

Thematic Section

Women's Rights in a Changing World¹

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ABSTRACT *Anita Nayar looks at five key areas where major change is occurring and affecting women's rights. These are Global Power, Inequality, Fundamentalisms, New Technologies and the Environment. She asks a series of questions to provoke a debate and deeper understanding of the interconnection between these issues and women's movements responses to them.*

KEYWORDS *feminisms; choice; global power; new technologies; inequality; fundamentalisms; environment*

Introduction

There are five areas where major change is occurring which clearly affects women's rights and therefore human rights. But must we accept these changes as inevitable? Will the religious right inevitably be in control of our countries? Are neo-liberal policies the inevitable design of our economic policies? Is climate change inevitable? Can we not and must we not as feminists challenge the inevitability of these models? After all the only constant in life is change so why look at the future as somehow predetermined? We all have a choice of what the future can be.

Global power

With regard to the first area, we are witnessing four manifestations of global power today: (1) Geopolitical power whether unilateralism as represented by the US or emerging regional powers such as China, India, South Africa and Brazil; (2) the power or weakness of multilateral institutions such as the WTO, IMF, WB, or UN; (3) corporate power and (4) the power of civil society. These global forces are inter-related and define our lives by their policies or actions.

Inequality

If we look at the institutional framework of these global forces – particularly the multi-lateral economic and trade organizations – it is clear that the policies they are promoting and our governments are implementing are creating the conditions that have deepened inequality. Women's and other social movements have attempted to engage in these policy arenas but have found the spaces for so-called civil society participation limiting. How can we transform such spaces into mechanisms of accountability? How

do we guard against being co-opted? One of the lessons learnt by our increasingly frustrating engagements with various UN bodies has been to pay closer attention to the broader UN reform process in order to address system-wide issues of transparency and accountability as well as extend NGO rights in the UN to better integrate our voices into decision-making processes.

Fundamentalisms

The link between global power dynamics and increasing inequality is evident but we also need to recognize that deepening inequality is a major cause of violent conflict and social unrest that can be linked to so-called 'fundamentalisms'. But what does this term 'fundamentalisms' mean? Is it even an appropriate term to use? Many feminists from Muslim societies in particular have said the term is a misnomer. After all anyone of faith who believes in the fundamentals of the faith could be considered a fundamentalist. The fundamentals of a faith of course depend on who is defining them and that is a contentious issue, but many people who believe in the fundamentals of their religion are not conservative or right wing. So would it not be more appropriate to use the term 'religious conservatives' or 'religious right'?

Feminists' response to the religious right has been to insist on a secular state that is responsible for guaranteeing the human rights of all peoples. But is this a sufficient response given the complexities in some situations where the religious right is providing basic social services, which the secular state is failing to deliver, or in other situations where secular states are patriarchal and undemocratic? We cannot just fight for a secular state without intentionally developing ways of addressing the economic basis for the growing attraction to religious extremism. We therefore need to ask, other than being secular, what does the state need to do economically? We may not have all the answers but need to be mindful that one of our challenges is to envision an alternative economic system to capitalism that protects the rights of people and the health of the planet.

New technologies

While we need to hold unilateral powers, regional powers, multilateral institutions and right wing forces in check, let us examine more closely corporate power and the role transnational corporations play in the consolidation of global power. A key arena where corporate power manifests is in the development of new technologies whether in the military industrial complex, the food and agricultural sectors, or in relation to our reproductive health. Feminists need to consider why we are not as engaged in the science and technology arena compared with the other areas addressed above. The challenge is to hold transnational corporations, and science in particular, accountable to serve the common good. Given that they operate across many nation states, a multilateral strategy is required to develop and implement international enforceable standards of corporate conduct.

Environment

With regard to the environment science has made an important contribution in terms of our understanding of ecological concerns. Today very few scientists and people regardless of corporate power would dare say we are not facing a major crisis with climate change. In the last year from the Tsunami to hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Stanley and Wilma to the recent earthquake in Pakistan and India, the crisis is in our face. While corporations have been actively involved in the environment whether derailing rivers, drying and reclaiming marshes, deforestation, or removing natural barriers making us vulnerable to hurricanes, where have we been engaged? Indigenous and community-based women's groups in particular have taken up the call for action on these crucial environmental issues yet the collective of women's movements must take these issues on board at the global level.

Challenges ahead

Women's rights movements need to be working on many fronts and at many levels, working outside of our silos to engage across our issue areas funda-

Development 49(1): Thematic Section

mentally remembering that as we demand our human rights we need to pay attention to our host, the earth. We need to guarantee the rights of women, people and the health of the planet. We all

have a choice of what the future can be. There are many obstacles but also many possibilities to create the change that we want and need. To make that choice is our challenge.

Note

- 1 This short article is based on Anita Nayar's remarks as facilitator of the AWID Forum's second plenary entitled 'What is the change around us?' on 28 October 2005.