

Can We Have a Women's Agenda for Global Development?

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This paper examines the "what and how" of the next stage of the women's movement looking at the influence and importance of Nairobi conference of 1985 and the development of women's movement world wide. Devaki Jain looks towards the future with respect to international Solidarity with the hope to develop new strategies which will influence government and gain full public attention for the ideas and interests of women in new international development policy.

The global agenda

My basic argument is that International Solidarity has to move from the realm of moral and financial support to joint action in the field of growth and development strategies. If the South has to rebuild itself in a way that is equitable across class and gender, in a way that is not environmentally destructive and in a way which reduces its decent into greater indebtedness then the North would need to follow development strategies which are similar so the South.

My second, but related argument is that more "oneness" is required in theory — in the intellectual arenas.

The two propositions may look contradictory — to ask for identity in action and then thought — but without agreement on theory, real agreement on action will not emerge. Hence to successfully implement proposal one, we need to succeed on proposal two.

My third proposition is that in this area of following similar economic and social behavioural patterns, women of the North and South can lead the way, and I propose to outline some of the areas where I think we can develop joint platforms.

Usually when the North wishes to "help" the South either it gives money, or technical services to help the South emerge out of poverty and backwardness, and or support at the moral level by supporting struggles against colonialism, racism, poverty etc. But its own production and consumption choices its own

social practices remain different and at a distance from the South. The North's advice is on the how and what of development of and for the developing countries. The advice excludes itself.

This distance creates a real problem for the South as any self-reliant, more appropriate, low-key strategies followed by the South look perpetuating poverty, marginalization. The North sets the model, the paradigm, which is an ever-receding goal.

Even the South Commission, where some of us tried to make a case for a less dependence creating, (i.e. more self-reliant) strategy of development, which necessarily means more inward looking, more "poor" supporting, other members strongly criticized us. They said we were miserabilizing our countries or that the North would only be too happy to leave us in our puddles of poverty. We had to enter the world arena like equal giants with the North.

Further, the articulation from the North does not reveal some of the difficulties the North is facing because of these strategies. For example the environmental hazards of certain technologies; the destruction of resources because of "over" consumption. The stresses on the social fabric and so on.

Women together on separate agendas

Against this background, I wish to propose that we women break this deep hard rock of separation which is damaging both for the North, for the feminist ideals of the North and the feminist ideals of the South.

It is my perception and experience that women of the North have been in the vanguard of the critique of Northern development strategies. They have had to fight for gender's accommodation in that growth process. They have allied themselves with Green and Peace movements as they have found that Northern production and consumption strategies have led both

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to environmental hazards and to militarism. *Thus they are the most appropriate configuration to make an appraisal of the economy and social history of their lands — from the point of view of equity, environment and peace.*

Women in the North, Researchers/Activists, especially, those who are involved in development (usually a term which is applied in the North to those involved in developing countries) could reflect on investment, production and trade strategies of their own countries. They could also assess strategies for social development especially looking at the two-way traffic between economies and societies and particularly focussing on the institutional arrangement in the North for such programmes.

Elected bodies, local government, legal and community institutions play a vital role in management of the polity. This aspect does not often get into development exercise. Institutional arrangements would include the State. To that extent it would be a dynamic triangle composed of three points — the state, society and the Economy.

It is women's articulation in the North which has sometimes worked in "alternatives" especially in production and trade, in health, in education. Clear and professional elaboration in the North of these ideas can support and perhaps give courage to adapt them in the South. It would be extremely difficult to put these new concepts to the ground until they are more clearly elaborated. At the moment these ideas are considered to be "marginalizing". If rich, growing countries, consider these legitimate and viable, then they will be seen in the South Countries as central and not marginalizing.

Similar exercises can be undertaken in the South. To some extent, DAWN is on this track.

Looking at the North with Southern lenses

It is sometimes suggested that since most of the women in the North who are working on development like those in the OECD/DAC committee on women etc., are more experienced in developing countries, and issues of the south my proposal will be difficult for them to implement. Actually, it is because most of such persons have experience of adjusting gender and equity in South countries, that I think they can bring the *relevant scrutiny of Northern development*.

What I am saying is that the measures, the items, which we use in looking at development and women in the South should be applied to the north and an assessment made of what it looks like against these measures. Obviously, some measures e.g., pertaining to extreme poverty hunger and death would not be appropriate. But there are other measures that we use in looking at South, e.g. in integrating women into economic transformation process or conversely feminist strategies, — consumption and social development strategies that can be used to see how the North "comes out".

Looking at the North with South created lenses might be productive and revealing, and help us to extract the positives

and negatives in a more, just intimate manner than the currently used double standards.

At another meeting in the Netherlands organized by the Evert Vermeer Foundation earlier this year, where I shared a platform with Jan Pronk, Minister of Development Cooperation, The Netherlands, I was encouraged by his response to my suggestion that the North imitates the South, rather than the reverse: namely the South imitating the North. He picked up a policy that India is now setting out on and said such a policy would be most appropriate for the Netherlands.

Waste generating, waste avoiding

In a review I have made of women's role in the protection of the Environment, I have found that if the people of the North followed some of the life styles and development practices of the South, green could be enhanced.

I have chosen *waste* as an element for this discussion. Poor societies have *waste avoiding* cultural practices. They grow and process crops such that all parts are used. When they cook and eat no grain can be wasted. When they "waste" it is recycled. Through religious and ritual taboos they are held *responsible* for wasting and even punished.

Other societies, usually the rich have *waste generating* cultures of productions and consumption — neither the producer nor consumer is held responsible for the waste he/she generates which is often toxic.

Today there are communities in the North who are separating their household garbage to degradable, recyclable, and "dangerous". These have always been the practice of households in the South, where the degradable waste goes to animals as food or the earth as compost.

Householders in the North are patronizing farming which does not use chemicals. People are returning to renewable non conventional sources of energy like the wind, the sun, animal and human excreta. Yet these were the conventions in the South especially amongst the poor till "development" brought the pollutants.

Most often it is women who are the forefront of such safe-food movements.

The other side of nonwasting or avoiding dangerous waste, is to change consumption styles — to reduce consumption, as well as to selectively consume what is least "dangerous" not only environmentally but also socially. Here too women have been the most sensitive to what I call the ethic of consumption restraint. When I spoke about an alliance in consumption between North and South, 10 years ago in Sweden, many women responded with enthusiasm and wanted to work out the modalities.

South critical appraisals of growth, of material progress could reveal areas of thought action where women, gender, feminists have identity of experience, the identity of thought whether North and South. This could lead to our capability putting forward a joint critique where we may have something

to say on the basic principles, the normative positions the classical categories, taken-for-granted measures, indices of development.

Looking towards 1995

In 1995 at the international women's conference (UN) we could have a joint platform called "New approaches to global development : a joint approach from women of the North and the South" to present a feminist perspective on development as a collaborative exercise drawing from gender based experience of economic and social change in the North and the South.

In order to make this event worthwhile, it would be important to initiate the activity as a process — gathering synthesizing, re-formulating, identifying critical main-springs of thought and action, associating such identification with similar items in main-stream development debate and so on.

Hopefully this would lead to a platform a set of actions around which all of us, North and South, can unite and do joint advocacy which would generate a form of economic progress which is friendly to all men and women and the Planet.

The Indian experience

It is my personal and South based experience which I have discussed above which gives me the basis — the hope to discuss with you some proposals for joint action.

I will take you directly to the current scene and my own proposals to our Indian women's movement. (Jain, 1990)

As you must have heard through the media Indian youth are setting themselves and buses on fire to protest against a policy of what is called special reservation, quotas in government jobs for sections of Indian society which have remained "Backward" I can tell you more about this at question time. There is a class and caste issue here in a situation of scarcity of employment. There is a fear that less will be available to those who are "on top" in terms of class, historical social opportunity. It is discussed in terms of class, lowering of standards, of merit selection.

Where is the women's response?

It was a sad really disturbing thought that during all this real violence and hatred, the Indian women's movement was invisible and inaudible. There were students, academicians, journalists agitating speaking writing but they were not gender issues, or the feminist, women's voice in the fracas.

Neither a group of women parliamentarians, legislators, nor lawyers, leaders of women's organizations, women writers came out with a view, or with a negotiating or counselling, mediating, healing hand. Why? somewhere we women (in India) had lost (or not struggled and strategized) our place in the

national scene. Hence I wrote an article "Needed: or "Missing" — Women's opinion on National issues.

I showed how in the pre-independence days no political move constitutional amendment, important direction to the economy could be given without counselling women leaders. I do not mean politicians who are women, but women who represent women, feminists if you like. In pre-independence India, the women's movement was the lobby for voter's registration, women's education and consumer vigilance.

Positive discrimination i.e. quotas is a well known experience and debate amongst women in India. It was an issue crying for direction by women. It seem to me we are not gathering our dispersed energy, forming stars of autonomous women's groups into a constellation of light.

Why? We have not got together to identify the major political and economic issues confronting our country or to thrash out our perspectives on them.

In India today for example, this cruel social conflict could have been avoided if the supply of education from elementary schools to Universities, the entitlement to resources including food, the employment base, had been widened so that opportunities and access were not limited to the powerful.

If the women's movement had taken on the advocacy for such policies, which are equity building, with militancy, with persistence, in the last 40 years, the current crisis would not have been there. After all if women stand for human rights, social justice, equity, then these programmes should have been theirs.

But they did not. We got involved with women's projects, integrating women into something called development, which escaped definition and capture — sometimes seemed invisible; sometimes an armed tank. We got into household violence, female-male problems. We marginalized ourselves.

An opening in the horizon for example is the economic strategy contained in the 8th Five Year Plan. It offers two major platforms (1) making the right to work a constitutional guarantee and (2) putting the finance and political will for development management into local bodies through the Panchayati Raj system. These two instruments — if fully put on the ground, can revolutionize access to material benefits of subordinate groups like scheduled castes, scheduled tribes. Other backward classes and women.

If every Indian citizen, man or woman, whatever the caste or class, can have not only an entitlement to income through work, but that the entitlement would be encashable because the national policy towards technology, towards agriculture and industrial towards that goal, such that the entitlement is encashable, then quotas or positive discrimination would become unnecessary at least at the mass level.

From this base of basic means of livelihood, it is not difficult to see subordinate groups emerging through the educational system into its own in the job market. Equally critical to the poorer, the less literate, the more physically handicapped oppressed social categories is the empowerment of the local body. Distant legal and political caste, class or gender.

Whether it is in food security or political security, its access, availability to the poor, the oppressed is a function of proximity.

Thus the Panchayati Raj bodies can provide a lever even if initially they are 50 percent dominated by the dominant classes and castes — to redress political and legal power, if not economic power. Reservation for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and women on these bodies and the fact that these bodies will be exposed to elections, namely the secret ballot, will definitely unleash a process of accountability at the local level, as it has done in Karnataka. Hitherto, invisible social categories will emerge into the public arena of awareness, advocacy and decision making. Even if 50 percent of this new unleashed power is corrupt or selfish, the other 50 percent will be the tail which will ultimately ensure upward mobility. Both programmes need a "Ring of Support" — an unleashing of effort to ensure "safe" landing on the ground. Otherwise they will appear in a mutilated form and once more the possibility of re-building India will be pass us.

What is distressing is that neither of these policies have been a subject of lively debate or thunderous support by the women's movement. While a sati or a rape or dowry immediately become "Women's news", these development programme which can make major shifts in economic and political power have been by and large ignored.

This is not to say that issues of personal violence such as sati, rape and dowry, harassment, which are a reflection of the subordinate position of the women are not important. But along with vigilance on these issues, there is need understanding and exercising vigilance on the major structural and political changes that are being formulated in the Indian polity. For example, the neglect to intervene — whether to support or to differ — in order to organize the frame work by which these instruments will land effectively on unequal soil is an indication of perhaps a lethargy or a fragmentation within the movement.

What would be extremely useful is if the women's movement can ensure that these two instruments get on the ground in their conceptual integrity.

The review done so far is to illustrate the current inertness of a potentially rich, creative mass, namely the Indian women's movement. The time for its awakening and for its active intervention in national politics has come.

In this context, it is possible to conceive of the proposed National Commission on Women as playing a significant role. For instance, the Commission can provide the receptacle or focal point for bringing together the women's perspective on these national issues.

It can catalyse in an organized manner this dispersed intelligence and awareness.

International strategies

But working in the South Commission has taught me that the South, even at its most affirmative level can not throw back

these legacies, on its own the North too will have to say, show that these theories are wrong, i.e., they have not led the Northern societies to the green pastures.

Wherever we go South or North, we hear of rethinking development, defining development, of alternative development specified into alternatives in employment, in health, in education, marketing, indices of evaluation (peres) and so on.

But these dissenting voices in development expressed most forcefully in protests, resistances by the "movements", environmental, women, ethnic minorities and so on — usually aggregations, networks of grassroot organizations are not able to contain the dominant development paradigms. They are, in spite of their visibility, voices in the wilderness, even if the wilderness is larger in size, and more beautiful than the cultivated territory occupied by the so called mainstream.

But it is not easy. (In development as in defence there are the "hawks" and the "doves" and there is a continuous battle between them (as in the US Pentagon).

The hawks are those who promote rapid industrialization even if it means imports not only of goods but technologies, even if it means that the economy is bent basically to export, a heavy converting dispersed, peasant societies into urban modern, perhaps concentrated population societies. They would not be inhibited in entering world markets whatever the cost in fact would see "progress" and "modernization" in terms of presence in the world market. They would thus push and pull the economies and societies of the poor countries towards what is called high rates of growth accompanied by the manufacture of industrial products and their exports and the presence of modern cities apart from modern goods.

The doves are those who propose a more dispersed form of growth, a growth which may not show itself in the trade statistics but would show itself in the employment and wage statistics, a growth which sometimes may not show itself in the production statistics but in fact would in a kind of non-monetized or less properly counted production and trade that goes on in the large traditional zones of the poor countries. The doves would emphasize the production of health, food, the provision of basic education, health as necessary preconditions of economic growth as they would the growth of human capability. They would argue that equity and growth can go hand in hand. They would even argue that in the long run sustainable growth even in terms of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) even as it is measured now will be possible if the stimulus for growth comes from a more dispersed or a wide spread change than in the obvious small sectors associated with modern development.

The South Commission too had its "hawks and doves".

The hawks warn against "inward" looking strategies, marginalization from the global mainstream. Poverty focussed development strategy or walking with the poor out of poverty by modifying consumer styles, adopting labour intensive production process, worrying about wage goods and not the value of exports or rank in industry was called "miserabilization" — becoming poor, instead of making the poor rich.

The North would be too happy to leave you in your puddles they said.

There was difference of opinion on who are the actors in development — governments or “people”. Those used to working from governmental and intergovernmental tables could only see the history of the world through official events. The energetic, creative, strong impulses towards development emerging from the “soil” in the poor countries were not recognized. To that extent, the need to shift responsibility for change from the State to society, through decentralization and using of people’s institutions seemed a risky venture to those from establishments.

Finally, of course wisdom prevailed and the South Commission also supports a style and substance of development that makes livelihood, and human capability building, with democratic politics its charter of development.

Moving towards equitable development

But whatever it is India or the South, this type of development which generates growth from the “traditional” production and trade base, which keeps a low profile on the high tech goods and sources, which appeals to austerity is not accepted as good economics. Further the entrenched classes and institutions in the North and South will not allow it wisdom to prevail as it will hurt them.

It appears therefore, that first, the real impediments for cooperation in eradicating poverty, the worst form of violation of human rights is the hard-rock of orthodoxy in economics, in politics, in the conceptualization of the social sciences, the categories, theories that they generate. It is necessary not to limit development cooperation only to material transfers, but to go the root of the nature of development.

Second, a paradox — that macro processes, structures and theories whether at national, regional, or international level are

the key to change (not the micro grass root organization) and at the same time issue based movements like environment, women, workers are the key instruments for change, not governments, not even summits.

Third material cooperation is necessary but less critical than intellectual cooperation between North and South.

Fourth an entire economic edifice built from conceptualization of the principal actors in economics, to theory, practice and normative indices would need to be pulled down/can be pulled down if an innocuous looking production programme which will give a right to work to the poor is genuinely implemented. This programme, this right can not be exercised unless we have decentralized, “people centred” people — designed (intelligence of local ground level) development where accountability is enhanced. Consequently, that this right can not be exercised unless there is a democratic system elections through the one person one vote principle, with multiple choices to a local government which is accountable — susceptible to the voter. Right to development needs forward and backward linkages — sharpens its focus towards equity.

Fifth, the divide of class, ethnicity and gender — in countries North or South rich or poor can not be resolved with a political process — and that process has to permit the expression of distress, whether the distress is political or economic, individual or collective.

Sixth, the economic theory underlying development thrusts, needs, not only dismantling but re-assembling to show that people-centred, poverty removing strategies are both more efficient and often more sustainable in their growth path than the “backing the fast horse” approach and for legitimizing this theory, North/South intellectual alliance is crucial.

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Reference

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