

GMOs Globalizing Male Omnipotence

BY HELEN FORSEY

Le débat sur les organismes génétiquement modifiés (OGM) doit inclure une analyse féministe. La des OGM par les grandes compagnies à travers le monde reflète une mentalité patriarcale de contrôle de la nature et de mépris envers les agricultrices et les consommatrices

As a woman who loves life, eats food, and works with farmers, I have watched the public debate over Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) with the keen interest of a participant-observer. After all, the issue of genetic manipulation touches multiple aspects of our lives—the safety and quality of our food, the health and stability of the environment, the on-going contest between the public good and private globalized corporate interests. Whether and how we as humans manipulate the stuff of life profoundly affects both the present and the future of our own and other species on this planet.

Everyone who is concerned about the rapid advance of genetic biotechnology pretty well agrees on that much. But in almost all the discussions, there is a gaping hole. Through all the talk of butterflies and bacteria, profits and preferences, nutraceuticals and novel foods, margins and marketability, almost no one seems to have noticed that the whole GMO enterprise reeks of patriarchy.

It is a hard thing to say in mixed company, but I am convinced that genetic engineering represents the culmination of the perverse but pervasive masculine quest for control. I trust that the reader will give me the benefit of the doubt and allow me to skip the ritual prefatory explanation of why this claim does not constitute “an attack on men,” so as to get on with the real discussion.

Admittedly, some of the connections between GMOs and male dominance may not be immediately obvious. Nonetheless, if you look beneath the surface, GMO technology itself, its ownership aspects, the way it is being introduced and promoted in the context of globalization, and even much of the controversy surrounding it, all demonstrate a fundamentally patriarchal mind-set. In this article I want to substantiate this claim, and address the problem this situation represents for women, other human beings, and the planet.

The Illusion of “Control”

For years, men have fought wars, built empires, colonized whole continents, taken over corporate rivals, and pen-

etrated outer space as they compete for mastery of the universe. Now, with the tools of biotechnology, they are invading what Indian physicist and activist Vandana Shiva (1997) calls the “inner spaces” of the living cell, trying to take possession of its DNA, the very stuff of life. The space may be different, but the mentality of conquest is the same.

The patriarchal illusion of control is one of the hallmarks of a globalized culture where “masculine” values predominate. Descartes’ famous declaration about becoming “the masters and possessors of nature” encapsulated this mechanistic mentality in 1636, and as Carolyn Merchant, Brian Easlea and others have noted, the same attitude has largely shaped scientific endeavour ever since.

This mentality and its corresponding practice are clearly linked today with the neo-liberal ideology of global capitalism, in which giant transnational corporations, almost always headed by powerful white men, seek to consolidate their ability to exploit other human beings and the earth. The World Trade Organization (WTO), international trade agreements, and specific agreements like the one on Trade-Related Intellectual Property (TRIPS)—basically, the patenting of life—embody that ideology and enable the corporate elites to pursue their goal of dominance, free of any constraints that might be imposed by local or national governments or by communities of people defending their human rights and their place on the planet.

Key to this on-going corporate endeavour is biotechnology, at once an extreme expression of the mechanistic world view and, together with the “intellectual property rights” that accompany it, a powerful practical tool for imposing that worldview on societies and environments across the globe. Those of us who have watched how patriarchy operates in other contexts recognize the familiar patterns and have little trouble connecting the dots. Unfortunately, however, most well-known critics of global devastation have failed to notice the role patriarchy plays at the source of the problem. Leading spokespeople in the environmental movement continually make statements like: “We have long thought of ourselves as masters

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of the natural world, but now that drive to dominate and control is having dangerous consequences.” Or: “Much of the planet is dying, and we are, all of us, the cause.” This language neatly avoids requiring anyone to confront the gender dimension of the domination mentality. It thereby also short-circuits the deeper analysis which is needed if we are ever to truly understand our predicament and move through and beyond it.

When we do take the gender dimension seriously, we become aware that seeing human beings as “masters of the natural world” is significantly and specifically a view of reality as men experience it under patriarchy. Most women find it hard enough to imagine ourselves as “masters” of anything, and that is not a mere quibble over a choice of words. Man’s “drive to dominate and control” has always been dangerous to women, to children, and to other living things; but we have regularly been ignored, ridiculed, and silenced—often brutally—for daring to try to point this out.

Feminists like Elizabeth Dodson Gray, Dorothy Dinnerstein, and Vandana Shiva have noted that

patriarchal societies have long identified women with “nature” and have sanctioned the all-out exploitation of both, at the same time colonizing or destroying earth-based cultures which honour the feminine principle and the natural world.

Meanwhile, women’s social conditioning and actual life experience tend to make us somewhat more skeptical of mastery and conquest, less obsessed with ownership, perhaps more respectful of natural processes. Someone who lives in a woman’s body and has to cope every day both with her own biology and with a whole range of male attempts at control, is less likely to fall for the dangerous illusion that “we” can (or should) ultimately manage everything.

GMOs and the Masculinization of Agriculture

In the specific context of the current genetic engineering debate, these gender-related realities make a difference at many levels. As female human beings, women are generally less apt to be entranced by a philosophical concept based on mastery of nature, less likely to be aroused by the prospect of exerting ultimate control over life. Women farmers and gardeners tend to be somewhat less susceptible to the pro-biotech ads in the farm press promising “More Bottom Line Power” or proclaiming “Just the Facts” about GMO seeds. As preparers of food, many women are suspicious of government and corporate propa-

ganda aimed at denying them informed choice through mandatory labelling of GMO foods. And, as the majority of the world’s poor, women are less willing to be taken in by promises of “happy-ever-after” in a brave new world run by the same technocrats and free-traders who have always exploited and impoverished them.

Of course it would be simplistic to suggest that the dispute over GMOs splits neatly along gender lines. Many men as well as women oppose the patriarchal values of dominance and control, and are valiantly resisting the onslaught of the biotech giants. Unfortunately there are also many women who have bought into the corporate pro-GMO line. This issue is not a case of men versus women, it is a clash of world views. But if we are to adequately address the pro-GMO position, it is essential that we understand its inherently patriarchal nature.

In an article entitled, “Monocultures, Monopolies, Myths and the Masculinization of Agriculture,” Vandana Shiva pleads for recognition of this crucial element. She points out that in most of the world, “women farmers have been the seed keepers and seed breeders over millennia,” practicing a subsistence agriculture which feeds masses of people. “In this woman-centred agriculture,” she says,

knowledge is shared, other species and plants are kin, not “property,” and sustainability is based on renewal of the earth’s fertility and regeneration of biodiversity. There is no place for monocultures of genetically engineered crops and monopolies on seeds.

Shiva’s vision contrasts sharply with the current picture she paints of “corporate men investing in theft and biopiracy (who) present themselves as creators and owners of life.”

Again, this male compulsion to own and control the life force itself feels eerily familiar to feminists. Some years ago, I heard Geraldine Finn speak at Carleton University about the way male science has attempted, through computer technology, to appropriate the creation of human intelligence. She held up a newspaper advertisement showing a computer in a baby carriage, and wondered aloud what the psychological appeal might be. Others around the world, observing men’s pervasive habit of claiming ownership of women and children and the key role in reproduction, have identified “womb envy” as a male phenomenon that transcends cultures. It seems reasonable to suggest that the same dynamic might be at work in the field of genetic engineering.

Shiva points out that the biotechnology corporations “call themselves the ‘life sciences industry’ even while they push millions of species and millions of small farmers to extinction” would add that this corporate abuse of the term “life sciences” parallels the use of the phrase “pro-life” by the opponents of reproductive choice. Both are patriarchal appropriations of life-affirming values—traditionally seen and experienced as women’s values—twist-

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ing them, and then trying to use them for anti-life, anti-choice, anti-female purposes.

The Feminization of Resistance

Another example of the neglected gender dimension of the GMO debate is the patronizing attitude of biotech proponents in the corporations and in certain corporate-oriented farm groups towards consumers who oppose them. The superior, condescending tone of much of the industry talk about “educating consumers” comes at least in part from a very male place, and is directed towards a mass of the population which is generally perceived as female.

Think about it: what image does the word “consumer” conjure up? A guy in a suit with a briefcase? A man in a checked shirt driving a tractor? Not likely. The typical image is of a woman, pushing a shopping cart through a grocery store with small children in tow. Against a cultural backdrop which still too often paints women as lightweight, “emotional,” easily hoodwinked by “scare-mongers,” the GMO pushers can indulge in paternalistic little homilies about “the customer” always being right, even though she may be “scientifically” wrong.

These people give no real credence to the possibility that all those consumers out there just might have good reasons for wanting to avoid genetically modified products. By disregarding the potential validity of women’s concerns, they can dismiss the widespread public opposition to GMOs as merely the “emotional” reaction of ignorant and gullible housewives to technological innovation. In the arrogance of this mentality, which is given considerable play in the mainstream farm press, consumer resistance is viewed as nothing more than a marketing challenge that the corporate PR and marketing people have to solve.

The reality of what’s happening in consumerland is, of course, quite different. The widespread and increasing opposition to genetically-modified foods from both female and male consumers is an informed and conscientious response to an unproven and risk-laden technology. Women in particular have been targeted too often by marketing experts intent on selling the latest in food additives or pharmaceutical products, and we have good reasons for being wary. For most of us, concerned about our own and our families’ health, the Precautionary Principle is the intuitive starting point from which we enter the GMO arena.

One of the most hopeful and inspiring examples of resistance to GMOs as harbingers of corporate globalization is the decade-long battle to ban Bovine Growth Hormone (BGH) from Canada. This genetically engineered “production aid” was Monsanto Corporation’s flagship product, introduced with great fanfare to demonstrate the marvels of GM technology. Injections of BGH forced dairy cows to produce up to 20 per cent more milk—and burned them out in the process. One would think Monsanto would

have realized the folly of trying to promote such a technology to anyone with mammary glands. Moreover, use of the genetically engineered hormone presented possible human health risks, and raised economic as well as animal welfare concerns at the farm level. Throughout the 1990s, Canadian farmers, consumers, scientists, health activists, and others mobilized in an unprecedented and persistent opposition to this intrusive drug, winning a permanent ban in 1999.

I would maintain that a non-patriarchal society could never have come up with anything resembling BGH. Nor, incidentally, could any human culture that was deeply rooted in nature and in the spiritual and moral values of humility and wonder, caring and respect.

It is not surprising, then, that women are the back-bone of the increasing world-wide opposition to GMOs. Except for the minority who have been bought or hoodwinked by industry interests, women—and the increasing numbers of men who are open to women’s perspectives—are generally unwilling to ignore the risks or to disregard the enormous unknown potential impacts of this technology on human beings and the Earth.

By contrast, the guys with the briefcases claim to know the facts, and they reassure us with all the confidence that their big salaries and sparkling career prospects bestow. “Not to worry, folks,” they say. “We’re managers. We’ll manage the risk, manage nature, manage the earth. There’s no problem when we’re in charge.”

How far will they go with their “management?” One of the largest biotech companies is reportedly on record as wanting to make all crops transgenic so that people will have no choice but to consume them. This outrageous, ultimate, “obey or starve” scenario is conceived in a place where the brown, the black, the poor, and the female are despised—and can therefore be manipulated or destroyed with impunity.

The issues in this struggle go deeper than even many activists realize. Like the movement for peace, like the movement to save the Earth, the resistance to the patenting and manipulation of life urgently needs feminist perceptions, the understandings we have as women. Let’s make sure it gets them. At stake is nothing less than the future of life itself.

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