Global Women’s Movements at a Crossroads: Seeking Definition, New Alliances and Greater Impact

Author: Carol Barton

In a circle under the trees at the dismantled women’s tent at the close of the January 2003 World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, some 30 feminist leaders representing regional and international networks from around the world gathered to evaluate their impact on that global gathering of activists. In 2003, Latin American feminists, who have been outspoken voices on the WSF International Committee, assumed responsibility for the planning of key plenaries at the WSF only to discover that these events were physically marginalized while attention turned to big-name speakers. Meanwhile, smaller workshops organized by women were sparsely attended. Women working primarily in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) discussed whether a stronger presence of Left political party influence in the WSF (parties that are notoriously sexist) was a dangerous or a strategically necessary thing. In the closing WSF press conference, a male WSF leader had acknowledged that integration of a feminist agenda in the WSF was one of the critical issues yet to be addressed, but also challenged feminists to be more responsive to the realities of indigenous, African descent and other marginalized women who are present in large numbers at the WSF, but not often part of feminist organizations. In the small women’s meeting some saw these remarks as lacking an understanding of feminist agenda and practice, while others quietly acknowledged the depth of class and race divides in feminist movements.

In a taped speech to the 10,000 peasants organized through Via Campesina who marched on the WTO meeting in Cancún, Mexico in September 2003, Zapatista Commander Esther clearly linked the struggle of women as peasants and workers to the issues they face as women. “The struggle against neoliberalism humiliates us, exploits us, and wants to wipe us out as indigenous women, as peasant women, as women. We also want to say to the men that you must respect our rights as women. Because many times the mistreatment we receive as women isn’t only coming from the rich exploiters. It also comes from men who are poor like us. We call on women from the cities to organize to struggle together with us. Those who are factory workers, domestic workers, teachers, secretaries. aren’t paid a fair wage. many young women workers are harassed and raped. This is why we invite you, sisters, indigenous women, peasant and urban women, to organize and join in the struggle together. Since we all suffer humiliation both by the rich and by our men, together we will demand that they respect us as women.”
These two episodes underscore some of the challenges facing global women’s movements struggling for gender justice and for economic justice. With their colleagues in other social movements, feminists must respond to urgent current realities: neo-liberal globalization, religious and ethnic fundamentalisms, militarism, the US interventionist “war on terrorism” in the name of security, and the decline in multilateralism as the US takes a unilateral approach and inter-imperialist rivalry intensifies. As feminists struggle to defend women’s rights in this context, they debate how to be part of a dynamic global justice movement and still maintain a powerful, distinctive voice. Feminists have been successful in building organizations and broad movements in recent decades, and in having many of their demands recognized (at least on paper) at the global level. At the same time, they confront many challenges, including:

– The larger political/economic forces, particularly neo-liberal globalization and the rise of religious fundamentalisms;

– Debates within women’s movements on the nature of the feminist political project, strategies and arenas for action.

– How feminists can claim space within social movements and the global justice movement while keeping a clear feminist agenda and integrating feminist analysis into those broader struggles;

– The challenges of cooptation and the diluting of political change agendas;

– The need to bridge gaps between concerns about women’s right to control their bodies and their autonomy, and women’s economic justice struggles;

– How to address the multiple oppressions women experience, including class, race, ethnicity, caste, sexual orientation, national origin, citizenship status, colonialism, region, religion, age, and marital status;

– How to strengthen local women’s struggles while continuing to have a global impact.

This article gives an overview of global women’s movements at the regional and international level, focused on global international fora, while recognizing that the success of work at the international level is measured by its impact on the lives of women at the local level. It explores responses to the current global political-economic challenges, as well as to specific problems within these international networks. I write this not as observer but as an activist fully engaged in these movements, and I recognize the limitations as well as the benefits of an insider’s vantage point. I seek to pose questions and dilemmas, observe trends and point to some
directions, without pretending to have answers for this “crossroad.” The analysis offered here reflects an internal critique, towards my own organization and that of colleagues, in a constructive effort towards more effective political work. We are not immune to the contradictions of the moment.

**The Women’s International Coalition for Economic Justice** observes:

Women are being hemmed in by two forces: One is the push for a corporate-led globalization with a “fundamentalist” notion that there is only one economic model for the world, that of the “free market” and trade liberalization. The other is that of religious and ethnic fundamentalism, aggravated in part from the dislocation caused by neo-liberalism. Both of these forces are devastating to women, who suffer both the loss of livelihoods and economic security, and the efforts to reassert control over their life choices and their bodies. Both internationally and nationally, these forces are pushing hard to dismantle women’s hard-won rights to define a sexual rights and reproductive agenda, to express their sexual and reproductive rights, and to have access to resources that assure life choices leading to reproductive health and well-being.

Much has been said about the current model of neo-liberal globalization, and its differential impacts on women. The past 20 years have seen an intensification of economic re-colonization, first within the framework of multilateralism led by G-8 countries and their corporate interests, and now under the Bush Administration with a decidedly unilateral bent. Walden Bello of the Bangkok-based *Focus on the Global South* points to a crisis of legitimacy in the current system. The rhetoric that twenty years of “economic reforms” and liberalization would reap growth and “development” has failed miserably, leaving crises such as that of Argentina in its wake. The debacle of Enron and many other US corporations showed the weakness of US capital, faced with a crisis of over-capacity and declining profits which led to mergers, and then creative book-keeping. It also highlighted the vast dangers of de-regulation and privatization of energy and other sectors. In response to growing unrest, seen both in religious fundamentalism and in a burgeoning global justice movement, the US and its allies have stepped up repression and undermined liberal democracy under the rubric of a global war on terrorism (often alleging that activists are terrorists). At the same time, the war in Iraq and US military presence in the Philippines, Colombia, the Middle East and multiple smaller fronts, represent a challenge to national autonomy, a challenge to imperialist rivals, and the overt grab of a cocky empire.

One reaction to intensified globalization is religious fundamentalism, growing in strength in Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism. In the global South, the loss of peasant land, credit and price supports in the rural areas, and the loss of urban jobs, social services and markets for informal entrepreneurs have arrived in the package of Western culture and political/military imposition. This has robbed people simultaneously of livelihoods, cultural anchors and dignity.
In response, religious fundamentalisms offer political, economic and cultural/ideological alternatives to people cut from their moorings. Not only are many religious groups challenging Western domination and military intervention; they are also providing the critical social infrastructure to meet basic needs, filling the gaps left by the diminished state. From the Hindu BJP in India to the Christian evangelicals in Brazil, Cuba or US neighborhoods, to the Muslim brotherhoods in Gaza or Egypt, these are the groups reaching out to poor people and meeting their immediate needs. They seek to restore a sense of dignity, albeit through an often rabid cultural, religious or ethnic nationalism that vilifies an “other,” particularly through its women. While some of these movements (radical Islam, for example) pose a strong critique of globalization—which threatens their political, economic and cultural control—they are also anti-women in practice, and mobilize around the control of women’s lives and the abuse of the “other’s” women. In the US case, Christian fundamentalists, a strong force behind the Bush Administration, have had a heavy hand in the globalizing project. They are shaping US foreign policy using literalist Biblical interpretations to justify the occupation of Palestine and support the Iraq war, while seeking to rewrite two decades of legislation for women’s equality and reproductive rights in the US. They vilify Muslim immigrants as well as poor welfare moms and gay or lesbian couples as the “other.” Their support similarly comes from people’s sense of economic insecurity as gaps between rich and poor in the US grow, feeding a right-wing racist and xenophobic agenda which also seeks to control women’s lives.

Fundamentalism thrives as a fearful response to the fallout from rampant global capitalism and the chaos of the current crisis. Notes Bello, “Today, corporate-driven globalization is creating much of the same instability, resentment and crisis that served as the breeding ground of fascist, fanatical and authoritarian populist forces (in the 1930s).” The global justice movement and thousands of national and local movements, as well as the massive global anti-war mobilization in early 2003, represent a more positive form of resistance and a critical counter-force. However, as opposed to the Right, these movements have not linked a political program with organized social services and cultural meaning, to respond to people’s physical, cultural and political needs simultaneously. The Left demands that the State deliver services and redistribute resources; it critiques the type of social service delivery that isapolitical and demobilizing, and opposes the privatization of service delivery (whether through the private sector or through NGOs). It is awkward, then, that religious fundamentalist movements have coupled service delivery with political and ideological mobilization to such powerful ends. It is a challenge to our own thinking and practices.

Central to feminism is the challenge to patriarchy. Patriarchy is understood as a socially constructed system controlled by and benefiting men, through the political, economic and ideological institutions of society. Some of the central divisions within feminist movements are between those focused specifically on patriarchy and those who view women’s oppression as
inseparable from broader societal transformation. The women’s movements have also had intense debates about the vast differences in women’s lived experience due to multiple oppressions, and about concerns as to which “movement” speaks for which “women.” Given power relations at the global and national levels, the women in the dominant groups have often come to embody the definition of “woman” and to define the agenda for change to the exclusion of other women. We particularly note these dynamics between women of the economic North and South, between “white” women and racialized women, between women of different classes in both South and North, and increasingly between women of different religious and ethnic groups.

There are still strong elements of essentialism in some feminist arenas, imagining “woman” and assigning her inherent attributes. This emerged again in anti-war mobilizations in 2003, when some women’s groups took up banners of “women for peace” or “mothers for peace.” Comments Katha Pollitt in The Nation: “For progressive women, in 2003, to fall back on the ideology of woman-as-peaceful-outsider rings as false as Phyllis Schlafly pretending to be a housewife.” This strategy says “men are violent and women are peaceful, men love guns and women love children, and propose[s] that men messed up the world and women can fix it. The positive aspect of this vision is that it gives disregarded and disrespected ordinary women a platform-as-mothers and homemakers-from which to demand attention as significant social actors; the downside is that it valorizes that very powerlessness.”

Despite the recognition of the very different roles men are assigned in society given different race, class or national origin, there are still some who would see men as the enemy. Others, like Comandante Esther, view women’s struggles as part of a common project for radical change, yet challenge patriarchy within that struggle as well as within the larger system.

At the global level, women’s organizing that was galvanized by the 1975-85 decade for women began to shape a holistic agenda at the Nairobi Third World Conference on Women (1985), particularly with the DAWN manifesto that addressed a “crisis in people’s capacity to survive generated by the structures and effects of an economic system (capitalism) enforced by male-defined political and military power (patriarchy).” This was strengthened by the UN Beijing Platform for Action of 1995, which explores multiple issues “through women’s eyes.” However, despite these advances, global women’s organizing has continued to function with a significant divide between those working on issues of violence, reproductive and sexual rights, and legal equality for women, and those focused on economic issues. Yet success depends on the linkage of the two areas of rights. Comments Sunila Abeyesekera of Inform, Sri Lanka, “women’s capacity to enjoy economic and social rights is often constrained by economic dependence and social attitudes that affirm her secondary and subordinate status in society. The right to be
treated on an equal basis with men when it comes to domestic and family matters is essential for women’s economic and social freedom.”

On the economic front, things are further complicated by the fact that much of the discourse and activity in recent decades has been shaped within the context of “development” study and practice—within the governmental and inter-governmental arena, development agencies, and NGOs that deliver services and shape mainstream policy. A succession of approaches within this field, from Women in Development to Gender and Development, has addressed the unequal impacts of policies on women, and called for more resources to women.

The development debates of the past 30 years, particularly in the UN, are a reflection of the broader power relations between the central powers and those nations emerging from colonialism. While the North-South struggle is overt in the international arena, much of the work of “development” on the ground obscures these power relationships, especially in the case of development aid channeled through NGOs. Thus, a good deal of the work in the field of “Women in Development,” now called “Gender and Development” has been an effort to integrate women into an unequal and detrimental development model.

Women’s groups in the economic South, as well as such groups as Alternative- Women in Development in the North, have been strong in their critique of this approach. In claiming a more radical approach to Gender & Development, Maria Riley states that GAD “identifies unequal power relations between women and men; reexamines all social, political and economic structures from the perspective of the gender differentials; and recognizes that achieving gender equality and equity will demand ‘transformative change.’”

Feminists also seek to bring their agenda into the global justice movement. Many colleagues in social change movements tend to see their political project as only about addressing the external oppressors while minimizing the need to address women’s concerns. Commented the DAWN movement, in a statement to the second World Social Forum in 2002:

It is never a simple task for feminists to engage with and attempt to transform the perspective of progressive social and political movements such as those strongly represented in WSF. In doing so we often find ourselves being responded to through tokenism and vague or rhetorical commitments to gender, while at the same time being marginalized and criticized from all sides: by progressive men and women who do not have a feminist perspective; by feminists who find it futile to engage with males in male-dominated spaces and are critical of feminists who do so; and even by some grassroots women leaders of social movements who have essentially mobilized themselves on the basis of motherhood and the political virtue of women’s values.
Feminists are concerned that patriarchy cannot be a mere add-on for the global justice movement. It is a central element in the functioning of the current system in the economic, social, political, military and cultural spheres, and thus analysis and movements for social change cannot succeed without incorporating an explicit critique of patriarchy. This is becoming all the more apparent as fundamentalisms grow, gaining mass social followings and political power in part through increased control over women’s lives. The objectification of women and reassertion of control over their bodies, from Gujarat to Washington, DC, as well as the Bush Administration’s justification of intervention in the name of “women’s rights,” reveal the centrality of patriarchy in the current conjuncture.

By addressing the power relations between men and women embedded in societal institutions, feminism necessarily addresses the very nature of those institutions, and seeks to transform them to bring justice for both men and women. However, in reality, many of the pieces of this project get compartmentalized. Women’s movements for rights encompass many fronts. Many women enter “women’s movements” to increase choices and control over their lives, or for economic reasons, without a critique of patriarchy or an identification with feminism. Women’s organizing cuts across all sectors, identities and issues, and is embedded in different political projects. This all tends to come under the heading of global women’s movements. Many of these groups, issues, identities and projects have converged in global arenas such as UN women’s conferences, all seeking “women’s rights” and “gender equity,” making for a sometimes fuzzy scenario.

In the post cold-war era, much organizing at the global level has moved into the NGO arena. This has shifted the ground from mass-based organizing by trade unions, peasant movements and left political parties-weakened by the rise of neo-liberalism and the collapse of the USSR. NGOs play an important role, and in themselves are not good or bad. It’s a question of how they ally themselves with social movements and a broader Left and feminist project. Yet, the realities of funding, coupled with neo-liberalism’s push to shift state functions to the private sector, have meant the de-radicalization, professionalization and potential co-optation of many groups.

NGOs range in size from tiny volunteer entities to multi-million dollar organizations, and in politics from radical social change groups to fronts for transnational corporations. While a large number of NGOs primarily channel public and private donor dollars to social service projects, a sub-set use the NGO institutional structure to pursue a more radical social change agenda, including efforts to strengthen mass-based social movements.

A series of UN conferences from 1992-2002 on issues of Environment, Social Development, Human Rights, Women, Racism, Population and Development, Habitat, and Development Financing became the focus of organizing for activists around the world. UN conferences on
women since 1975 have helped not only to shape a common set of demands on States regarding women’s equality, but also to galvanize women’s activism at all levels—with some 40,000 women present at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China (1995). Women also emerged as strong voices in the other UN conferences. This series of UN conferences provided the focus, momentum and funding resources that enabled the creation of networks and infrastructure for global women’s movements on multiple issues. They particularly strengthened NGOs, which are the formal vehicles for civil society representation at the UN.

Activities at these global conferences have largely been coordinated through national and international NGOs and trade union leadership, with limited participation from grassroots women and a limited impact on grassroots women’s lives. Vanessa Griffen of the Gender & Development Programme, Asian and Pacific Development Centre, Malaysia argues that women’s successes at the international level, for example in addressing violence against women, have not begun to change the deep patterns of patriarchal oppression for women at the local level. I would not minimize gains at the global level. Nonetheless, I concur with Griffen’s assessment that the power to demand implementation must be grounded in strengthened mobilization of women with a feminist and class consciousness at the local level, not limited to NGOs or to global work. This is what makes the perspective of Comandante Esther so interesting—such mobilization is happening, often unbeknownst to global feminists.

MADRE, a US-based women’s human rights organization, notes that there is no longer a possibility of choosing between local and global work:

Women from the global South argue that when local conditions are so heavily impacted by global trends, community-based activists must be equipped to understand and impact developments in the international arena. Community-based projects must include components that provide training to enable women to influence macro policies. Otherwise local work remains a limited and, ultimately, exhausting venture for women. That’s why MADRE brings the voices of community-based women into international processes and insists that the women’s movement devote resources to guarantee that the international arena is not dominated by elites. We also believe that international work that is not rooted in community priorities risks becoming abstract and irrelevant to most women. Ultimately, policies at the local, national and international levels must function together to protect women’s human rights.

The emergence of a “global justice” movement, particularly since the Seattle WTO ministerial in 1999, brings together progressive NGOs, trade unions, peasant and other mass-based social movements (such as landless workers), and left political parties. This is what’s occurring in the World Social Forum, (as well as the WTO, G-8, IMF and World Bank meetings). These world forums are fraught with political tensions. For many social movement groups, NGOs are too
dependent on government and private funding, are not accountable to a base, do not utilize
democratic decision-making structures, do not represent poor masses, are elitist and too
reformist. For many NGOs, some trade unions and certain Left parties are seen as dinosaurs
that have democracy and representation in name only, are rigidly hierarchical, dogmatic and
manipulative. This divide involves class and other power dynamics, different political agendas,
as well as views on “insider” vs. “outsider” strategies.

However, the divisions can also be a source of strength. As was evidenced at the Fifth Ministerial
of the WTO in Cancún, Mexico in September 2003, many NGOs and “social movements” played
both roles to great effect—putting mass pressure through street demon- strations on the outside,
while presenting specific demands to negotiators on the inside. Despite the military barricades
separating these two groups, the divide is not as vast as it appears. The victory that people’s
movements celebrated in Cancún, when several southern countries walked out of negotiations,
derailing US-EU attempts to impose more unbalanced rules, was in no small part due to the
strength of these inside and outside voices (both NGOs and social movements), including over
10,000 peasant farmers, and months of intense pressure at the national level.

Feminists bring their own critique to the role of NGOs and political parties in today’s
movements for social change—particularly the general lack of a feminist analysis by players in
both spaces. Much current feminist organizing is also done through NGOs. Some leaders of
women’s NGOs emerged from left political parties in the 1970s, fed up with the double
standards and sexism within those parties. This created a group of women leaders who have
radical politics, but are dubious of left parties. While many women are organized through trade
unions, peasant and indigenous groups, these women are woefully under-represented in
international women’s events. They often don’t embrace feminism and may see feminist issues
as alien to their struggles. At the World Social Forum, women trade unionists, women peasants,
and “feminists” have each attended their own events with little dialogue across sectors.
However, in Cancún, some women valiantly maneuvered around security blocks to maintain
contact between “women’s caucuses” on both sides of this physical, class and political divide,
involving indigenous Mexican women from Via Campesina in the conversations with NGO
women trade experts."

In a time of strengthened global capitalism and a weakened Left, there are fewer groups that
directly cite the seizing of state power as their political goal. Some, like the Workers’ Party (PT)
of Brazil or the Movement towards Socialism (MAS) of Bolivia, have linked union and mass-
mobilization to an electoral agenda. Others, such as the Zapatistas in Mexico, appear to be
mobilizing to seek concrete gains for indigenous peasants faced with the onslaught of trade
liberalization, but not seeking to gain control of the State. Many of the players in the “global
justice movement” represent social movements focused on specific demands regarding land,
markets, environmental degradation, privatization of basic services, jobs and livelihoods—
efforts to push back the onslaught of capital-without a broader political project. In an age when
considerable power is concentrated in transnational capital, whose interests are represented by
the IMF, World Bank and World Trade Organization, it is increasingly difficult to contemplate
national alternatives (via either elections or revolution) apart from broader regional or global
challenges to capital. Some theorists ask whether there is an “outside” to global capitalism at
this point. This poses the question of what it would take to get “outside” this dominant global
system, or indeed, whether that is possible. Brazil seeks to assuage the fears of investors and
creditors, while mobilizing a Southern bloc in an attempt to shift North/South power relations.
Cuba, Vietnam and China, to different degrees, are integrating into the global capitalist
economy. Nicaragua, with the highest per capita debt in the world, is fully back in the neo-
liberal fold.

The political goal may not be clear to many of us at this time, while it is perhaps too adamantly
clear to some political groups. This makes gatherings such as the World Social Forum, or broad
feminist coalitions, very complex arenas, where the electoral left, revolutionaries, anarchists,
issue-based NGOs, social movements seeking short-term demands, and identity-based groups
(as well as mainstream development agencies and even the Vatican) all converge to propose
alternatives.

In dialogues I recently had with three observers of Latin American struggles, I got very different
responses regarding our political goals. Commented one US observer who has been closely
involved in both Cuba and Nicaragua, “If we’re not ultimately dealing with taking state power,
what are we doing?” Yet from the perspective of an Indian colleague who lived in Nicaragua
during the revolution, many leftists in small, poor nations of the South do not see taking state
power as a goal at this time. In recent years this approach has resulted in imperialist “contra
wars” and the violent undermining of the project, where thousands of people are massacred.
Said a third person, active in the Coca and Water-privatization battles in Cochabamba that just
culminated in ejecting the president of Bolivia (October 2003): “despite the sacrifices, if we
don’t struggle we don’t survive—we have no choice.” For her, it’s not a question of whether or not
to challenge state power, but when and at what relative cost.

Feminists struggle with this question through the additional lens of patriarchy. They
simultaneously criticize the state as enforcer of patriarchal relations, and make claims upon the
state to deliver women’s rights and broader societal demands. Feminists have bitter experience
with so-called socialist states (or left political parties) which replicated patriarchal relations, but
they continue to see the role of a transformed, egalitarian State as a vital arbiter of societal needs
and rights.
The short-term task, in many styles and approaches, is building mass power to contest the imposition of terms by capital (at national, regional and international levels), through organizations that can negotiate alternatives with the State that go beyond the rejectionist positions taken by some street activists. Be they political parties or social movements, these groups must have mass accountability and clear alternatives for progressive social change. They must also address patriarchal relations within their ranks as well as in State and society. Without this leadership, the lurch towards religious fundamentalisms may only intensify.

Both the Zapatistas and the Workers’ Party are interesting examples in this regard. In Mexico, the Zapatistas, an indigenous peasant movement, are challenging the state’s ability to impose a particular political and economic agenda; they are organizing and educating masses of peasants, negotiating with the government, and even, among a few leaders, bringing in a feminist agenda! And despite the limitations global capital imposes on Brazil, Lula’s Workers’ Party played a leading role in organizing Southern nations to challenge the US and EU at the Cancún WTO meeting, and seeks to build a Latin American trade bloc to challenge US dominance of regional trade negotiations (Free Trade of the Americas Agreement).

While organizing continues at the national level to contest state actions on behalf of capital, mobilizations of the “global justice movement” have served to challenge the legitimacy of global capitalist institutions (IMF, World Bank, WTO, Davos, G-8). This is necessary when national victories can be blind-sided by transnational capital and their political interlocutors. The dance between challenging national capital in Southern nations, and taking nationalist stances against the onslaught of imperialism is a complex one-at times leading to strange bedfellows.

The World Social Forum seeks to create a space for building alternative strategies. It remains a critical question how NGOs, who have taken leadership in creating that forum, might challenge the worst practices of the “old left”-particularly around issues of gender, race and participatory democracy-while becoming grounded in the mass-based social movements that have the potential to contest for power.

The additional challenge for feminists is how to integrate an analysis of patriarchy into the critique of neo-liberal globalization. At the first World Social Forum in 2001, feminists issued a statement calling on WSF organizers to “practice the democratic principle of gender and regional balance” in leadership structures. In a call to colleagues at the second WSF (2002), DAWN, which sits on the WSF International Committee, stated, “Since the mid-1980s we have been wrestling with problems arising from the interconnectedness of globalization and fundamentalism and their detrimental effects on women’s lives, rights, agency and freedom.. The World Social Forum may lose its meaning, political grip and vitality—as a radically democratic global civil society space—if it does not directly face and process the multilayered
paradoxes of forces impacting women in all regions.” Women’s concerns are still mostly considered an “add-on” for the “guys” in leadership of the WSF. While there is a small group of feminist organizations on the WSF International Council, and more on the local organizing committees, other groups have sent few women representatives, and fewer feminists, to represent them. However as the WSF now shifts to Asia for the first time, Indian feminists have made considerable strides in integrating a critique of patriarchy into some of the major events of the 2004 WSF and balancing women’s and men’s leadership in these events. They are building on three years of groundwork laid by their Latin American sisters.

2003 marked the ten-year anniversary of the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna. That was a landmark event for global women’s movements, as the idea that *women’s rights are human rights* was codified in an international agreement. Human rights-as embodied in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in Covenants (treaties) on both Political and Civil Rights as well as Economic, Social and Cultural Rights-are seen to encompass both political and economic rights. However, this international law was a victim of the cold war, where the West prioritized the former, and the East prioritized the latter."

Despite an affirmation of the indivisibility of all human rights, in its early stages (1993) the women’s human rights movement placed emphasis on issues of violence against women, reproductive rights, sexual rights, and bodily integrity-”gender justice.” This is because many feminists see issues of violence against women and women’s control over their bodies as the primordial issues on the feminist agenda. As Bina Srinivasan notes, these are the issues other movements consistently fail to address. While feminists who focus on violence also address the importance of global economic issues in women’s lives, they have tended to underplay this agenda, just as women in economic development work have until recently downplayed sexual and reproductive rights, and ignored a human rights framework.

The Beijing Platform for Action (1995), became the central organizing program for women around the world over the past decade. It was a significant achievement for global women’s movements but also has its limitations. It is strong on issues of violence, bodily integrity, and equal access to resources, as well as micro-responses to women’s poverty in an era of globalization. It is weak in addressing the multiple oppressions diverse women face, and in addressing systemic causes of women’s poverty—particularly the neo-liberal corporate agenda. This is not surprising, given the power of the G-8 in UN deliberations. In official reviews in 2000 and 2005, women activists are placed in the awkward position of holding the line against rightwing attacks that would undermine the Platform, while wishing to make it more far-reaching. The consensus has been to keep it a closed document to avoid setbacks.
In Beijing, the differential emphasis on issues around violence and macro-economic issues among feminists was deepened by the energetic initiatives of the Clinton White House (with Hillary as the leading “feminist”) and European women elected officials who championed anti-violence struggles and micro-enterprise, while keeping the focus away from G-8 imperialism. Many women’s groups, particularly but not exclusively from the Global North, enthusiastically embraced this narrowed agenda.

Gita Sen and Sonia Correa note that this dichotomy within governments and women’s NGOs reflects a real confusion of agendas by women themselves. In the 1980s and 1990s women entered labor markets in great numbers. Sometimes they gained more autonomy in the home and community as a result, and sometimes they lost autonomy, with greater work burdens and workplace controls. Sen and Correa observe:

These contradictions mean that women’s struggles for greater personal autonomy may not mesh simply or easily with their concerns and demands for a more just and equal economic order. The irony for women is that, on the one hand, the supporters and promoters of a globalized world economy are often also the ones who support the breaking of traditional patriarchal orders. On the other hand, some of those who oppose globalization do so in the name of values and control systems that strongly oppress women.

The impact of the neo-liberal agenda in the ’80s and ’90s had deepened the North-South divide and weakened the bargaining position of the global South. “In this climate moral conservative groups that oppose an agenda for women’s rights have systematically attempted to emerge as champions of the South,” including the Vatican and a small group of Southern nations. This has created a sharp divide in UN negotiations between Northern nations arguing for a certain limited definition of “women’s rights” while strengthening the neo-liberal stranglehold on the South, and some Southern nations undermining those “women’s rights” while leading the battle against Northern economic control. Women’s rights were again obscured in this battle.

Sen and Correa say that feminists of North and South attempted to bridge the divide between gender justice and economic justice at these UN conferences. While some did, including WICEJ, many others were easily boxed into different tracks, as well as divergences between North and South. Unfortunately, too many women’s NGOs with a focus solely on “gender justice” allied with US and EU governments on this agenda, obscuring the broader economic issues that also undermine women’s rights, and the complex dynamics at work.

There are encouraging signs that these two organized elements of the feminist agenda are coming together, both analytically and in activism. As US imperialism intensifies, and as the Washington Consensus begins to show some cracks, feminist activists are developing a more
integrated analysis. This analysis links the neo-liberal agenda, the rise of religious fundamentalisms, the intensification of civil wars and religions/ethnic communal violence, the rise of militarism and decline of democratic space, to both patriarchal social structures and the current crisis of global capitalism. 

Signs of integrated analysis and action include: the emergence of the “Campaign Against Fundamentalisms” launched at the 2002 World Social Forum by the Feminist Marcosur Coalition, a network of Latin American Southern Cone feminist organizations. With giant lips to “open your mouth against fundamentalisms,” hot air balloons, stilt-walkers, dancers and drummers, as well as testimonials from around the world, the on-going campaign links the “fundamentalism” of neo-liberal dogma to religious fundamentalisms, in their undermining of women’s rights.

In 2003 this campaign broadened into an international coalition, including such groups as Women Living Under Muslim Law, Association for Women’s Rights in Development/AWID, the Center for Women’s Global Leadership, DAWN and WICEJ.

Women involved in planning for the 2004 World Social Forum are shaping panels that will integrate sexual and reproductive rights with economic rights in a critique of neo-liberalism and fundamentalisms, and planning a feminist strategy meeting to better integrate these themes and coordinate action.

The Women’s International Coalition for Economic Justice, which emerged during the UN five-year review of Beijing, also connects groups in the “women’s human rights” community and in the “gender & development” community, as well as racial justice and immigrant rights activists. This has strengthened a trend towards reclaiming economic rights as part of the women’s human rights agenda, with demands for jobs, food, housing, water and basic services as part of women’s rights, and an understanding of systemic economic violence as one aspect of violence against women. WICEJ, collaborating with other feminist groups in the World Social Forum and the Campaign Against Fundamentalisms, is increasingly linking analysis of neo-liberal globalization with fundamentalisms, militarism and patriarchy.

In 2001 the Association for Women in Development formally changed its name to Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID). Originally a trade association for development professionals, AWID was transformed into a gathering place for global women’s movements and their ideas and has worked to integrate a rights perspective into the feminist development agenda. Their Forum of some 2000 women, Women Reinventing Globalisation, in Guadalajara, Mexico in October 2002, brought together these many streams of global feminisms under one roof for debate and analysis. Two speakers dubbed Forum participants the “Guadalajara Woman,” in response to the “Davos Man,” with a “complex identity and activist agenda,” who “struggles for institutional accountability and demands gender, racial and class justice from the...
state,” while “building alliances with a broad cross-section of social justice advocates” in the global justice movement.

There is a new interest among women’s groups in the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) and the UN Committee on Economic and Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) as potential vehicles for enhancing economic rights and challenging the Washington Consensus. Under Mary Robinson, former PM of Ireland, the UNCHR established working groups to assess the human rights implications of globalization and structural adjustment as well as WTO policies. In 2003 the Committee on ESCR affirmed the right to water, in direct challenge to the rampant privatization of water systems around the globe pushed by the IMF and World Bank. As mass-based struggles against the privatization of basic resources grow in places like Bolivia, Ghana and South Africa, often under the leadership of women, some of these movements are increasingly interested using the UN system to challenge the WTO and Bretton Woods institutions, as well as private companies. The International Network for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, a new grouping, had its founding meeting in Thailand in June 2003, and an active women’s caucus was part of that event.

Women are mobilizing in all regions to challenge the backlash of the religious right, in UN regional ten-year reviews of the Cairo conference on Population and Development (1994) and the Beijing Platform for Action (1995). In doing so, they are linking reproductive health issues with economic justice concerns and a political assessment of the current moment. Even those groups which have reduced their role in the UN see these regional events as a critical battleground for global feminism.

The deepening impact of neo-liberalism on women’s lives called forth multiple responses-some within a development approach, and some with demands for redistributive economic justice. Responses included:

- survival strategies, which were then touted as anti-poverty strategies;

- survival strategies combined with political organizing;

- grassroots women’s organized strategies to defend their livelihoods;

- NGO solidarity, education and advocacy to document these impacts and demand accountability from the state and private sector; and

- academic responses in the form of feminist economic theory.
The imposition of World Bank/IMF Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) on poor nations of the Global South beginning in the 1980s was one important catalyst for both local and international women’s organizing in this arena. SAPs turned national economies into debt-servicing machines, laying the groundwork for their re-colonization. It became clear to women activists that the burden of SAPs was being borne disproportionately by women, as they substituted their own reproductive labor for diminished social services; lost service sector jobs; became the breadwinners in the informal economy; or moved into the new export processing zones as cheap labor. This process was repeated in the wholesale privatization of Eastern and Central Europe.

As the neo-liberal ideology increased its stranglehold on national economies, grassroots women activists began to organize as maquiladora or sweatshop workers, informal sector workers and community activists, to struggle for rights and, increasingly, to challenge the neoliberal economic model. Many began to apply a feminist critique to economic processes. Some workers organized explicitly as women workers outside of union structures—both because of the danger to unions in maquiladora factories, and because of machismo in the trade unions.

Feminist economists began theorizing about gender and macro-economic policy. A feminist economic analysis explores the multiple roles women play in an economy, in the paid labor force, as the primary caregiver responsible for “social reproduction,” and in the community. Much of this work is unpaid and uncounted in the formal economy, yet necessary for it to function. Women documented the ways that structural adjustment policies utilized women’s paid and unpaid labor to pay debts and restructure economies.

Maria Riley observes that changes in the global economy and the pressures on women’s lives in the 1980s made it clear to some feminists that “programs such as income generation not only did not move women out of poverty, but they often resulted in more work with little reward because the negative impact of macro-economic developments wiped out any advances women were making.” She notes that the WTO came into existence the same year as the Beijing Women’s conference (1995), gradually making economic integration the priority of global capital. Structural Adjustment programs laid the groundwork in Southern economies for the liberalization of trade and investment under WTO rules. The Asian financial crisis of 1997 pointed out the dangers of speculative capital and had devastating effects worldwide.

As Zo Randriamaro notes, gender equality cannot be resolved at the national level alone. It “requires transforming policies and institutions in global economic governance.” She adds that “debate among women’s organizations and activists has been obscured by the overwhelming focus on the impact of neo-liberal policies on women and gender relations, at the expense of a systematic analysis of the structural and inter-related causes of this impact.”
Building on these critiques, women’s economic justice activism has evolved from a focus on the impact of structural adjustment and debt to a challenge to the broader neo-liberal agenda and, as noted above, is now beginning to explore how this meshes with political and ideological forces that undermine women. Those focused on economic justice are challenging the mainstream development paradigm, and efforts at “gender mainstreaming” that would merely integrate women into the neo-liberal model. In the process, groups such as the International Gender & Trade Network have emerged as significant players in advocacy around global trade deals. Likewise, women have been active in the UN Conference on Financing for Development (Monterrey, Mexico 2002) and its follow-up, which addresses debt, trade, aid and global finance. Women endorsed such proposals as debt cancellation, new forms of global economic governance, and a global Currency Transaction Tax (CTT) on speculative capital, destined for sustainable development. Women have begun efforts to engender ATTAC (Association For The Taxation Of Financial Transactions For The Benefit Of The People), an “international movement for democratic control of financial markets and their institutions” which promotes the CTT. This grassroots movement, built from community to community in Western Europe, now plays an important role in World Social Forum organizing.

Observes MADRE:

Women’s organizations have had to fill the role of government in implementing the [Beijing] Platform for Action. These efforts, ranging from health clinics to battered women’s shelters to AIDS education and literacy programs, to income-generating initiatives, nutrition classes and girls’ leadership training, represent the best in the human potential for tenacity, creativity and sheer hard work. These efforts are to be applauded, but they must also be understood as the result of a serious failure of governments to meet their commitments...This failure must be rectified, for NGOs, no matter how competent, are no substitute for responsible government.«

Perhaps the bulk of “women’s organizing” has focused on survival strategies at the grassroots level. Women’s valiant efforts to generate income, particularly in the informal sector, were seized upon by the likes of RESULTS, American Express, Monsanto, government and private donors as a solution to women’s poverty. In the 1990s, dollars poured into efforts to support micro-credit and micro-enterprise schemes-symbolized by the Grameen Bank model in Bangladesh, and endorsed by then First Lady Hillary Clinton as an example for US women who faced the dismantling of welfare under the Clinton Administration.

There are now numerous critiques of these efforts, which were intensely promoted by US corporate interests, the World Bank, and the US government.« The lending schemes served to (a) integrate poor women entrepreneurs into the formal economy and the joys of debt; (b) pump resources to the most local level to ameliorate the impact of structural adjustment policies and
lessen the threat of social rebellion, and (c) turn women’s meager survival strategies into an ideological panacea for entrepreneurship and capitalist economic development.

This relied on the super-exploitation of women’s labor, while taking the focus and the burden off government responsibility or the need for decent jobs with decent wages and benefits. It has intensified as some of these “home workers” now sub-contract to local manufacturers, who produce goods for global corporations. While the limitations of this endeavor are evident to many, self-employment programs continue to be a major focus of “development” funding and of many women’s NGOs. Women’s need for survival locally was enmeshed in a larger political and ideological agenda of both “boot-strapism” and social control. In addition, as economic crisis deepened in many regions the enticement of external resources meshed with the goals of some women’s organizations for women’s “empowerment” and women’s economic autonomy (not to mention resources for the NGOs themselves).

The diversity of women’s organizing strategies—in local communities, women’s NGOs, unions, political parties, universities— with different experiences and political agendas, all under the rubric of “women’s rights” makes for complex dynamics. In an atmosphere of “friendly allies” there has been little desire to articulate political differences. This has led to a lack of political and analytical clarity. This is intensified by the power realities among women’s NGOs, in terms of the defining “voices” of the movements, as well as the funders of the movements. In a politically conservative period, some women’s NGOs dependent on donor dollars may feel constrained in what they can do or say. While some self-censor a radical analysis, others don’t share such an analysis, and are more focused on the pragmatic goal of reforming and ameliorating the impacts of unjust policies. In an effort to find common ground among women’s groups, already fighting an uphill battle against governments, religious institutions, and their own male colleagues on the left, political differences have most often been muted.

This is also complicated by the fact that many women of both South and North have now built professions in the arena of gender and development, women and reproductive rights, or women and violence, in universities, NGOs, government agencies, and multi-lateral institutions. In some regions women have effectively demanded that their governments incorporate gender perspectives into national policy-making, and the Beijing process established national women’s desks. In some cases, women professionals move back and forth between government posts, NGO agencies and multi-lateral institutions. While this can enhance women’s power and effectiveness, it can also compromise political change agendas if accountability is not part of the equation.

The concept of gender mainstreaming began as a victory for women activists. Instead of boxing women into sidelined projects, the concept emerging from Beijing was that gender analysis must
be integrated into all policy and programming in all areas. In practice, this has created a gender industry, and for many governments and UN, IMF or World Bank officials it continues to mean adding “women” to the current neo-liberal policies. It is used as an excuse to cut women-specific programs. In some cases it has led to instrumentalist arguments that women should be considered in the economy in order to enhance growth—not because of basic rights. It has meant involvement of women but limited advances towards gender equality or economic justice.

The agenda has also become blurred for women’s NGO activists as institutions such as the World Bank seek to embrace terms such as gender equity, participatory development and pro-poor policies, and co-opt them. Emerging from an encounter with World Bank president James Wolfensohn in Beijing in 1995, women succeeded in establishing internal gender monitoring mechanisms within the World Bank as well as an external NGO monitoring group. The outcome has been a flurry of studies, new offices and bureaucracies, and new resources to women at the local level (particularly through micro-loans), but negligible change in the macro-economic policies of the World Bank or the borrowing countries.

The gender mainstreaming debate again surfaced regarding women’s strategy at the WTO ministerial in Cancún, 2003. One group of Latin American women proposed creating similar mechanisms for gender monitoring within the WTO, with NGO watchdogs. Other women vociferously opposed this strategy, noting that the WTO was actively courting NGOs to legitimize its role and activities. These women seek to reclaim the concept of gender mainstreaming arguing that it does not mean integrating gender into illegitimate institutions and policies. Gigi Francisco of IGTN suggests what a transformative understanding of gender analysis should look like:

Gender perspective and politics applied to trade, development and governance cannot but fundamentally challenge paradigms and models that continue to promote in an inter-linked fashion the invisibility of social reproduction in the economy; re-creation and consolidation of processes of accumulation that result in massive poverty for certain groups of people the world over, and the instrumentalisation of democracy and human rights. A set of rules that insists on the centrality of market forces above persons, communities and governments and continues to overlook the structural, institutional and cultural barriers to women’s self autonomy is immediately and fundamentally in discord with the visions and politics of gender transformation.”

Zo Randriamaro comments: “‘engendering’ economic policies is different from institutionalizing compassion towards women. A feminist approach would posit that sound and equitable economic policies require men and women to have equal access to and control over, productive resources, equal participation in decision-making, and equal distribution of the benefits of their
work (giving) each country enough flexibility to meet the needs of their peoples, giving primacy to human rights and developmental needs."

With a growing demand by governments and institutions for “gender experts” to work within the official framework, along with the absence of direct accountability of women’s movement leaders to a grassroots base, there are real concerns about co-optation, often even of the most well-meaning activists. In project or event-driven activism, the lack of clarity regarding the political task makes it even harder to judge how women’s agendas are being manipulated.

Julia Elyachar gives a powerful account of how the World Bank manipulated pro-poor NGO agendas in Egypt. In an urgent need to address social unrest in the wake of structural adjustment programs (SAPs), the World Bank began to emphasize “people’s empowerment” and gender equality. She observes that “disenfranchisement is seen as a global security problem.” Elyachar points out that a development program directed toward the informal economy “expands the social space over which the state is not sovereign. Such a development approach thus accords well with neo-liberal ideology,” by advocating a shrinking state with less control over economic activity. This meant that many antiglobalization activists with a procommunity agenda were inadvertently serving the neo-liberal agenda. In the case of Egypt, NGOs often played the role of “enforcing financial discipline just as SAPs have done on a macro scale.” The main focus of local programs was the “empowerment of women,” leading to a scramble for sisters and wives who could be recipients of donor dollars. The process built on and coopted social networks in communities and people’s strategies for survival. Put bluntly, “SAPs discipline naughty states. When infused with NGO-mediated finance, social networks can serve as a mechanism for ensuring that the poor discipline themselves.”

A conversation with a woman from the Global South working for a European government donor agency was very telling. She was interested in putting money into “economic literacy” for women and women’s participation at the grassroots level. She wanted to “mainstream gender” into current World Bank economic reforms (known as poverty reduction strategy papers) that have now incorporated local NGO input. She wanted to enhance women’s bargaining power vis-à-vis local authorities, and saw women’s knowledge of macro-economic issues as crucial to their ability to negotiate. She saw the role of development assistance as a transfer of knowledge and skills, rather than hard cash. She saw “gender-budgeting” as a good way of engaging women at the local level. When asked why this interest in women’s participation, she candidly answered that the donors’ goal is to “reduce tensions by providing basic services and enabling women to become players at the local level so that they won’t destabilize political systems.” She expressed concern that if people did not feel engaged they could become bomb-throwing fundamentalists. While wanting to promote pluralism and “democracy” in the global South, she acknowledged that little would actually change in terms of these grassroots women’s economic realities.
A major continuing challenge for global women’s movements is the need to effectively integrate race, ethnicity, caste, class, sexual orientation, national origin, age and other identities that define particular women’s lived realities and shape their politics-in both theory and practice. This issue became an important part of global feminist discourse in the preparations for the UN World Conference Against Racism that took place in Durban, South Africa in September 2001. That conference was a remarkable event, which gathered racially and ethnically marginalized activists from around the world in an intense forum demanding redress for racialized oppressions.

The women’s caucus included women rarely involved in feminist or NGO circles, from Dalits and Roma to Indigenous women and Afro-Latinas. In Durban, beyond a women’s caucus and regional caucuses, women activists also participated actively in a “Race, Poverty and Globalization Caucus,” that developed a racial and gender analysis of colonialism and neoliberal globalization, calling for global shifts in wealth from North to South in reparation for this legacy, via debt cancellation, currency transaction tax, and other direct mechanisms. This represented efforts to link gender justice and economic justice through a historic lens of race, class and geography. This caucus continued into the UN conference on Financing for Development, where women worked (in vain) to bring a gender, race, class and human rights framework into those deliberations.

Some of the intellectual and political work done in this period built on long-term demands to reconceptualize the feminist project, given the intersection of multiple oppressions. The challenge is both analytical-how to develop an integrated feminist analysis that considers women’s multiple oppressions, their differential experiences, and the political implications-and also practical. That is, how can global women’s movements give leadership to women who have been marginalized, incorporate their agendas, and thus equalize power relations among women within these movements?

These Durban discussions were easily diverted by 9-11 (which occurred only days after the UN conference) but are no less urgent for women’s movements to address. It is essential to take seriously women’s different lived experiences, as well as racism, classism and North/South power imbalances within women’s movements. How can a focus on significant differences and power relations avoid letting identity politics overwhelm a potentially unifying agenda of women’s equality, rights, racial justice and economic justice? This is equally important at the national level-from the US to South Asia and at the global level within North/South debates.

Two decades of women’s organizing in UN conferences have created seasoned international advocates and activists in the UN arena. Yet the era of UN conferences appears to be over, as well as the current potential for making gains through inter-governmental negotiations. The
post cold-war opening for a multilateral development agenda based on a system of common, rights-based commitments has been undermined by the current US administration’s unilateralist policy, most evident in its invasion of Iraq despite global opposition and the intensification of inter-imperialist rivalries. The most recent UN conferences since 2000 indicate the consolidation of mutually reinforcing agendas among the IMF, World Bank and WTO, the growing power of these institutions vis-à-vis the UN, and the strength of the global corporate agenda.

In terms of women’s issues at the UN, the growing tensions between North and South have deepened the resistance on the part of Southern nations to making concessions, and have strengthened the hand of moral conservative forces. At the March 2003 Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), occurring parallel to the Security Council debate on Iraq, delegates could not reach consensus on a statement on violence against women. A group of nations representing the religious right tried to roll back gains women had made over many years, by rejecting a previously agreed-upon text. Their unwillingness to compromise on women’s rights issues was fed by anger at US unilateralism on both political/military and economic fronts. While the US empire may be weaker than it imagines, with enormous external debt, internal deficits, an unstable Iraqi occupation, and the growing economic power of both the EU and China, it continues to have the upper hand at the current moment.

This CSW stalemate merely drove home a reality already confronting UN activists: the success in shaping the language of national and international development commitments did not transfer to real accountability by national governments. The UN’s ability to shape development policy was eclipsed by the power of the IMF, World Bank and WTO (the first multi-lateral institution with the power to police treaty compliance with sanctions), representing capitalist interests within the G-8 industrialized nations, while gender justice agendas were undermined by the conservative Right. Thus, increasingly, women’s groups are reflecting on the most strategic venues for their activism—from the UN to the trade arena to the WSF to regional and national work. This is one of the key debates among global feminists at the current time, reflected in a heated discussion about whether a Fifth World Conference on Women should even take place.

In meetings and on list-serves, global women’s movements that came of age in these UN processes are reflecting on the wisdom of a continued focus on the UN, and on another world conference on women:

– Those in favor want to maintain momentum on a global women’s agenda and to involve young women in the process, continuing to see the UN as the primary site for action. They note successes women have had in influencing the international agenda and the empowerment this has offered women vis-à-vis their national governments. Many argue that the UN needs to be
strengthened and transformed to be more responsive to equality demands, while maintaining pressure at both the national and international levels.

– Those opposed note “conference fatigue, the lack of implementation resources, the geopolitical climate and backlash which pose a danger of losing ground” on feminist issues. Some feel that the focus has shifted to the WTO and regional trade pacts, and that women have little to gain from UN processes.

Vanessa Griffen (Malaysia) argues that global negotiations have not improved women’s lives at the local level, and thus major emphasis on the UN arena misplaces women’s energies and lessens their political impact. She maintains that some women are needed to monitor government implementation of agreements, retain language of past commitments and hold back the conservative backlash, but that this should not be the central focus of global women’s movements.

Of growing concern to some women’s organizations is the reduction of the extensive commitments made by governments in the UN conferences of the 1990s to eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which have become the chief organizing framework for all UN and World Bank development work. These goals reduce gender concerns to only one of the eight points, and seek technocratic mechanisms for halving poverty, guaranteeing basic health and primary education and other lofty goals by 2015, without challenging the neo-liberal framework that is directly undermining fulfillment of these goals. Commitments to reproductive rights made in Cairo (UN International Conference on Population and Development, 1994) and Beijing have been dropped. Ewa Charkiewicz says the MDGs mark a shift from a focus on citizens with rights to consumers of privatized commodities. Peggy Antrobus calls them “Major Distraction Gimmicks” and says they divert women’s focus from the more far-reaching Beijing Platform for Action.

A March 2003 gathering of some international women’s NGO leaders attending the UN Commission on the Status of Women in NY did not represent global consensus, but suggested (a) a fifth world conference to be held before 2010 but not in 2005; (b) a ten-year review of implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action only within the regular meetings of the UN and at national levels in 2005, with no negotiations on text; and (c) the potential for autonomous women’s events in such venues as the AWID Forum and the World Social Forum or an alternate world meeting of women apart from the UN.

What has not been as explicit is the fact that a shift from the focus on UN advocacy and UN conferences to local/national organizing, or WTO and regional trade agreement organizing or World Social Forum organizing means a potential shift in the style, culture, leadership or even
the class base of global women’s movements. This challenges the modus operandi, careers, funding and power bases within women’s networks—including that of my own coalition. It will be an important challenge to separate these factors from an assessment of the most strategic way forward.

To a great extent, women’s endorsement of a Fifth World Conference will depend upon their assessment of the state of geo-political dynamics as well as the role of UN advocacy at this time; and the outcome of regional Cairo+10 and Beijing+10 reviews.

Ultimately, it’s not a question of either/or, but of how to combine work at different levels and in different venues most strategically. While it would not be wise to walk away from the UN as an advocacy target, the payoff is currently quite limited. The goals there become holding the line and pushing for a more credible institution, while seeking specific UN niches where feminists might advance their agenda, such as some of the human rights treaty bodies. The global justice movement and the World Social Forum process provide spaces to link women to mass-based social movements at the global level. This, and local/national movement-building can contribute to building a power base to demand real accountability from the state and private interests at every level.

It has seemed, at times, that there are nothing but setbacks to the women’s rights agenda, particularly in the lives of poor women around the world. Loss of livelihoods, increased economic and physical exploitation, the rise of women’s migration for economic survival, and increased control over women’s autonomy are coming from many interlinking forces. The significant gains made conceptually and through government commitments have not been realized in terms of most women’s lived experience, as corporate globalization, militarism and fundamentalisms intensify. We cannot minimize these gains, however. The shift in discourse and some actions on the part of governments, however co-opted, represent a response to the strength of women’s organizing over the past three decades. Despite huge setbacks, thousands of women have also felt the right and the space to claim their rights on many levels as a result of local and global feminism. There are also encouraging signs, including:

– the further development of a feminist economic analysis linking a critique of patriarchy and capitalism;

– the new wave of women addressing macro-economic issues and mobilizing for redistributive economic justice—not just economic “development”;

– the growing integration of gender justice and economic justice theoretically and politically;
the incipient efforts—though still limited—to assess global women's movements’ political strategies, venues, impacts and internal power dynamics, including race/ethnic, class and geographic issues; and

feminists’ efforts to be heard by movement colleagues in arenas such as the WTO protests and the World Social Forum as well as regional settings, with a goal of building a broader mass-based social movement that can challenge power, be it located in the family, with religious or national patriarchs, transnational corporations; or the US empire.

This article, although written in a personal capacity, draws on my work as Coordinator of the Women’s International Coalition for Economic Justice (WICEJ), a coalition of 40 organizations—both NGO and Labor—from all regions of the globe focused on macro-economic policy from the perspective of gender, race, class and national origin. The coalition has been active in numerous UN world conferences as well as the recent WTO ministerial in Cancún, Mexico. My thoughts here were developed in dialogue with Bina Srinivasan. We began our discussion of these issues through the Rockefeller Humanities Fellowship Program, “Facing Global Capital, Finding Human Security: A Gendered Critique,” based at the National Council for Research on Women and the City University of New York.

Notes


2. This emerged as a “movement” at the Seattle WTO ministerial in 1999, and has been present at key events of the G-8 and international financial institutions in Washington DC, Prague, Genoa, Evian and elsewhere, and consolidated in 2001 at the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, held parallel to the Davos World Economic Forum.

3. Because of the diversity of agendas, identities, objectives, issues and organizational structures, we refer to global women’s movements, rather than one movement. While multiple global networks tend to come together in such venues as the UN or the Association for Women’s Rights in Development forums, there is a diversity of perspectives and agendas that would not define a single movement.

4. Claire Slatter notes that these arenas are “a privileged global space where mostly, global NGOs interact with representatives of nation states.” “Beyond the Theory-Practice-Activism


7. Group of 8 industrialized nations, includes US, Canada, France, Germany, England, Italy, Japan, and Russia.


10. I use the terms “economic North” and “economic South” to define post-colonial geo-political and economic relationships between nations. These more clearly define divisions than “global North and South,” and the cold-war era “First World and Third World.” I have borrowed the term from Claire Slatter.


15. See Maria Riley, “From Women in Development to Gender and Trade,” Center Focus, Center of Concern, No. 152, June 2001, Washington, DC

16. Ibid.


21. With acknowledgement to Patricia Clough and discussions in the CUNY/NCRW seminar, “Facing Global Capital: A Gendered Critique.”


23. Issues directly addressing patriarchy, including violence, reproductive rights, sexual rights, bodily integrity, legal rights among others.

24. A larger debate is whether human rights is a valid framework for feminist organizing at all. This juxtaposes concepts of “universalism” with those of “cultural relativism,” and critiques the Rights regime as a Western-imposed, individualistic paradigm. Rather than accepting an either/or dichotomy, we are grateful to Ayesha Imam (of Women Living Under Muslim Law) for sharing an approach to “claim and critique” both local and international rights discourses-to embrace local rights frameworks as feasible, while pushing the parameters, and doing the same with international rights.


26. Ibid. (Since that writing, the US under the Bush Administration has now joined this conservative group on moral issues related to women’s rights, but not, of course, on challenges to G-8 hegemony.)


31. Introduced by the *Economist*, Davos Man refers to the international business and political executives who meet annually in Davos, Switzerland for the World Economic Forum. Cited in Danner & Young (n. 28).

32. Ibid, pp. 87-88.


42. Randriamaro (n. 36).


45. See, for example, the work of the Women of Color Resource Center, [www.coloredgirls.org](http://www.coloredgirls.org). For new work in this regard linked to the WCAR, see debates of the Durban Women’s Caucus (on Women’s Human Rights Net) as well as documents at [www.whrnet.org](http://www.whrnet.org); Raj, Bunch & Nazombe, *Women at the Intersection: Indivisible Rights, Identities, and Oppressions*, Center for Women’s Global Leadership, Rutgers University Press, 2002 ([www.cwgl.rutgers.edu](http://www.cwgl.rutgers.edu)); and UNIFEM ([www.unifem.org](http://www.unifem.org)).

46. World Conference Against Racism, Financing For Development, World Summit on Sustainable Development


This article, although written in a personal capacity, draws on my work as Coordinator of the Women’s International Coalition for Economic Justice (WICEJ), a coalition of 40 organizations—both NGO and Labor—from all regions of the globe focused on macro-economic policy from the perspective of gender, race, class and national origin. The coalition has been active in numerous UN world conferences as well as the recent WTO ministerial in Cancun, Mexico. My thoughts here were developed in dialogue with Bina Srinivasan. We began our discussion of these issues through the Rockefeller Humanities Fellowship Program, “Facing Global Capital, Finding Human Security: A Gendered Critique,” based at the National Council for Research on Women and the City University of New York.
Notes

1 Charlotte Bunch’s endorsement of Amrita Basu’s Challenge of Local Feminisms, 1995 (see Bibliography).

2 These include: Nicholas Guyatt (Another American Century) on how US policy shaped the discourse on development, John Madeley (Hungry for Trade) on trade, and Martin Khor (Globalization) on the impact of globalization on the economies of the South. (See list after the Index, this volume.)

3 The current title, the ‘movement for global justice’, comes closer to capturing the wider agenda of the movement.

4 These include the USA, Canada, the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Russia and Japan.

5 The site of the 2nd Ministerial Meeting of the WTO.


7 Of these it was estimated that 15,084 were delegates and 15,000 were living in the youth camp. Fifty-seven per cent of the delegates were male and 43 per cent female.

8 The Enron corporation was one of the five largest energy corporations in the USA with links to both the White House and Congress.

2 | The global women’s movement: definitions and local origins

The authors of this Kenya case study describe a process which is common to many of us as we are called on to consider the question of whether there is a women’s movement. This chapter attempts to answer the questions: Is there a global women’s movement? How can we understand such a movement? How can it be defined, and what are its characteristics? My conclusion is that there is a global women’s movement. It is different from other social movements and can be defined by diversity, its feminist politics and perspectives, its global reach and its methods of organizing.

Definitions

In her book, commissioned by the Ford Foundation as a contribution to the events surrounding the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in September 1995, Amrita Basu put together a collection of writings documenting the manifestations

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Personal reflection

When we were first approached about writing on the women’s movement in Kenya, one question emerged in both of our minds: Is there a women’s movement in Kenya? When we considered this, we simultaneously answered, ‘No’. After more reflection, we began to ask, ‘If there is no women’s movement, what is this intense activity going on around us of women’s group meetings, workshops, seminars, and even individual women agitating for women’s rights in the courts, in the media and even on the streets? (Wilhelmina Oduol and Wanjiku Mukabi Kabira).’
of feminist politics through local struggles which shape and are shaped by feminism. She defines women’s movements as comprising ‘a range of struggles by women against gender inequality’. The seventeen case studies, from as many countries or regions, describe and analyze a rich diversity of experience, grounded in specific local struggles.  

Many authors admit that this movement does not conform to conventional definitions of a ‘movement’, lacking as it does common objectives, continuity, unity and coordination. Yet this should not surprise us, nor should it be taken as a sign of deficiency. Women’s movements are, after all, different from all other social movements in that they are crosscutting, ask different questions, and often seek goals that challenge conventional definitions of where we want to go. Only a few activists take the view that the objectives of the women’s movement are similar to those of labour, human rights and student groups, which seek justice for their members. Many see the objectives of women’s groups as broader, seeking changes in relationships that are more varied and complex. At the same time it is sometimes difficult to identify clear objectives; worse, the objectives articulated by some groups seem to contradict those of others. The following quotes from the Nigerian case study illustrate the problem:

The Nigerian women’s movement is an unarmed movement. It is non-confrontational. It is a movement for the progressive upliftment of women for motherhood, nationhood and development.

And again:

When African women demand equality, we are only asking for our rights not to be tampered with, and the removal of laws that oppress and dehumanize women. We are not asking for equality with our husbands. We accept them as the bosses and heads of the family.

The confusion and contradictions captured in these statements reflect the complexity of a movement that is caught in the tension between what is possible and what is dreamed of, between short-term goals and long-term visions, between expediency and risk-taking, pragmatism and surrender, between the practical and the strategic. Most of all, there is understandable ambivalence surrounding challenging and confronting relationships that are intimate and deeply felt. But the confusion also reflects a lack of clarity about definitions of what groups might be considered part of a ‘women’s movement’.

Many activists, including Nigerian activists who identify themselves with a women’s movement, would question definitions of the objectives of their movement in terms of the ‘upliftment of women for motherhood, nationhood and development’. They would argue that this instrumentalizes women, while being in complete accord with patriarchal definitions of women’s traditional role.

It seems to me that the continuing confusion about what defines women’s movements relates not so much to the fact that this movement does not conform to a conventional definition of a movement, but rather to lack of clarity about objectives in contexts that differ widely.

One way of clarifying these apparent contradictions is to recognize two mutually reinforcing tendencies within women’s movements – one focused on gender identity (identity politics) and the other concerned with a larger project for social transformation. There are two entry points to concerns about a larger social project. One is recognition of the centrality of the care and nurture of human beings to the larger social project, and that to address this, given the primacy of women’s gendered role in this area, requires addressing gender relations in all the complex interplay of their economic, social, political, cultural and personal dimensions. It also involves locating gender inequality within other forms of inequality that shape and often exacerbate it.

Another entry point is recognition that women cannot be separated from the larger context of their lived experience and that this includes considerations of class, race/ethnicity and geographic location, among other factors. This means that the struggle for women’s agency must include engagement in struggles against sources of women’s oppression that extend beyond gender.

The larger social project would therefore include transforming
social institutions, practices and beliefs so that they address gender relations along with other oppressive relationships, not simply seeking a better place within existing institutions and structures. For this reason, women’s movements in countries where the majority of women are marginalized by class, race or ethnicity must be concerned with the larger social project. This is often a point of tension between women’s movements in the context of North–South relations, as well as in the context of struggles against oppression on the basis of class, race and ethnicity.

I believe that confusion about definitions of women’s movements is also caused by failure to make distinctions between women’s organizations as part of a wide spectrum of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or civil society organizations (CSOs), and those that might be better understood as part of a politically oriented social movement.

Similarly, the term ‘women’s movements’ is sometimes used interchangeably with ‘feminist movements’, an error that confuses and misrepresents both feminism and the broad spectrum of women’s organizations.

In the final analysis, it seems to me that the identification of feminist politics as the engine of women’s movements may help to clarify some of the confusion around women’s organizing in the period covered by this book, as well as to focus the answer to the central question: Can women’s movements make a difference in the struggle for equity, democracy and sustainability in today’s globalized economy? It is the combination of struggles for gender justice with those for economic justice and democracy that enables women’s movements to make a difference to the larger social project for transformation of systems and relationships.

An important segment of women’s movements is composed of the associations that work to incorporate a feminist perspective into their theoretical, analytical, professional and political work. In academia, most disciplines now have feminist associations – Anthropology, Economics, Political, Social and Natural Sciences and Theology, among others. Moreover, within these disciplines – whether women are organized into feminist associations or not – women in the academies are doing important theoretical and empirical work that deepens our understanding of women’s realities and produces the analyses and insights that strengthen the work of activists.

In the professions there are also women’s associations – doctors, nurses, midwives, social workers, teachers, lawyers, bankers etc. – that are challenging patriarchal patterns and relationships, raising new questions and changing the practices and methods by which their professions operate.

Many women’s organizations, even those that focus on traditional concerns of home and family, are nevertheless important participants in women’s movements. Among these are grassroots women’s organizations of various kinds – Women’s Institutes, Federations of Women, the YWCA, and many worldwide organizations identified with strong advocacy on behalf of women’s rights, although they may not describe themselves as feminist.

Finally, a definition of a women’s movement must include those individual women who would never join an organization, nor define themselves as feminists, but whose lives and actions nevertheless serve to advance the liberation of women in their community and beyond.

All of these women must be seen as part of, or at least contributing to, women’s movements. They are all part of the diversity and richness of a movement that seeks change in the relationships of superiority and inferiority, domination and subordination between women and men in a patriarchal world.

The following statements summarize my own views on women’s movements:

- A women’s movement is a political movement – part of the broad array of social movements concerned with changing social conditions, rather than part of a network of women’s organizations (although many women’s organizations may be part of a women’s movement).
- A women’s movement is grounded in an understanding of women’s relations to social conditions – an understanding of gender as an important relationship within the broad structure
of social relationships of class, race and ethnicity, age and location.

- A women’s movement is a process, discontinuous, flexible, responding to specific conditions of perceived gender inequality or gender-related injustice. Its focal points may be in women’s organizations, but it embraces individual women in various locations who identify with the goals of feminism at a particular point in time.

- Awareness and rejection of patriarchal privilege and control are central to the politics of women’s movements.

- In most instances, the ‘movement’ is born at the moments in which individual women become aware of their separateness as women, their alienation, marginalization, isolation or even abandonment within a broader movement for social justice or social change. In other words, women’s struggle for agency within the broader struggle is the catalyst for women’s movements.

bell hooks describes this process of conscientization thus:

Our search leads us back to where it all began, to that moment when an individual woman ... who may have thought she was all alone, began a feminist uprising, began to name her practice, indeed began to formulate theory from lived experience.8

Women from across the world who identify themselves as part of an international and global women’s movement are to be found participating in international meetings organized by feminist associations, networks and organizations such as the International Inter-disciplinary Congress, the Association for Women’s Rights and Development (AWID) and UN conferences.9 They celebrate annual special ‘days’ such as International Women’s Day (IWD) on 8 March and International Day Against Violence Against Women on 25 November. They are in constant communication with each other through the Internet, where they sign petitions and statements in solidarity with women around the world, formulate strategies and organize campaigns and meetings.

The movement has important resources:

- resource centres such as the International Women’s Tribune Centre (IWTC), set up following the 1975 International Women’s Year (IYW) Conference in Mexico City;
- media, such as feminist radio stations like the Costa Rica-based FIRE (Feminist International Radio Endeavor); news services like WINGS (Women’s International News Gathering Service) and Women’s Feature Services (WFS), supported initially by UNESCO;
- websites (see p. 189–90);
- publishers and women’s presses;
- artists and artistes – filmmakers, musicians, dancers, painters, writers, poets and playwrights;
- women’s funds started by individual philanthropists and organizations that support women’s projects, organizations and networks.

Characteristics

Diversity Experience of the past thirty years points to the pitfall of starting with an assumption of a ‘global sisterhood’, especially when that ‘sisterhood’ is defined by a privileged minority. The emergence of a global movement has indeed depended on the emergence of new and different voices challenging hegemonic tendencies and claiming their own voice and space, and the acceptance of differences within the movements.

Diversity is now recognized as perhaps the most important characteristic of women’s movements. Nevertheless, many of the tensions among women in their movements can be related to differences of race/ethnicity, nationality/culture and class, although, as Audre Lorde points out:

[I]t is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize [them] and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behaviour and expectation.10

She also reminds us, ‘There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.’11 Women understand that each of us has multiple identities and that at any
point in time one or other may be more important than others. Insistence on focusing on gender in isolation from issues like race, ethnicity and class has often been more divisive than the inclusion of these issues in the agendas of the various movements. It is indeed impossible and even counterproductive to separate the varied forms of oppression because of the systemic links between them. Thus in many countries of the South women have had to confront colonialism, imperialism or racism before they could confront patriarchy.

Feminist politics It may be useful to identify feminism as a specific politics, grounded in a consciousness of all the sources of women’s subordination, and with a commitment to challenge and change the relationships and structures which perpetuate women’s subordinate position, in solidarity with other women. The consciousness of sexism and sexist oppression is the essence of feminist politics, and it is this politics that energizes women’s movements, whether or not the word ‘feminism’ is used. It is possible then to identify feminist politics as a specific element within a broader universe of women’s organizations, women’s movements and other social movements.

Feminists have worked with and within other social movements – especially those on peace, racism, the environment, indigenous peoples and the poor. These initiatives have served both to broaden and redefine the issues of concern to women, as well as to refocus the agendas of these movements.

In addition, there are feminists within institutions and agencies who recognize the ways in which the ideology of patriarchy constrains and diminishes the achievement of laudable goals and objectives, and who engage in the struggle to challenge it.

Feminist politics can also be identified within bureaucratic initiatives and institutional arrangements established for the improvement of the condition and position of women, enabling them to contribute to the movement for gender justice. These include women’s bureaus, desks, commissions, special units and gender focal points within mainstream institutions.

Global reach Our understanding of the diversity within women’s movements that has led us to speak more often of a multiplicity of ‘movements’ would lead many to question the concept of a single global women’s movement. However, I would argue, as others have done, that despite the rich diversity of experience, grounded in specific local struggles, women have been able to transcend these to become a movement of global proportions, with a global agenda and perspective.

Here I want to distinguish between an international women’s movement and a global women’s movement. Although, as Uta Ruppert has pointed out, local or national women’s movements have never viewed their activities as ‘simply crossing the borders of nation states’, I would conceptualize an ‘international’ movement as one in which the national and cultural differences between women were recognizable and paramount. Indeed, this was characteristic of women’s movements at the international level in the mid-1970s, at the launching of the UN Decade for Women (1975–85), and to some extent throughout most of the Decade. However, as women established their separate identities along the prevailing axes of North–South, East–West, they discovered commonalities that moved them increasingly towards greater coherence and even common positions in the policy debates around issues of environment, poverty, violence and human rights. At the same time, as these issues became increasingly ‘global’ (as reflected in the themes and agendas of the global conferences of the 1990s), women’s movements converged in these global arenas to negotiate and articulate common agendas and positions. As Ruppert puts it:

The political process of international women’s movements has been shaped by the insight that international politics does not simply take place at the inter-nation-state level, but also encompasses multcentric and multilevel processes. Thus the movement’s multidimensional political understanding, which is sensitive to differences, almost predestined it to become the most global of social movements of the 1990s.

She goes on to identify:
A second component ... essential for the women’s movement to become an effective global actor, which was the movement’s shift toward aiming for ‘globality’ as a main objective. Even though there has never been an explicit discourse along these lines, the movement’s political practice suggests a conceptual differentiation between three different political approaches on the global level: criticizing and combating globalization as a neo-liberal paradigm; utilizing global politics, or rather global governance, as tools for governance under the conditions of globalization; and specifically creating ‘globality’, which the women’s movement has aimed for and worked towards as an important factor in women’s global politics.

Methods of organizing. It is widely understood that a characteristic of a global women’s movement is the linking of local to global, the particularities of local experience and struggles to, as Ruppert says, ‘the political creation and establishment of global norms for world development and global ethics for industrial production, such as (social and gender) justice, sustainability and peace, based on the creation of globally valid fundamental human rights’. However, few have related this to the particular methods of feminist organizing.

Although, as Ruppert rightly states, this practice has not been the subject of an explicit discourse, it has nevertheless been based on conscious decisions to involve women from different backgrounds and regions in the search for ‘globality’. These decisions have been the result of an understanding of the ways in which global events, trends and policies impact on local experience, and in particular on the experiences of poor women in the global South.

While Ruppert and others cite women’s organizing around the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) and the 1993 International Conference on Human Rights as the first signs of this kind of organizing, I would refer to the experience of the network of Third World women, DAWN, in their preparations for the Forum of the 1985 Third World Conference on Women. It was here that a conscious at-

tempt was made to bring together local and regional experiences as the beginning of a process for the preparation of a platform document for a global event.

I speak more about this experience in Chapters 3, 4 and 5; here I merely want to use it to illustrate the feminist methodology used for the ‘globalizing’ of frameworks around economics, environment and rights. The starting point was a meeting at which women were invited to reflect on their experience of development over the course of the Decade for Women – from the perspective of poor women living in the economic South. In this way the final document reflected regional differences, even as it reached for a framework that revealed the linkages between these experiences. This process – which starts with testifying to local, regional, or even individual experiences (‘telling our stories, ‘speaking our truths’), leading to the negotiation of differences and finally to the articulation of a position that attempts to generalize, synthesize or ‘globalize’ the diversity of experience – was repeated in the processes leading to the global conferences on environment, human rights and population. Chapter 6 focuses on the processes around these events.

This methodology, clearly related to that of feminist consciousness-raising and Freiran conscientization (combining reflection on personal experience with socio-political analysis to construct and generate global advocacy) has been a powerful tool for the global women’s movement. Like conscientization, which takes specific realities ‘on the ground’ as the basis for social analysis that can lead to action, it is a praxis (process of reflection and action) that has helped to mobilize women to challenge neo-liberal and fundamentalist state policies at national and global levels. This praxis has also been a powerful tool in feminist theorizing.

To drive home one of the differences between international women’s movements and a global women’s movement, I want to compare this feminist method of globalizing to the process of regional meetings and consultations used by the UN in the preparation of their international conferences. The documents that feed into and emerge from these processes have to be screened and sanctioned by governments and, by their very nature, are limited
in the degree to which they are able to reflect the realities of women. While the plans and platforms of action that emerge from the conferences contain many recommendations and resolutions that accord with the advocacy of women's movements, they often lack the coherence and clarity of the platforms produced by a movement unrestrained by the conventions of international diplomacy. Moreover, without the vigilance and political activism of women's movements, especially at local or national, but also at global, levels, these recommendations are meaningless to women.

This brings me to another aspect of the links between global and local – the ways in which local actors organize to defend themselves against global threats. Recognizing the relationship between global trends and local realities, women are organizing around the defence of their bodies, their livelihoods and their communities. The word 'glocality' has been coined to highlight the ways in which global trends affect local experience. This recognition of a 'politics of place' poses new challenges to a global women's movement. While organizing in the defence of 'place' has the potential to be the most powerful and effective form of organizing, local groups clearly need information and analysis on the broader policy frameworks that are affecting their lives. A global women's movement also needs links to this level of organizing to retain its relevance and to legitimize its advocacy.

The global women's movement is very aware that action at global level must have resonance at local, national and regional levels if it is to be meaningful to women. In this sense we need to see the global women's movement as made up of many interlocking networks. Many of the global networks have worked to strengthen their links to activities at regional, national and local levels.

A second method of organizing, which is also a strategy (to be discussed more fully in Chapter 6), is networking. Some may say that women's movements invented networking! Networking is the method used to make the vertical (local–global) as well as the horizontal (inter-regional as well as issue-specific) links that generate the analysis and the organizing underlying global action.

A third is the linking of the personal to the political, the ways in which gender identification and recognition of common experience can short-circuit difference to create a sense of solidarity. This often makes it easier for women who are strangers to each other to work together.

Symbols and images

In the final analysis, words may not be enough to enable us to understand the complexity of a global women's movement made up of such a diversity of movements. In thinking about this book, I have often been struck by the ways in which images and symbols capture the shape and structure of a global women's movement. The images and symbols that come to mind are those of the spiral, the wheel, the pyramid, the web and the patchwork quilt.

A spiral is an open-ended circle. As an adjective it is a 'winding about a centre in an enlarging or decreasing continuous curve'. As a noun, 'a plane or three-dimensional spiral curve' (Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1990). In both cases it captures images of continuity and change, depth and expansion – something that is identifiable yet varied.

Inuit story-telling takes the form of a spiral, a three-dimensional curve that winds about a centre in an enlarging continuous curve that allows the story-teller to start at any point and move backwards and forwards as appropriate. The story has no end. A spiral is open-ended, continuous, ever enlarging our understanding of events, our perspectives. The global women's movement can be thought of as a spiral, a process that starts at the centre (rather than at the beginning of a line) and works its way outwards, turning, arriving at what might appear to be the same point, but in reality at an expanded understanding of the same event.

A spiral is also dialectic, allowing for the organic growth of a movement of women organizing – a movement in a state of on-going evolution as consciousness expands in the process of exchanges between women, taking us backwards (to rethink and re-evaluate old positions) and forwards (to new areas of awareness).

As a number of interlocking networks, a global women's movement might also be likened to pyramids, webs and wheels. In a study of two campaigns, the campaign against breast-milk substi-
tutes in Ghana, and against child labour in the carpet industry in India, the New Economics Foundation (NEF) identified

three structures for organizing constructive collaboration: the pyramid, the wheel, and the web. Pyramids have a coordinating secretariat who disseminates information through the campaign; wheels have one or more focal points for information exchange, but information also flows directly among the members; in the web, no focal point exist, so information flows to and from all the members in roughly equal quantities.21

The pyramid, the wheel and the web underline the fluidity of the global women's movement, comprised as it is of interlocking networks that come together as appropriate, even as each continues to focus on its specific area of interest.

The movement can also be understood as a patchwork quilt, full of colour and different patterns, discontinuous and defying description, but none the less an identifiable entity made up of units that have their own integrity. A quilt, an art form peculiarly developed by women, uses whatever material is available to make something both beautiful and functional. It represents ingenuity, creativity, caring and comfort. A global women's movement can have no better symbol as it seeks to create a world in which people might find beauty, comfort and security.

Origins

Since the concept of a global women's movement conceals the actors who make it possible, I turn now to consider some of the contexts that energized the local struggles out of which a global

Gita Sen's description of the three waves of the women's movement

The first wave had three distinct sources. One source was in the colonized countries with the emergence of social reform movements that had as their primary focus the transformation of cultural practices affecting civil laws, marriage, and family life. While these reform attempts mobilized possibly as many or more men as women, they were an important early strand in the transformation of social discourse and practice affecting gender relations. A second source was the major debate within the social democratic and communist organizations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which then carried forward into the debates in the Soviet Union on the 'woman question'. This strand of debate was the most explicit about the connections between the institutions of private property, the control over material assets, and women-men relations within families and society. A third source was the liberal strand that combined the struggle for the vote with the struggle to legalize contraception; this strand existed mainly, though by no means exclusively, in Europe and North America.

The second wave, in the mid-twentieth century, was dominated by struggles against colonial domination, in which women were present in large numbers. Their experiences in these struggles shaped their attitudes to global economic and political inequality, even though specific issues of gender justice took a back seat at this time. Many women also went through the experience of being in the thick of anti-colonial struggles and then being marginalized in the postcolonial era.

The third wave, that we understand as the modern women's movement, had its roots in the social and political ferment of the 1960s, like so many other social movements of the later twentieth century. The anti-imperialist and anti-Vietnam War movements, civil rights struggles, challenges to social and sexual mores and behaviour, and above all the rising up of young people, brewed a potent mixture from which emerged many of the social movements of the succeeding decades worldwide. What was specific to the women's movement among these was its call for recognition of the personal as political.22
movement was formed. Reference is often made to ‘three waves’ of the women’s movement: the first wave of the late 19th–early 20th century, the second covering the mid-20th century, and the third, the late 20th century. Although these waves are often depicted as distinct, it is instructive to look at the connections between them because, as Gita Sen points out:

They delineate in an early form potential strengths as well as tensions that characterize the international women’s movement right until today. The presence of multiple strands from early on has made for a movement that is broad and capable of addressing a wide range of issues. But the potential tensions between prioritizing economic issues (such as control over resources and property) or women’s personal autonomy or bodily integrity existed then and continue to exist now.23

Conclusion

It is clear that, despite the lack of clear and common objectives, continuity, unity and coordination – characteristics that would make a women’s movement identifiable with other social movements – there is nevertheless an identifiable movement enriched by its diversity and complexity, sustained by the depth of its passions and enduring commitment to its causes, and strengthened by the apparent lack of coordination and spontaneity of its strategizing.

Varied experiences highlight the complexity of women’s struggles, the interplay between race, class and gender and the need to distinguish between the material and the ideological relations of gender.24

There are many roads to the awareness that manifests as involvement in a women’s organization or identification as part of a women’s movement. There are still more steps towards a feminist consciousness, which would transform involvement in a women’s organization into a political struggle for gender equity and equality, often within a broader project for social transformation. Many of the women involved in women’s organizations, or movements, were influenced by leftist politics, and discovered their own mar-
ginalization within the processes of these struggles. Others began the journey to feminist consciousness through personal experiences; still others through their work experience. A characteristic of many of those involved in women’s movements is the process of personal transformation which they undergo as they become aware of gender subordination. At the same time, this essentially individualistic experience seems to engender a connection to the wider universe of injustice in a way that leads to a better understanding of the link between different forms of oppression and builds life-long commitments to the struggle against injustice.

Given these histories, there is no doubt that there is a global women’s movement, recognizable in its understanding of how ‘common difference’25 links us all in a political struggle for recognition and redistributive justice. Its difference from other social movements lies not only in the absence of homogeneity and its lack of common objectives, continuity, unity and coordination, but in the value it places on diversity, its commitment to solidarity with women everywhere, its feminist politics and its methods of organizing.

The following chapters will explore in greater depth the contexts in which this social movement emerged and took shape, as well as examine its potential as an important global actor in the struggles for a more equitable, humane, sustainable and secure world.

Notes

3 An ancient saying attributed to the Chinese states: ‘If you don’t change direction, you will end up where you’re headed.’ Where most conventional social movements are headed is still towards a place where the male is considered the definition of the human being.
6 I am grateful to Gita Sen for this analysis, which is developed in a chapter on ‘The Politics of the International Women’s Movement’ in the book Claiming Global Power: Transnational Civil Society and Global Governance, edited by Srilatha Batiwala and David Brown, to be published by Kumarian Press.

7 However, there may be self-defined feminists among their members.


9 Although UN conferences are also attended by women and organizations that are opposed to advances in women’s human rights, as was seen at the Five-Year Review of the Fourth World Conference on Women, when the call went out from right-wing religion-based organizations for women to come to New York to ‘defend’ women against that ‘dangerous’ document, the Beijing Plan of Action.


11 Ibid., p. 138.

12 In thinking about this distinction I have found Uta Ruppert’s analysis (Braig and Wolte 2002: 147–54) extremely helpful.

13 Ibid., p. 148.

14 Ibid., p. 149.

15 Ruppert defines ‘globality’ as ‘everything global politics or global governance should be based on or directly accompanied by’ (ibid., p. 151).

16 Ibid., p. 151.

17 Ibid.

18 The combination of consciousness and action, ‘praxis’, introduced by the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, to enable oppressed groups to gain an understanding of the forces impinging on their world, the sources of their oppression.


20 Examples abound. The work of the Chipko movement and of the Self-Employed Women’s Association (India) (SEWA) immediately come to mind because they have been so well documented; however there are examples of this kind of organizing in every region. The most recent was the action of local women in Nigeria to challenge the Shell oil company.


23 Ibid.

24 Eudine Barritteau makes this distinction to show that while advances in women’s material needs (practical gender interests) might be met within a policy framework of social equity based on race and class, the ideological relations of gender could cause men to resent and resist advances in terms of women’s strategic gender interests.

25 Moharty and Alexander (1997). The term ‘common difference’ is the title of Gloria Joseph’s book, and is associated with Chandra Moharty’s writings.