working at the macro level and those that are working at the micro level and those that are working at the global or those that are working at the local. This is also for me completely unnecessary competition. We need to be working at all levels, and we have to be understanding the intersections between what is happening at the micro level and how that translates into aggregate macroeconomic responses and then the decisions that are being made at the WTO. We need to understand all these things, how they interlink and how we need to change them at all these levels.

I am also concerned about the divisions between young women and older women. I particularly worry because for so many young women, globalization is playing out in their lives, their jobs and their bodies in very different ways than those women of a generation before. Therefore, young feminists and young women need to be at the center of the debate and activism around the future of economic justice. Many accuse younger feminists of not having feminism but this feminism is actually being displayed out on the streets very often as part of the anti-globalization and fair globalization movements. Feminism and feminist movements have not created a space or attracted in the same way that the anti globalization movement has. As a result, there is a real need to bring these together in more effective ways. I am preoccupied with the state of the world and how to counter neo-liberal globalization. To combat the kind of poverty that so many women around the world are facing, the power lies in our social movements, but our movements are not strong; our movements are fragmented. Many of these divisions and competitions that I just described are very real. For so much of the research that gets done, especially with regards to globalization, focuses on the impact of globalization, but the research does not focus on the change processes needed for us to transform globalization. We need to interrogate and research our change processes.