

Women, the global economy and decision making

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Global trends that were just emerging at the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, have now come into full play. Foremost among these is the set of economic rules, institutions and activities called globalisation. Since Beijing, the relentless emphasis on trade liberalisation and market growth, accompanied by the growing domination of economic decision-making by transnational corporations and the WTO, has reshaped the economic environment in both developed and developing countries.

While globalisation has brought benefits to some, these benefits have been unevenly distributed—among people, within countries, and between countries. The top 20% of the world's population earns 74 times more than the bottom 20%, and the 200 richest people in the world have more money than the combined income of the lowest 40% of the world's population.²

Despite an unprecedented period of economic growth in the United States—arguably the world's richest and most powerful nation—34 million people are living below the poverty line. Women head a third of those households classified as impoverished. Minority black and hispanic women are particularly affected.

Globalisation hits women hardest and in multiple ways—as workers in the formal and informal sectors, as market vendors and small entrepreneurs, as food producers, as family caregivers, and as community activists. Despite all of the professed economic growth, women are still more than 70% of the world's 1.3 billion poor. The number of rural women living in absolute poverty has risen by 50% in the last two decades, as opposed to 30% for men. In Africa, Asia and Latin America, trade liberalisation has wiped out many of women's traditional livelihoods and forced them into low paying jobs with poor working conditions. And as state support for public services—including health, education, and water—declines, or as services are privatised, women are left with the added burden of finding ways to access these services for their families.³

In the United Nations and other international forums, women from around the world have come together for decades to articulate a gender perspective and to push governments to respond to women's needs by making firm commitments.

WEDO⁴ is one of numerous women's organisations from all over the world that played a major role in putting gender on the agenda of global institutions, beginning with the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. To ensure their issues were considered, women organised regional and global preparatory conferences and lobbied for the inclusion of strong gender language and perspectives in official documents.

Through these processes, feminist activists not only established that women bring particular concerns and expertise to development, but also that every issue is a women's issue. We are proud that there is now general acceptance that women's rights are human rights, as recognised at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna. We will continue to advance women's right to reproductive and sexual health, which we struggled for in Cairo at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development.

The commitment of 189 governments to a comprehensive agenda for women worldwide—the Beijing Platform for Action (PFA)—was a significant landmark. WEDO, working with national women's organisations, engaged in monitoring implementation of these commitments. Beginning with "First Steps: What Has Happened Since Beijing", WEDO issued four reports documenting governments' progress—or failure—to implement the Beijing Platform.⁵

Issued in 1998 and covering 80 countries, "Mapping Progress" is the most comprehensive of these reports. It documents the positive steps being taken—from the drafting of national plans to the establishment of implementation mechanisms, to new laws, to increased budgets.

But "Mapping Progress" also underscores the lack of progress in key areas including political representation and women's economic status. To effectively shape policies that affect their lives, the community and the broader society, women must be present in critical numbers wherever decisions are made—locally, nationally and internationally—in both government and economic institutions.

In 1995, women were ten per cent of elected officials in the world's governments. Six years later, that figure has risen to 12.7%—that's an increase of only .5% per year. At that rate it will take 75 years before women are assured equal representation in their national governments. In response to this lack of progress, WEDO launched the "50/50: Get the Balance Right" campaign to advocate for a critical mass of women in decision-making positions—at all levels of government, international forums, and economic institutions.⁶ Women's access to decision-making is the key to progress on the broader set of women's concerns, particularly with respect to globalisation.

WEDO promotes an integrated approach to effectively bring together micro and macro approaches and to link more explicitly across social and economic issues. But what we see is that by dividing the Beijing Platform into issue areas,⁷ this integrated approach is made more difficult. Separating the topics "Poverty" and "The Economy" may have made sense in 1995 when women sought to emphasise the gender-based inequities of poverty and the reality of the feminisation of poverty as an almost universal phenomenon. It became apparent at the 2000 Five Year Review of the Platform, however, that this way of examining the issues had serious shortcomings.

The main drawback was that domestic poverty alleviation took place in isolation from issues relating to formal labour market employment and the global economic activities that would become so significant over the next few years. This artificial divide made it more difficult to analyse women's economic status and address women's poverty.

In addition, the Beijing Platform emphasises poverty alleviation approaches such as micro-credit and micro-finance over systemic economic approaches. This limited support reflects the current attitudes of governments and international donors toward women's economic activities, both at the policy level and in terms of financial resources. Initially, micro-credit was seen as a critical breakthrough in improving women's economic status. The apparent accomplishments of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh—which offers small loans to women with no collateral—and its progeny have enabled millions of poor women around the world to better support themselves and their families. These programs must continue to receive major support. What is now clear is that micro-credit and micro-finance cannot be the only strategies employed to advance women's economic status.

1 Executive Director, Women's Environment & Development Organization (WEDO).

2 United Nations Development Program (UNDP). *Human Development Report 1999*. 1999.

3 United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). www.unifem.undp.org/ec_pov.htm

4 Women's Environment & Development Organisation.

5 *First Steps: What Has Happened Since Beijing* (March 1996); *Beyond Promises: Governments in Motion One Year After the Beijing Women's Conference* (September 1996); *Promise Kept, Promise Broken?: A Survey of Governments on National Action Plans to Implement the Beijing Platform* (March 1997; updated September 1997); *Mapping Progress: Assessing Implementation of the Beijing Platform* (March 1998).

6 For details of the campaign, visit the WEDO website: www.wedo.org. To join WEDO's governance network of over 250 individuals, women's groups and members of parliament send an e-mail to 50ingovernmentnetwork@yahoo.com.

7 Poverty; Education and Training; Health; Violence; Armed Conflict; Economy; Decision-making; Institutional Mechanisms; Human Rights; Media; Environment; The Girl-child.

WEDO and other advocates lobbied hard at the Five Year Review of the Beijing Platform to make women's role in the global economy more visible and to urge governments to take immediate steps to redress the negative impacts of globalisation on women. These efforts were limited by the structural shortcomings in the PFA, but nonetheless some important gains were made.

The final document⁸ calls for equal access to social protections for women, including new and more flexible forms of work associated with globalisation (110a). It links globalisation with other critical economic issues such as trade and debt, and calls for enhanced and effective participation of developing countries in international economic policy decision-making in order to guarantee equal participation of women in macro-economic decision-making (135a). The document also calls on governments to integrate a gender perspective in all budgetary processes (109a), to ratify ILO conventions on women's rights at work (127b), and to advance commitments to eradicate poverty and increase women's access to housing and inheritance and property rights (135d; 102k).

The Special Session of the General Assembly to review the 1995 World Summit for Social Development (WSSD+5) was convened in Geneva shortly after the Beijing appraisal. There were significantly less women present but they were able to build on the gains made at the Beijing review and cement the linkages between global trade, health and human rights in the final document.⁹ WEDO, along with other women's caucus lobbyists, also argued successfully for gender to be integrated throughout the text rather than concentrated into Commitment 5, the section on Gender Equality.

The central focus of WSSD+5 was on poverty eradication, a key concern for women around the world. Yet so much of the energy, time and resources of the women's movement has been concentrated around the women's conferences. These conferences were and remain fundamental for setting, reviewing and reaffirming a comprehensive global women's agenda but we cannot afford to stop there. This was true in 1995 but is even truer today.

The implementation of these hard-won commitments depends on the mobilisation of domestic and international resources. But these matters are discussed and decided elsewhere. With hindsight it is clear that the major systemic issues relating to macroeconomics and governance were not adequately addressed in either the Beijing or WSSD reviews. Unfortunately, following these meetings, many women's organisations, along with many governments, suffered from UN fatigue. While this is understandable—and we certainly share that fatigue—it is critical that NGOs, and women's organisations in particular, use the available space at the UN that WEDO and others have fought so long and hard to expand.

We have few alternatives. The World Bank, the IMF and, in particular, the WTO, provide few opportunities for participation by civil society. Women have managed to get a tiny foothold in the World Bank with initiatives begun in Beijing, including the establishment of national and regional watchdog groups working under the umbrella, Women's Eyes on the World Bank. But at the WTO, women's concerns are almost invisible—both in the formal meetings and even in the larger social discussion by NGOs. To the extent that WTO officials have reached beyond the business sector, it has been to address concerns of environmental and labour organisations. Women's voices, diverse perspectives and experiences are largely absent from these debates.

The United Nations is the most democratic and transparent international forum, with well-established rules of procedure for NGO participation. Thus, it offers NGOs and governments the opportunity for a serious dialogue on the current economic system. For too long, the UN has been sidelined by the IMF, World Bank and WTO as they aggressively pursue policies of structural adjustment, free trade and open markets. The UN is now seeking to reassert itself as a player in this growing debate, but it is not yet clear where it will stand.

The Secretary General's recent "Global Compact" initiative calls on business leaders to support core principles derived from UN agreements on labour standards, human rights and environmental protection in exchange for UN support of free trade and open markets. WEDO along with many other non-governmental organisations questions this new partnership. The United Nations was set up for "we the people". This does not mean it cannot have a relationship with the transnational corporations (TNCs), but it should not have a compact with them. The UN must seek to transform the laws under which TNCs operate within the global architecture and speak for the needs of the people and for development.

In 2002, the UN World Conference on Financing for Development (FfD) will take place in Mexico. An initiative of developing countries, FfD seeks to identify financial mechanisms to support the commitments made by UN member states at the previous world conferences. It also will undertake a discussion of the international financial architecture and the adequacy and effectiveness of development assistance.

Women activists must mobilise their resources—intellectual, human and financial—to be present in critical mass, to tell our own stories, to push for innovative solutions and to be serious players in these global debates. We must seek to influence not only the discussions by governments but also by mainstream NGOs, which too often need to be reminded to include gender equality as a central tenet of their demands.

For women, real and lasting change requires transformation of the global economic system, which involves both economics and governance—two sectors where women, despite the progress we have made, still lag far behind. We can no longer sit at the side of the table shouting to be heard. It is time to bring the gains of the women's conferences directly into the halls of power. This can only happen if we are present in large enough numbers to make our demands in a stronger and more unified voice.

We must articulate more concretely what some of these solutions might be, going beyond the need for more feminist analysis and gender sensitive policies. We must also demand a broader recognition of women's multiple roles, how essential these roles are to society as a whole, and ways to translate these roles in economic terms. ■

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8 United Nations Report of the Ad Hoc Committee of the Whole of the Twenty-third Special Session of the General Assembly. Supplement No. 3 (A/S-23/10/Rev.1). www.un.org/womenwatch/confer/beijing5/

9 United Nations Report of the Ad Hoc Committee of the Whole of the Twenty-fourth Special Session of the General Assembly. Supplement No. 3 (A/S-24/8/Rev.1). www.un.org/esa/socdev/geneva2000