



**DAWN DEVELOPMENT DEBATES**  
**“Re-imagining Feminist Politics and Strategies in the Global South”**  
**Mauritius, Africa**  
**18 to 20 January 2010**

**CONCEPT NOTE**

**BACKGROUND**

Twenty-five years have passed after DAWN published its pathbreaking contribution to development debates entitled, “Development, Crisis and Alternative Visions: Third World Women’s Perspectives,” by Gita Sen and Caren Grown (1986) that examined “in great depth why and how strategies designed to achieve overall agricultural growth and industrial productivity have proven to be inimical to women (p. 16)”. At that time, DAWN wrote about converging systemic crises that arose from erroneous development policies and emphasized that “the solutions to the systemic crises that are being put into place (viz., structural adjustment programs) are creating a major reproduction crisis, especially in the indebted Third World countries...Particularly, in the context of the debt crisis, the interests of poor women appear to lie in joining their voices to the struggle for a more structurally sound international and national economic order (p. 66).”

Starting in the late 1960s, economic processes had begun to favor trans-border production, exchange and consumption as well as the global expansion of finance, knowledge and the services sector. These processes intensified in the 1990s. The creation of a global capitalist market along neo-liberal economic logic proceeded apace. The structural adjustment programs of the 1980s which laid the foundation for the rapid integration of national economies into a global market had now been supplemented by the rules of an emerging World Trade Organization and of new regional free trade and economic partnership agreements that consolidated a number of disparate bilateral trade and investments treaties of the earlier period. This was the era of the emergence of the so-called Washington Consensus – the neoliberal implicit compact between the Washington based Bretton Woods institutions and the US government. After the 1997 Asian financial crisis, an augmented Washington Consensus attempted to present itself as a more benign version.

The first decade of the 21st century has been marked so far by two unprecedented critical events: the ‘war on terror’ and, more recently, the global financial crisis. There has also been an expansion of human rights institutions, including the International Criminal Court and the Human Rights Council. Externally generated crisis in its varied forms and the resolutions to crisis in all their complexities have come to preoccupy all sovereign nations and the peoples they govern. At same time, these nations and peoples struggle to uphold values associated with sustainable livelihoods, poverty eradication, human rights promotion, freedom of expression and mobility, respect for identity and sexuality.



Today, we hear development economists and policymakers pronouncing the demise of the Washington Consensus. This may be true. However, although the consensus may be dead, a fierce new world had already been born—a world that is full of shaken premises, complicated contradictions, serious fractures, severe backlash, broken promises, and uncertain outcomes for the world’s women, especially women from the economic South.

The DAWN Development Debates 2010 takes place 25 years after DAWN was launched and builds upon two other DAWN publications that followed its first book. The first was a DAWN book on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights edited by Sonia Correa (1994) which is DAWN’s first book on reproductive rights and the politics of the body, and reflected what emerged in the 1990s as a major advance for women’s organizations in integrating sexuality and reproduction into analysis, advocacy, movement building, and work on the ground. The second produced at the turn of the century was the “Marketization of Governance: Critical Feminist Perspectives from the South,” edited by Vivienne Taylor (2000). In this volume, DAWN called for challenging global economic institutions and re-issued the call for feminists to reclaim governance through alternative visions.

## **THE FIERCE NEW WORLD**

### **Financialization and Global Governance**

The challenges of responding to the global financial crisis arrive at the heels of market-oriented policy frameworks that have undoubtedly influenced late 20th century economic reforms. Financialization at the core of 21st century capitalist production has meant that profit generation depends all the more on returns from financial transactions rather than production and commodity trades (Epstein, ed. 2006). For rich countries, holders of financial assets account for much larger shares of national income. The increasing importance of the financial sector of the economy has also meant that macroeconomic policy create an environment of high interest rates for higher returns on financial instruments and lower inflation in order to keep real money values steady. These have had dire effects on the non-financial sector, particularly for agriculture and manufacturing. Asset bubbles and sharp fluctuations in commodities prices have created havoc on the ability of peoples to meet basic needs such as food and housing.

These trends have resulted in a profound modification of the public-private balance, affecting employment generation, sustainability of livelihoods, the provision of services, as well as, regulation and governance. In many inter-governmental spaces, developing country governments have been fighting vigorously for greater policy space to pursue their developmental goals. Debates on the role of the state and relevance of sovereignty have become increasingly lively.



Where is the place for social reproduction in the new world and how do we redistribute resources and opportunities? How do we put an end to the production and reproduction of inequalities by neoliberal policies? The gendered impacts of the global crisis have been raised under this political context: that impinges upon the time burdens of women; that women absorb care burdens even more as market-based services or public services become less accessible; higher unemployment rates, or women increasingly being marginalized into the informal sector, or worsening of working conditions. This describes the fate of women with every crisis.

The reconfiguration and realignment of international political relations towards a multi-polar world brings its own set of complexities to feminist challenges against unjust power structures. States and governments have attempted to assert for a structure in global economic governance. Yes, these new poles of accumulation and new centers of power, such as the large, middle-income countries, have not translated their actions into new directions and strategies for socio-political transformation.

### **Militarization and the Internationalization of Conflict**

The nature of conflict and war has changed from predominantly inter-state to intra-state conflict with civilians, mainly women and children being severely affected. Conflict and attendant militarization are often buttressed by juridical situations that suspend the normal rule of law with the introduction of emergency powers and repressive legislation creating a 'state of exception' in which citizens are reduced to 'bare life' stripped of their ordinary rights (Agamben 2005). In such militarized environments, law and order and accountable governance are suspended for military ends. This environment results in the disintegration of democratic rights, such as freedom of expression, freedom of association, and freedom of mobility, among others. Thus, the state of exception becomes the norm.

However, the lines dividing intra-state and inter-state conflict are muddy. Secessionist claims may be supported--militarily, economically or politically--by other sovereign states. Or, armed conflicts over natural resources can cross international borders. When natural resources, not only energy resources but also key minerals, primary products, and narcotics, are at the center of militarized struggles for power, conflicts tend to take longer to resolve and its internationalization makes resolution even more complicated to achieve, as political struggle over legitimate grievances becomes enmeshed with economic greed. In many situations, the struggle for control of key resources with involvement of former colonial powers is at the heart of conflict.

As the horrors of contemporary wars and conflict increase so has the need for humanitarian assistance. However, the principle of humanitarianism which is theoretically grounded on the concept of apolitical neutrality should be challenged as it remains silent in the face of a spectrum of violations perpetuated by both state and non state actors. In the post 9/11 context,



humanitarianism is also challenged by the political objective of selective military intervention and the responsibility to protect. Humanitarianism is thus not detached from politics and must be based on the insistence that human rights and humanitarian law that should be respected in all arenas of conflict from the local to the global.

Development and human security are intimately related—one cannot be achieved without the other. Contemporary wars occur in the sites of the most severe social divisions, calling forth multiple forms of crisis all at once (Petchesky and Laurie 2007). Militarization is integrally linked to systemic violence and together with armed conflict and civil war has played a major role in shaping and changing women's lives. As violent conflict kills, maims and destroys peoples, economies and livelihoods, development goals and achievements are reversed in climates of insecurity. Whether victim-survivors or recruited as combatants in war, women are forced to live in this militarized economy and under militarized globalization. With no alternative means of employment in the context of the breakdown of rural economies, mothers and wives have come to accept organized armed groups, including the military, as the sole avenue of employment for their sons and husbands (and perhaps, even for themselves). Along with this has been the rise in the numbers of widows and female-headed households. However, women are not merely victims of conflict, thus, calling for a problematization of the notion of victimhood with regard to both women and men. Responding to the gendered nature of both conflict and conflict resolution therefore requires a nuanced understanding of the multiple roles played by men and women and how aspects of masculinity and femininity are reproduced and reconstructed through armed conflict and processes of transition towards peace.

### **Advances and Contradictions with Human Rights**

The last decade has witnessed major steps forward in legitimising a more holistic approach to “development”, which has led to efforts that address inequality and poverty through a multi-dimensional approach, taking into account empowerment, freedom, well-being and human rights of all people. The global women's movement can boast of important achievements in the area of human rights, where women's rights are increasingly recognized. At the global institutional level, the combined advocacy efforts of human rights defenders and women's rights activists have secured strong and consistent support to the principles of gender equality and women's rights. The appointment of a Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and of a feminist to the post of Independent Expert on Cultural Rights; the inclusion of women's rights issues in the outcome documents of most global processes, along with the establishment of mechanisms such as the Human Rights Council and its representatives at regional and national levels are among the recent advances resulting from these advocacy efforts. In parallel, political and policy advocacy around sexuality issues and related areas has evidently become more visible both at the national and global levels, as exemplified by the international debates on HIV/AIDS, sexual rights and more



recently, the articulation of human rights principles to tackle discrimination and violence related to sexual orientation and gender identity (Yogyakarta Principles; December 2008 GA Declaration).

In spite of these advances, the implementation of the international conventions on women's rights remains problematic. Furthermore, there are unresolved issues related to the seemingly gender-neutral human rights standards that are applied, which do not recognize differences and promote a universal conception of citizenship built with both heteronormativity and elite males in a given society as the norms. For instance, African feminist activists and researchers contend that this dominant conception is not adequate for the African postcolonial context where women's citizenship is still largely defined by ascribed social relations of subordination, and their relations with the state are mediated by men, kin or communities. It is even more inadequate in the context of globalization where an "internal patriarchal closing of ranks" occurs as social subgroups or communities strive for their specific interests and rights in relation to the broader national community. In such a context, women at the community level are often forced to accept community culture and values defined by subordination. This is compounded by the prolonged crisis of many nation-states in the Africa region, where women are particularly affected by the exclusions resulting from their fragmentation and capture by both national elites and external forces. On one level, state policies already reflect some elements of "gender equality" frameworks but on the whole, these stop short of fully engaging issues of women's empowerment and in particular, sexual rights and health and reproductive rights.

### **Development Dilemmas with Climate Change**

Although it has been explicitly recognized that historically industrialized countries have created the climate change problem, they have yet to assume the greatest share of responsibility for development dilemmas that come with it. Instead they continue to deny their historical and current responsibilities and pass the burden of mitigation and adaptation onto developing countries. This is apparent in the substance of inter-governmental discussions, which have not been about decisive changes in patterns of over-consumption and production or long-term structural changes to the unsustainable nature of the neo-liberal economic system. Rather, deliberations and negotiations emphasize ways and means to sustain the existing patterns and approaches to continue meeting the global resource needs of the North while they simultaneously push for technological and market-based solutions where transnational corporations will make the most out of the climate crisis.

Market and technical 'fixes' to climate change, such as carbon trading, agrofuels, nanotechnology, geo-engineering, and synthetic biology, are at the center of these discussions and are part of capitalism's response to the climate, food and fuel crises. Yet these solutions are not neutral in their design or effect and will ultimately undermine food sovereignty, threaten to appropriate the





biological resources and livelihoods of peoples and disrupt the systems of ecological balances for the entire planet.

Greenhouse development rights and various mitigation and adaptation funding mechanisms are other attempts at seeking compromise solutions but will still fall short of shifting the international division of labor and the asymmetrical interdependence between the North and the South. Also worrisome is the resurgence of Malthusian notions linking population stabilization and climate change despite the fact that these connections have been challenged by feminists most notably in the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development.

In the vast terrain of global environmental change, there are massive impacts on livelihoods and survival and thus, on women's work burdens. The framing of women as a 'vulnerable' group is widespread in the discourse; instead, there is a need to recognize women as change agents engaged in struggles over fossil fuel exploitation, pollution, health, agriculture, water, access to energy etc. The relationship of the 'green' movement with women's movements and feminists also warrants further investigation.

### **Women's movements and multilateralisms**

Whether at the national, regional or global spheres, women's movements are still confronted with a daunting challenge, which has been articulated as follows by DAWN members: "if a human rights framework is our core analytical tool, then we need to articulate clearly the connection between women's rights and the rights of others" (Antrobus and Sen 2004).

In pursuit of our transnational advocacies, how relevant is the United Nations as a multilateral site and for insuring good global governance? In light of the paradigmatic shifts induced by globalization; the decline of the nation-state and the reconfiguration of the geopolitical context, the UN as a multilateral site is being re-examined. Some suggest that the UN is no longer appropriate for both the revival of multilateralism and civil society engagement. It is a state-centered space that has become very politicized, and is also fragmented by its connections with a number of 'silos', namely finance, security, trade, climate change, and, human rights. Hence, the need for a new and people-centered space outside the UN, and correlatively, the examination of civil society as an alternative space, along with its potential for mobilization and propositions.

Such an examination raises many thorny questions for the global women's movements, such as the legitimacy of civil society organizations (CSOs) as representatives of citizens, including women; the politics of CSOs' engagement with the UN; the branding of CSOs by the powers-that-be in global economic governance; the adequacy of the existing categories of CSOs to governance systems such as those of indigenous peoples; and the existing power politics and asymmetries within the civil society space. In particular, the types of spaces created by and for CSOs - namely



the invited, claimed and demanded spaces—and the dynamics of those spaces have critical implications in terms of legitimization, accountability, fragmentation and power relations. Moreover, the concept of multilateralism, which is rooted in the postcolonial context, needs to be analyzed against the backdrop of the neoliberal and neoconservative forces at play, along with the institutionalization of CSOs as non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The threads and thematic issues of the planned DAWN debates derive from the contextual issues discussed above and will revolve around questions that have been raised by Peggy Antrobus and Gita Sen in 2004, and have become even more crucial at this juncture: “What is the social project of the global women’s movements and is it larger than identity politics? Does the feminist social project go beyond the project of the movement for global economic justice? And if so, how?”