

# Development Crisis and Alternative Visions

## *Third World Women's Perspectives*

### DEVELOPMENT ALTERNATIVES FOR WOMEN WITH A NEW ERA

*Post Nairobi (Vol. 7, Nos. 1 & 2, 1986) was a formidable undertaking for CWS/cf. The educational benefits reaped from collaborating with our sisters in the developing world, however, made this issue one of the best we have ever produced. In this article, the DAWN group elucidates four of the most significant lessons for Western feminists interested in gender issues in development: that all oppressions — gender, race, class, nationality — are linked; that feminism is not monolithic and must be responsive to difference — the different needs of different women defined for and by themselves; that scholarship and action must be inextricably linked; and finally, that development processes are not inherently benign to the poor people most affected by them. This final point is particularly true for women, the poorest of the poor.*



*DAWN stands for Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era, a group of women working for alternative and more equitable development processes. The project DAWN began as a Third World feminist initiative in Bangalore, India in August 1984. The Bangalore meeting decided to produce a paper outlining their consensus of thought on women and development, which grew into its NGO Forum contribution. The following statement is a summary of DAWN's presentation.*

We believe that women's experiences with the development process, as researchers, activists and policy-makers, brought us to a range of common understanding despite different starting-points. The hopes raised by the UN Decade for Women made these experiences possible. But as the Decade draws to its close, we have also become more aware not only of the success and failures of the last ten years, but of the need to question in a more fundamental way the underlying processes of development into which we have been attempting to integrate women. In many of the discussions and actions generated throughout the Decade,

there has been an implicit belief that women's main problem in the Third World has been insufficient participation in an otherwise benevolent process of growth and development. Increasing women's participation and improving their shares in resources, land, employment and income relative to men, were seen as both necessary and sufficient for dramatic changes in their economic and social position. Our experience now leads us to challenge this belief.

Although dissonant voices questioning these assumptions could be heard very early in the Decade, it is only in the last two or three years that they have begun to coalesce with vigour. We can no longer simply assume that development as it has evolved in most Third World countries is a process inherently benign to the people living there. The consequences of long term economic processes which are often inimical, or at best indifferent, to the interests and needs of poor people, are being felt through interlinked crises or massive and growing impoverishment and inequality; food insecurity and unavailability; financial and monetary

disarray; environmental degradation; and growing demographic pressure. Nations and the international polity have tended to react to these pressures through increased militarization, domestic oppression, and foreign aggression. There is a growing sense of hopelessness, even lack of concern, about the Third World's poor in international donor and agency circles. This is compounded by the shift to bilateralism in aid and the cutbacks in contributions to multilateral institutions by some of the richest, most powerful, and most militaristic nations.

The nations of the Third World are increasingly being forced to rely upon internal resource mobilization to make up for sharp reductions in the availability of external resources. While creating serious hardships for the poor and middle income earners, such pressures may prove a blessing in disguise if they lead to policies that are more self-reliant and more geared to meeting the survival and subsistence needs of people. Women, in this context, are not only among the needy. More importantly, they offer strategic leverage for tackling the crisis of survival, since they

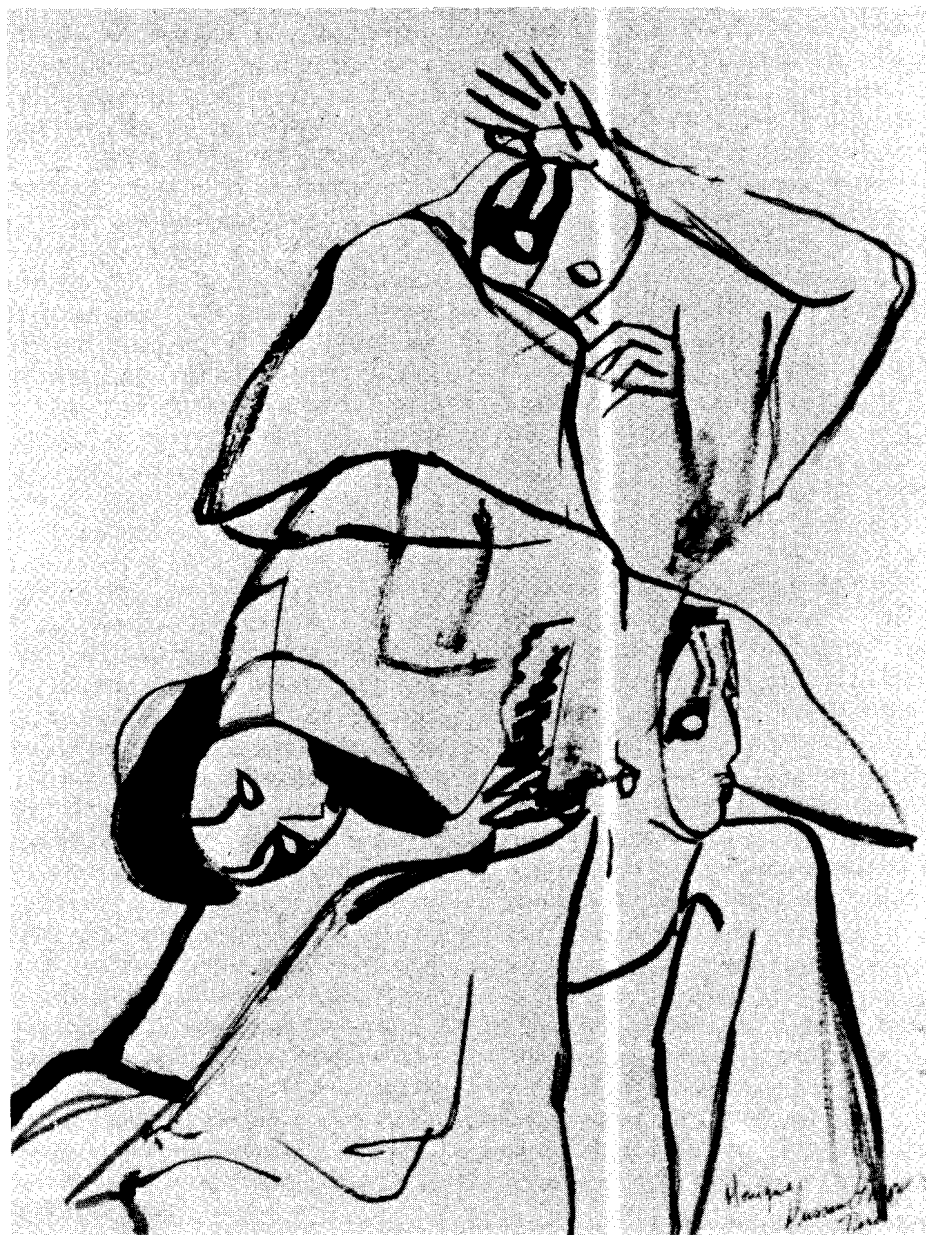
constitute the crucial human links in the ongoing reproduction of people.

New strategies for survival cannot succeed, however, if women are continuously squeezed, as they are now being, in the pincers of scarcer access to resources and greater demands on their labour time. The vision and methods needed to empower women to draw themselves and the poor out of impoverishing economic and social structures are the subject of our document. But we have no wish to see women crushed further under the burden of their traditional work in unchanging divisions of labour. Rather, we wish to argue that, if the survival of human beings is now the most pressing problem in the world, and if women are the crucial human links in that survival, then the empowerment of women is essential if new, creative and cooperative solutions to the crisis are to emerge.

As part of this process of empowerment, we feel a need to reaffirm and clarify our understanding of feminism. Throughout the Decade the women's movement has debated the links between the eradication of gender subordination and of other forms of social and economic oppression based on nation, class or ethnicity. The time has come to articulate the position that feminism cannot be monolithic in its issues, goals and strategies since it is the political expression of the concerns and interests of women from different regions, classes, nationalities and ethnic backgrounds. There is and must be a diversity of feminisms, responsive to the different needs and concerns of different women, and *defined by them for themselves*. This diversity builds on a *common opposition to gender oppression and hierarchy* which, however, is only the first step in a political agenda.

For many women in the world, problems of nationality, class and race are inextricably linked to their specific oppression as women. Their definition of feminism includes the struggle against all forms of oppression: it is both legitimate and necessary. In many instances, gender equality cannot come without changes on these other fronts. On the other hand, the struggle against gender subordination can not be compromised in the struggle against these other forms of oppression, or be relegated to a future when they maybe wiped out.

Many women from the Third World are acutely conscious of the need for this clarification and self-affirmation. Throughout the Decade they have had to



*Masques (huile sur papier) de Monique Dussault*

Credit: (Photo) Monique de Longeville

face accusations from two sides. On the one hand, there are those who dismiss them as not being truly feminist because of their attempts to link the struggle against gender subordination with that against other oppressions. On the other, there are those who accuse them of being divisive within class or national struggles. This is why we feel the need to affirm that feminism allows for the broadest and deepest development of society and human beings free of all systems of domination. Such a vision has been articulated before, particularly at Bangkok in 1979 and at Stony Point in 1980. This document is an attempt to build on those earlier initiatives, to sharpen our analysis and strengthen our attempts at change. While we refer to this as a "Third World" perspective, it is inclusive of all who share in

the vision outlined above, whether from the South countries, from oppressed and disadvantaged groups within the North, or all others who share in and are committed to working towards its fulfilment.

In this context we believe that it is from the experience of the most oppressed – women who suffer on account of class, race and nationality – that we can most clearly grasp the nature of the links, and the kinds of action we must take.

Such a perspective would imply that a development process that shrinks and poisons the pie available to poor people, and then has women scrambling for a larger relative share, is not in women's interest. We reject the belief, therefore, that it is possible to obtain sustainable improvements in women's economic and social position under conditions of

growing relative inequality, if not absolute poverty, for both women and men. Equality for women is not made visible within those existing economic, political and cultural processes that separate resources, power and control from large sections of people. But neither is development possible without greater equity and participation for women.

Our vision of feminism, born of our experience as activists and analysts, has at its very core a process of economic and social development geared to human needs through wider access to economic and political power. Equality, peace and development by and for the poor and oppressed are inextricably interlinked with equality, peace and development by and for women.

Our main audience in this document is women – those who have, through this past decade and longer, attempted in practical and analytical ways to come to grips with the implications of such a vision. Indeed, the actions undertaken by women themselves, individually and through organizations, have provoked the most exciting and potentially most promising events of the last decade. Women have come together in organizations, networks, and movements. They have sought to tackle problems of income and employment, and to alter the ways in which society, governments, international institutions, men and women themselves, evaluate women's works. They have struggled to bring the basic survival of human beings and the right to live in dignity to the forefront of consciousness,

to organize against military repression and militarization, and in a host of other ways. It is women, therefore, who have been the catalysts behind many of the actions of governments, agencies, and others during the last ten years.

It is important for us in the women's movement to understand and acknowledge our own achievements and strengths. We are living in a time when the ideological climate and mood are more gloomy regarding the prospects for peace and for genuine human and economic development than they were at the start of the decade. It is easy to be pessimistic about the concrete achievements of the past years in improving women's economic and social position. They appear to have been as meagre as the resources that agencies and governments have actually directed to women. But why not look at our experiences in another way? We know now from our own research how deeply ingrained and how far back historically the subordination of women goes. What we have managed to do in the last few years is to forge world-wide networks and movements as never before to transform that subordination and in the process to break down other oppressive structures as well. Only women know how hard they have had to struggle within their own families and communities to achieve the personal autonomy that fuels and builds upon wider socio-economic change. Starting from little knowledge and training, and having to challenge the full social, economic, and psychological weight of gender (and often class,

national, and ethnic) oppression, we have acquired skills and self confidence, and the capacity for change.

While it is to such a process of ongoing self-empowerment that this document is dedicated, many of the issues raised here, the analysis, and strategies proposed are for the consideration and action of agencies and governments as well. But we realise from our experiences of the past decade that the political will for serious action by agencies is contingent upon women organising to promote change. We need, therefore, to clarify our role in affecting the major social and economic issues of our times, and to assess the successes, failures and potential of our organizations. We do this with the recognition that few large movements of our times have the mass potential, the freshness of vision, the courage to experiment with new methods for action, and the respect for adversity and challenge that the women's movement does. It is time for us to assert with clarity, rigor and passion.

*The full text of this presentation was written by Gita Sen with Caren Grown. Collaborating agencies and organisations in the DAWN project include the African Association of Women for Research and Development (AAWORD), Dakar, Senegal; the Women and Development Unit at the University of the West Indies (WAND), Barbados; the Asian and Pacific Development Centre (APDC), Malaysia; and the Chr Michelsen Institute (CMI), Norway. The DAWN project can be contacted through: Devlaki Jain, SMM Theatre Crafts Museum, 5 Deen Dayal Upadhyay Marg., New Delhi 11002, India.*

### Seeking Refuge ...

I want to fly  
but have no wings.  
I want to build  
a cosy nest — all my own  
but do not have  
even dried up sticks.  
My life melts away  
in dependence and obligation.  
Every kind deed —  
reminds me of my stateless state.  
I seek refuge from —  
being a refugee.

(December 1985, London, England.)

**Sudha Coomarasamy**



## Canadian Journal of Women and the Law Revue juridique 'La femme et le droit'

Canada's only legal journal providing in-depth analysis of legal issues concerning women

- Bilingual, multi-disciplinary approach
- 200-300 pages per issue
- Published theme issues include: *Women and Reproduction*, *Women and Custody*, *Women and Crime*. Upcoming: *Women and Work*

### SUBSCRIPTION RATES PER VOLUME (2 ISSUES)

- \$65. Institutions
- \$40. Individuals
- \$30. National Association of Women and the Law member discount
- \$20. Student/Low Income (outside Canada add \$5.)

For further information contact CJWL, 400-1 Nicholas Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7B7 (613) 238-1545