

The Gender Dimension to the Search for Global Justice

BY LEE-ANNE BROADHEAD

Cet article examine le concept de la mondialisation présenté comme un phénomène inévitable qui ne sert qu'à mystifier les pratiques dommageables de l'orthodoxie néolibérale. Les politiques du Fonds monétaire international, (FMI) de la Banque Mondiale et de l'Organisation mondiale du commerce (OMC) sont examinées à travers une lentille masculine qui étale les fausses promesses faites au nom des politiques néolibérales. L'auteure affirme que quoique les femmes aient régulièrement soumis leur vision pour un ordre mondial alternatif, elles ont toujours été marginalisées et que le prix de ce silence est lourd pour l'ensemble de l'humanité.

"I suppose this is going to be the new industry is it?" queried one of my colleagues when he caught a glimpse of the *Canadian Woman Studies*' call for papers sitting on the table. He laughed at the notion that globalization would have anything to do specifically with women.

Academics and activists who spend their time working on the importance of a gendered approach to political inquiry might well be hurt by the biting remarks. For my part, however, there is something more worrying about these callous, off-hand comments: the profound ignorance they reveal about the importance of gender issues in the modern world order. If the educated men of the academy can so easily dismiss the disproportionately heavy costs of the neo-liberal agenda borne by women then much less progress has been made than I had previously believed to be the case. These comments also point to the wisdom of the *CWS/ef's* editorial board in its decision to dedicate an issue to an in-depth exploration of the way in which globalization affects women.

It is indeed time to re-state (even yell from the rooftops) the importance of a gendered approach that can serve to highlight the false promises of the New Right, an agenda implemented through market de-regulation, privatization, and a dramatic reduction in social spending.

To begin, it is important that we take a close look at the language of *globalization*. The word is bandied about in common parlance as though it identifies a self-evident phenomenon. Indeed, the discourse surrounding globalization—with its air of inevitability—serves to mystify the operation of the international marketplace and encourage the belief that the direction of international economic policies and the myriad "free" trade arrangements are not a matter of choice or the outcome of ideologically-driven policy but are, rather, the result of inexorable forces

outside our control. This belief was neatly summed up by Bill Clinton's depiction of globalization as a "great tide, inexorably wearing away at the established order of things." Aside from the fact that this "tide" might well be experienced as a tidal wave by people around the world, why on earth is it inevitable? What makes it so?

Concepts are important, and to have such an obviously contestable one as this accepted by the media and many pundits as some sort of divine "given" is deeply troubling. It is clearly time to examine the pre-suppositions of "globalization" in a manner allowing the purposes and perspectives of its adherents to be drawn into the spotlight.

For the media, bureaucrats and politicians who use it, "globalization" describes a new world order in which advancements in communications technology bring states closer together, with the resulting benefits shared and transnationalized.

If we look behind the policies presented as the necessary accompaniments to the phenomenon, we can begin to see what is actually being supported: a set of policies aimed at the elimination of the role of the state as a force for mediating the harsh excesses of the marketplace. Globalization, it seems, can be regarded as both the cause and the effect of neo-liberal orthodoxy to the extent that the international economic structures establish policies which encourage (and sometimes force) states to take specific steps in order to play by the rules of free market competition, foregoing policies designed to ameliorate the negative social and environmental effects of social competition. The unwillingness or inability of states to resist this pressure lead to the very "reality" of a transnationalized economy which is presented as the reason for undertaking policy objectives in the first place. The circular logic is curiously simplistic—and, of course, convenient—as a tool for the invocation of economic harmonization as a self-evident good.

At the domestic level we can witness the various privatization projects, the elimination of health, environmen-

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tal and social regulations and standards previously deemed important and the acceptance of rules dictating these (and other) policies articulated by the institutions which oversee the world economic system, notably, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO). The subordination of national economic decision-making to the dictates of economic efficiency and a rules-based system constructed with a view to facilitating the interests of transnational corporations is the main ingredient in this particular recipe. Despite increasingly energetic protests on the streets and many articulate critiques of the ideological underpinnings of the project, governments around the world continue to advance the neo-liberal project which serves to *create* the conditions which are then described as inevitable.

So, there it is: the flimsy veil ripped from the claims of inevitability. Globalization stands revealed as nothing more than a concept to justify the transformation of the international economic system into one in which economic deregulation serves the interests of international capital. So why a need

for a gendered approach?

First and foremost, it seems to me, looking at the international economic order through gendered lenses assists with the important goal of exposing the illogic of the system in a concrete manner. The claims that the structures of this new "global" system are providing the "people of the world" with higher environmental, social, economic and human rights standards are obviously arguable. How better to contest such blatant fallacies than through an examination of the costs paid by those who bear the brunt of the dislocation produced by the rush to "harmonize economies" and "globalize" the marketplace?

Let's return for a moment to those pillars of the post-war economic construction upon which the "inevitable" was built. Presented as the institutional mechanisms by which peace and prosperity can be furthered, a close examination of the impact their policies has had—especially, but of course not solely on women—reveals a startling picture of the costs of "progress."

For the IMF and World Bank, the central task is to bring the world's various economies into line with the neo-liberal orthodoxy which is the foundation of "globalization." In order to qualify for loans and other forms of economic aid, these economic institutions attempt to "adjust" the economic operation of member countries in order that they can fulfill certain requirements. Through the much-despised Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), the IMF and World Bank established rigid economic

programs for participating countries. Any government can, of course, refuse to "restructure" in accordance with the proposed plan, but to do so is to commit economic suicide in the international marketplace.

What, one might ask, does this have to do with women? Unfortunately, a great deal. Although the declared aim of SAPs is the stabilization of developing economies, one of their central features is the imposition of harsh economic measures, particularly the demand for reductions in government spending on social welfare. Having little to do with the long-term development needs of the people in the target countries, the advocates of the SAPs demonstrated instead a clear-headed interest in ensuring that developing economies promote private sector operations and market liberalization. Encouraging foreign investment was to be a central component of the overall structure as was celebrating the inevitably low costs of resources to be sold on the international market.

Benefiting those able to take advantage of the deregulated and open economy, the poorest people in the affected societies have paid a heavy price indeed as agricultural and other subsidies were removed to ensure "global competitiveness."

Aside from the environmental costs associated with these policies (stemming, for instance from the degradation of land which inevitably results from the vast increase in exports of raw materials required to fulfill the IMF's dictate of increased commodity exports), a great deal of evidence has been gathered over the years to demonstrate that women (and, as a result, children) are hardest hit by the austerity policies which governments commit to in an effort to meet the standards set by the programs established by international bureaucrats thousands of miles away.¹

Women's unpaid work inevitably increases when governments diminish their role in the provision of social services. Often toiling outside the "economy" as it is defined by the policy wonks at international economic institutions, women's role is constantly diminished by the calculations of what a society is "worth." Aside from the very obvious point that women are rarely asked for their opinions about how to create the conditions for a more just and harmonious society, it is also worth mentioning that the notion of what makes a society "prosperous" is being dictated in the crassest of terms. The efforts on the part of women around the world to articulate their vision of an alternative global order are consistently and resolutely marginalized by the international media and virtually silenced by those to whom such original thinking is directed. Witness, for example, the lack of coverage of the concrete suggestions emerging from the Fourth United Nations Conference for Women held in Beijing in 1995. The silencing of women's visions—based on the lived experiences of those struggling to envisage a better world for all—is, alas, a theme all too evident in the world around us.

It should also be noted that it is not solely in the developing world that gender inequality is being exacerbated as a result of the institutionalization and globalization of neo-liberal economic policies. The evidence is clear in the developed world (including Canada): women's work load dramatically increases as governments rush to absolve themselves of any role in the provision of social goods (especially in areas of health, education and social policy) while, at the same time, the gender bias of economic austerity programs means that more women than men are negatively affected by the so-called restructuring of economies.² The costs of these misguided and unbalanced policy decisions take a toll on society as a whole.

Another central spoke on the wheel of globalization is the (so-called) "freeing" of trade undertaken by the WTO and, once again, the gender lenses help us to see more clearly the true costs involved. Space does not permit an extended consideration of the many social ills resulting from this supposedly progressive and beneficial activity but it is essential to at least point out that the corporate rules which are being embedded in the international trade agreements serve multinational interests and not those of the people who are displaced by the logical outcome of them.

Take, for example, the current quest for establishing intellectual property rights. We are living in an age where patent laws are seeking to own and quantify every living organism and to market it for profit. The corporate worldview embodied in—and furthered by—the WTO and its view of ownership and property is distressingly short-sighted. When a corporate executive can attempt to convince Indian farmers to buy into this narrow worldview by proclaiming that "we bring Indian farmers smart technologies, which prevent bees from usurping the pollen," (qtd. in Shiva 16) the major gulf between the corporate perspective and a traditional worldview based on true sustainability and an inclusive view of nature becomes evident. It is the women's and farmers' movements in India that have attempted to resist the seed patent laws threatening biodiversity with their corporate double-speak and quest for profits from all of nature. It is, as Vandana Shiva argues, the worldview of Indian women—an ecological worldview based on a belief in the interrelationship of species—that is necessary to counter the dangerous path of the trade proponents and their corporate allies.

There have, of course, been numerous strategies developed to challenge governments acceding to the neo-liberal orthodoxy and the destructive ideas of profit and control embedded therein, but international efforts to liberalize trade and investment have continued apace. Those who protest are declared to be "isolationist" (when, in fact, it is they who are often the true internationalists) or intent on policies denying the fruits of progress to the masses. These charges may be ridiculous but, even in an age of global

communications and access to wide-ranging ideas, it remains extraordinarily easy to sideline or silence views running counter to the dominant worldview.

As a further corrective to the view of those who would heap derision upon a gendered approach to the international realm, it is instructive to reflect on the most obvious example of the persecution and marginalization of women in the global order today. I mean, of course, the treatment of women in Afghanistan—not just by the Taliban, and before them the Northern Alliance, but also by the western media and governments.

The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) struggled through the nightmarish years of Taliban rule to draw the world's attention to its struggle to create the conditions for a just order within that country. Their attempts largely fell on deaf ears. The international community roused itself briefly in its attempt to save Buddhist statues threatened, and ultimately destroyed by the Taliban, then fell once more into silent complicity with, or indifference to, the regime's brutal war against women. The cynical, hypocritical claim on the part of the Bush Administration, and many other governments quickly falling into line with Washington's "crusade against evil," is that the coalition is attempting to rid Afghanistan of the Taliban in part to liberate the country's women. RAWA's opposition to the bombing campaign (described as a "vast aggression on our country") is not played alongside the tapes of bin Laden for a simple reason: the women of Afghanistan take the view that violence is not the way to rid the world, and their war-ruined country, of injustice and oppression. RAWA's vision of an alternative global order is unacceptable to those determined to bring all countries into the western orbit. Alternative visions of lasting peace and prosperity are, once again, silenced in order that the dominant perspective on global power relations can remain privileged and unchallenged.

Those who dismiss a gendered approach will doubtless continue to see power in the international system in an artificially constructed and constricting manner, never seeking to use all the critical tools at their disposal to understand the enormous costs incurred by some in the interests of others. The price of this ignorance is great—not just for women, but for the whole of humanity.

Lee-Anne Broadhead is Assistant Professor in the Department of Politics, Government and Public Administration at the University College of Cape Breton. Her book, International Environmental Politics: The Limits of Green Diplomacy is

An ecological worldview based on a belief in the interrelationship of species is necessary to counter the dangerous path of the trade proponents.

forthcoming from Lynne Rienner Press.

¹See, for instance, Gladwin; Pearson; Sparr; Ashfar and C. Dennis; Elson; Cornia, Jolly and Stewart.

²For an overview of the gender inequalities inherent in "globalization" see Krause and Jacobs; Cohen *et al.*

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ABOUT THE GUEST EDITORS

Peggy Antrobus is the founder of Development Alternatives for a new Era (DAWN) and was the organizer of the last Earth Summit held in Brazil in 1992. She is currently based in Barbados.

Brenda Cranney is a writer and artist living and working in Toronto. She uses photography as an integral part of her research. Her book, *Local Environment and Lived Experience: The Women of Himachal Pradesh*, was published by Sage in 2001.

Ana Isla is a member of Toronto Women for a Just and Healthy Planet. This paper was written as part of her post-doctoral research awarded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), Canada.

Angela Miles teaches in the Adult Education and Community Development Program at OISE/University of Toronto. She is a member of Toronto Women for a Just and Healthy Planet, author of *Integrative Feminist Perspectives: Building Global Visions, 1960s-1990s* (Routledge, 1996).

Patricia E. (Ellie) Perkins teaches environmental economics and ecological economics in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University. She has a Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Toronto, and formerly served as a policy advisor in the Ontario Ministry of Environment and Energy.

Linda Christiansen Ruffman is a Halifax member of the steering committee of the Feminist Alliance for International Action. A committed feminist, she teaches women's studies, international development studies, and Atlantic Canadian studies at Saint Mary's University.

Nandita Sharma teaches in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Windsor and is a founding member of the group, Open the Borders!.

Shannon Storey is the Women's President of the National Farmers Union in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, and is actively involved with issues of concern to farm women across the country.

Noulmook Sutdhibhasilp completed her Ph.D. (Adult Education) from OISE/University of Toronto in 1999. She is an active member of the Global Alliance Against the Trafficking of Women.