



Presentation for DAWN Panel on Genderscapes in paradoxical times and spaces

At the site of human rights

by Sonia Correa

My contribution to this debate is located in the human rights “site”. If the focus on women’s agency is guiding principal to reframe the social contract, human rights clearly constitute one strategic location in which this transformation has been taking place and the United Nation necessarily appears as a strategic location. But, human rights are more than the UN, it is also a discourse that provides multiple spaces from where women and other actors (excluded or misplaced by existing social contract – black, ethnic indigenous indigenous groups , sexual dissidents) gain individual and collective agency and raise their voices to challenge states and private agents.

In light of this understanding, one of the paradoxes we have experienced during the last decade is that while market fundamentalism deepened its inroads and effects, we also witnessed clear breakthroughs with respect to human rights. Starting with Vienna this expanded towards other crucial definitions regarding women’s humans rights, there including the acknowledgment that sexuality and reproduction are domains to which human rights can and should be applied. Within that abortion became a global policy issue (even if this was achieved through a public health frame). This is not trivial as sexuality and reproduction are the domains in which women’s agency is constantly and everywhere constrained. Much was at play that can explain these achievements. One important factor was the global tragedy of HIV-AIDs that placed sexuality and gender power at the centre of policy debates. But this would have never happened, if it was not for women’s – and other actors – political agency. Particularly in relation to sexuality one important aspect to be underlined is that the discourse is moving away from health and violence rationales to a perspective of non –discrimination and agency. To understand what this means for potential, prospective re-construction of social contracts, suffice to remind that abortion and homosexuality belong to criminal codes and not civil legal statutes. In addition, if a transformed social contract must provide sustainability for social reproduction and resolve its gender unbalances it is not possible to move into that direction without principles of sexual and reproductive rights. Last but not least, human rights in the domain of sexuality also imply the deconstruction of normative heterosexuality, which is as we known, one pillar of gender based power.

It is not therefore surprising that since ever these dimensions have been terrains of political struggle at the UN level. Between Cairo in 1994, and Johannesburg, a month ago, these “novel rights” also became a battle ground. Since the mid-1980's, DAWN's called attention to the resurgence of fundamentalisms world wide and to the fact that transformed women's role was becoming a target for these forces. But in the 1990's and 200's these forces became really virulent. In global arenas this virulence can be interpreted as a response to “our agency”. At

the ground level, the growth and violence of these forces are also directly related to the outcomes of market oriented globalisation. And at this new stage, we have faced the paradox of watching fundamentalist governments position themselves against globalisation, while at the same time, they do their best to refuse and attack women's human rights. This is another critical linkage between economic and gender (erotic justice) justice, which is not understood by other progressive forces (with which we are engaged in our struggle against globalisation as it is).

In 2001, as we know, the Bush administration entered this scene. Even before refusing to ratify the Kyoto protocol it issued the gag rule - that restrict funds for NGOs that include abortion in their program agenda. This was followed by US policy proposals and funds for the promotion of abstinence; by the exclusion of Cairo- Beijing targets in regard to sexual and reproductive rights from the UN MDG agenda (under US pressure); and the systematic blocking of related language in UN documents (not to mention, after Sep. 11th the direct attacks on some basic human rights principles, in the name of the war against terrorism).

During this last year, in many occasions days I did feel myself as if I was facing a reality that had, somehow, directly escaped from a 1970's feminist text book: a male dominated capitalist empire, motivated by greed that is battling the drums of war and lambasting women's agency in sexuality and reproduction. One advantage of applying a decentred and combined feminist frame of analyses and action is that it complexifies this picture and help us to overcome the paralysis that arises from it. Through a decentred lens we can see that it is urgent to openly name, face and direct confront this terrifying geopolitical reality, while at the same the same time it is necessary to identify sites from where this reality is being or can be countervailed.

This means, identifying disjunctures and paradoxes not merely as an analytical exercise - but to find paths that can enable us to move strategically from one place to another, in order to act, or simply regain forces. Just to illustrate I would like to list few positive disjunctures at play at this particularly distressing time. I do think for instance , that the suspension of Saffyia Husseini death penalty in Nigeria , in March this year, should not be minimized. We do know that it is not enough to have one, two, three highly visible global women's human rights cases. But it is important to acknowledge that the effectiveness of that campaign has been a major gain in times in which human rights are being directly attacked. Let's also remind that Saffyia's was a "sex crime".

The security primacy that prevails since September 11th , 2001 is being used in many settings to justify the chasing of sexual dissidents, and even hate crimes. But more than ever these trends are being globally denounced. Most principally, at the ground level, North and South of the Equator, struggles to frame sexuality related rights as positive rights have not lost energy. In Latin America, for instance, in addition to the recently Campaign launched by CLADEM for a Convention on Sexual and Reproductive Rights, at least in four countries legal

provisions are being debated with respect to same sex marriages. This includes Colombia and Argentina, despite the deep economic and political crisis affecting the two countries.

But other strategic sites are to be looked systematically. One of them is American domestic politics and civil society dynamics, as it will determine the geo-political conditions under which global feminist global politics will play out in the years to come. At micro level we must understand more precisely the variety of negative impacts of untransformed social contracts on women's lives and well being. In DAWN's view one clear example is abortion related mortality that kills women of all ages, races and religious faiths across the globe.

This de-centered and flexible frame is vital to sustain our vision and agenda in all areas But is particularly critical in regard to sexuality and reproduction, which at the same time belong to the daily endeavours of women's agency and has become a core issue in global politics. This de-centered frame is not a blind drifting from here to there looking for positive signs that would appease our anxieties. It is an exigent and permanent exercise of strategic re-positioning , which requires both political clarity and sharp principles to guide our agenda. Looking forward, in DAWN's view, new research and a new thinking is required on the relationship between gender, sexuality, human rights, development and environment to consistently advance the transformation of existing social contracts.

The "new social contract " we envisage can not be bound by the nation-state frame and must be able protect social reproduction. For that to happen it is necessary to fully acknowledge that the care-reproductive economy is based on unequal gender relations and division of labor -- asymmetries in voice, access to resources, rights and responsibilities -- that are socially constructed and grounded in normative frames and social practices. Within that it is critical to understand that the social construction of sexuality (and heterosexuality) is one structural element of existing gender contracts that determine social reproduction regimes. Last but not least, a social contract that is able to safeguard social (and environmental) reproduction, must include a precautionary principle applied to the most diverse areas of governance, including health sector reforms and legal frames. This means that in relation to all areas of policy making and legal formulation the question must be systematically raised if is what is being decided and implemented will or not do harm to women's agency in all dimensions of their lives.