

GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS FOR WOMEN

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The United Nations sponsored Decade of Women (1975-1985) brought about an unprecedented level of international awareness of women's issues and the vital role of women in development. However, as we enter the decade of the 1990s it is clear that an immediate effort is necessary to build upon the gains made during the Decade of Women, or else the progress made is going to be lost. UNU has pledged to foster global change and global responsibility as its vision for the 1990s. Unless women are targeted and women's issues placed on a priority agenda this pledge cannot succeed.

In the late 1980s two unexpected trends emerged. On the one hand a wave of human rights movements and the opening up of Eastern Europe; on the other a retreat on women's rights and the status of women world-wide: from widow immolation and dowry deaths in India, to female infanticide in both India and China to reiteration of Sharia laws in various Muslim countries to curtailments and restrictions of reproductive rights in the USA, Canada and certain parts of Europe.

Many regions are also currently experiencing a serious recession. Simultaneously social welfare programs have been cut back by governments. Though health problems, such as the AIDS epidemic are affecting millions of lives, governmental expenditures on health care have slowed in many countries. Military expenditures on the other hand have not been cut in the same proportion and the share of the national budget devoted to the military has actually increased dramatically in several countries, including India and China, recently. In Latin America GDP in 1986 is lower by over 10 per cent over 1988; in some countries the decline has been 15-20 per cent (American Development Bank 1987). In the United States 57 per cent of Black families with two or more children are below the poverty line, and the life expectancy of both women and men is actually falling.

Nor does the expanding global economy hold out the promise of better jobs for women. More women are now employed as wage workers than ever before. Worldwide however, wherever jobs have declined in the formal economic sector, and men are forced out of jobs in the indus-

trial sector, the employment of women in the formal sector with homeworking and the service industries has increased. Upto three-quarters of the new jobs created in some parts of Europe in the 1980s consisted of part-time and temporary jobs, many involving homeworking (International Restructuring Education Network, Europe, Issues No.12, 1998). Women form 90-99 per cent of homeworkers. The numbers of the working poor in the vast majority of countries has continued to increase in the 1980s, with women remaining the poorest of the poor.

This state of affairs does not bode well for the future of the world in the 21st century. It is clear that as we head into the 1990s a commitment to global responsibility must imply a renewed commitment to women's issues. The UNU is well-poised to take a leadership role in refocussing world attention on this neglected majority of the world's population by pursuing a multifaceted strategy of research and advocacy.

Three spheres in need of immediate attention and potential research targets can be charted out:

THE-FOOD-FUEL-WATER-CRISIS: The impact of environmental degradation on women as a result of hydro electric projects, irrigation dams, the development of wood based industries, industrial pollution of water and so on has not been adequately evaluated.

While the increased labor of women in fuel gathering, the destruction of economic trees reducing sources of income, the absence of safe water and its impact on infant mortality have been noted, innovative strategies have yet to be developed to ensure women's concerns are integrated into the planning of these projects from their initial stages. The activist efforts made by women at the local level to protect their livelihoods have typically been disregarded by the state governments.

Allocations for programs targeted at women need to be sharply increased. One study of the funding practices of specialized United Nations agencies estimated that in 1982 only 8.05 percent of the total allocations in the United Nations system to the agricultural sector were to programs for rural women (Sen and Gown, Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions, 1986:44). Affirmative action quotas need to be established which would prohibit international funding of organizations which do not have women at least 25 percent of staff and do not

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target at least 25 percent of their funding for programs for women.

THE RESTRUCTURING OF THE INTERNATIONAL ECONOMY: The consequences of privatization; the casualization of labor and the feminization of poverty need to be understood globally. Privatization of public enterprises, pushed by the World Bank, IMF, US government agencies and multi-lateral lending agencies since the mid-1980s, have had the effect of replacing hundreds and thousands of permanent jobs in the public sector world-wide with temporary and part-time positions. This has undermined both the earning capabilities of workers and the rights of workers protected by union contracts. There is practically no data on how this has affected the family and contributed to the rising incidence of female-headed households. Workers' rights and access to health care is also a major concern in the proliferating export-processing zones. As of 1985 there were 200 such zones world-wide. Many involve the use of hazardous chemicals; at all sites work-speedup are common with workers receiving no protection whatsoever. The vast majority of export-zone workers are women. Efforts to unionize and develop collective protection of workers rights have led to repression by the various national governments, including arrests, and "disappearances" of union organizers.

A violation of workers rights must needs be understood as a violation of basic human rights. In a global economy, the responsibility for the protection of workers rights must also be implemented globally. International funding agencies and the UNU need to be far more outspoken in their advocacy of workers' rights and human rights as part of the stated ideal of global responsibility.

CULTURE, POLITICS OF EXPEDIENCY AND VICTIMIZATION OF WOMEN: The rise of religious fundamentalist movements throughout the world from the Islamic to the Christian to the Hindu and Buddhist and

Jewish and the anti-democratic tendencies of these movements are inimical to both human rights and a respect for human diversity.

Repeatedly in the 1980s the world has seen fundamentalist religious ideology being used to restrict the reproductive rights of women, the freedom and mobility and equality under the law. The alliance of government office holders and the religious right has enabled the passage of legislation which would not be possible if the items of legislation were placed under public scrutiny and included in the ballot in public elections in those countries where there are free elections. A false equation has been made between "religion" as "culture" by many fundamentalist religious organisations; a position that is both irreligious and anti-humanist.

The achievements of the Decade of Women have been the most dramatic in the spheres of raising consciousness of women's issues. But mass education projects to change the acceptance of inequality of women by men have not been undertaken. If the vision for the 21st century is a democratic vision, projects to sponsor a global culture of equality and respect for diversity must be developed. Democracy cannot thrive globally if it remains a political slogan, with no reverberations in daily life where control of half the population of a country is systematically imposed by the other half. The UNU can pioneer a pro-human rights approach to religion and aid in the development of a genuinely egalitarian global culture for the 21st century.

The decade of the 1990s, in the aftermath of the various movements for democracy and hopefully a peace-dividend from the termination of the Cold War, provides an opportunity to redress existing gender inequalities and build on the accomplishments of the Decade of Women. However, if this opportunity is not seized, and gender inequalities are allowed to multiply, the vision for global change with global responsibility is also jeopardised.

Human beings understand themselves and shape their future by arguing and challenging and questioning and saying the unsayable; not by bowing the knee whether to gods or to men.

Salman Rushdie
'In Good Faith'