



Beyond the Theory-Practice-Activism Divide

'Tensions in Activism: navigating in global spaces at the intersections of state/civil society & gender/economic Justice '

*Workshop on Gender & Globalisation in Asia and the Pacific:
Feminist Revisions of the International*

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The twin aims of this workshop are to cross the theory/practice and academic/activist divides, and to locate gender/Asia/Australia within the framework of both the political economy of globalisation and growing transnational links, as feminists use new global technologies and regional and international fora for feminist purposes (Pettman, pers.comm). Both these aims find resonance in DAWN's work of building critical South feminist analyses of global issues, strategically locating itself as a feminist network within the paradoxical spaces opened up by globalisation, and engaging with other networks in its advocacy for economic and gender justice.

In 1985, when DAWN produced its first global analysis - a critical appraisal of women's development experience and a South feminist critique of the dominant, economic growth model of development - we articulated a vision. The vision appears in that first DAWN book, and reads:

'We want a world where inequality based on class, gender and race is absent from every country and from the relationships among countries... where basic needs become basic rights, and where poverty and all forms of violence are eliminated...[where] each person will have the opportunity to develop her or his full potential and creativity, and women's values of nurturance and solidarity will characterize human relationships...[where] child care will be shared by men, women and society as a whole... where the massive resources now used in the production of the means of destruction will be diverted to areas where they will help to relieve oppression both within and outside the home...[T]his technological revolution will eliminate disease and hunger and give women means for the safe control of their fertility. We want a world where all institutions are open to participatory democratic processes, where women share in determining priorities and making decisions' (Sen & Grown 1987:80-81).

There have been many times when we in DAWN have revisited and reaffirmed this vision, most recently in the wake of the September 11 atrocities and their equally horrific aftermath, namely the US-led punitive bombing raids on Afghanistan in which untold numbers of women and

children have been killed or horribly maimed. The fact that the vision statement continues to be as relevant today suggests, depressingly, that perhaps very little has changed substantively in the last 16 years. And yet, we know that a great deal has changed. Plus sa change? Perhaps.

DAWN specialises in producing South feminist analyses of global environment issues, drawing on the experience and insights of the women's movement and on the knowledge, collective wisdom and analytical strengths within its own network. In its analyses, DAWN usually seeks to challenge mainstream thinking or received wisdom, and to advance or clarify feminist definitions or understandings, particularly on issues which are conceptually problematic for the women's movement or which divide the movement, impeding effective advocacy for gender justice. As a South feminist network concerned with economic justice, gender justice and democracy, the importance of moving beyond theory, or what we in DAWN prefer to call analysis, to practice or activism (what we tend to call advocacy) has always been clearly understood within DAWN. We have always described ourselves as a network of scholars *and* *activists* from the economic South and we have always worked at the intersections of feminist scholarship/activism, of critical feminist policy analysis/policy advocacy.

Having a vision, even more than having analyses, is what commits a network to working actively towards its realisation. A vision provides a reference point and keeps us focused on the goals of working to end all forms of inequality and oppression, poverty, violence, disease, hunger and militarism, to see basic needs met as a matter of right, women's reproductive work redefined, women's fertility safely controlled, and women actively participating in democratic decision-making.

In the 1990's DAWN found a niche in the series of development conferences which began with UNCED (Rio) and included the ICPD (Cairo), the WSSD (Copenhagen), and the FWCW (Beijing). DAWN also participated in the UN Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, or SIDS. Through these international fora, the first significant global occasions when 'women's issues' made their way from the margins of 'women-only conferences' to the mainstream agenda (Sen & Madunagu, 2001), DAWN worked to clarify analysis of the main issues for feminists in these Conferences, and, in collaboration with a core of other women's organisations and networks, to secure significant commitments to policy changes through platforms and programmes of action. Through sustained feminist advocacy in this series of UN development meetings, the Conferences built on one another. Thus, the commitments to gender equality and reproductive health reached at the WSSD were based on ICPD definitions. The Beijing PFA likewise built on the Vienna agreements on Human Rights, as well as on the ICPD recommendations on reproductive health and rights, and the WSSD macroeconomic agenda (Sen & Madunagu, 2001).

Engaging in these UN Conferences entailed an intense period of work for DAWN, both in building analyses (through processes of consultation on an

analytical framework, led by a research coordinator responsible for producing and fine-tuning the framework, and ensuring analytical rigor) and in tricky drafting and lobbying work throughout the Conference processes, including the many prepcoms. Because of the way that DAWN works, holding regional and inter-regional meetings to share our framework and draw on the collective wisdom of feminist scholars and activists, some tensions surfaced from time to time over the priority we were giving to engaging in the official Conference processes, rather than focusing on the NGO Forums, the alternative space in which the international women's movement has traditionally organised its own autonomous events. Although DAWN first made its mark by putting macroeconomic issues on the agenda of the women's movement at the NGO Forum in Nairobi, its judgement was that only by engaging in the official Conferences could feminists bring women's issues and concerns from the relative obscurity of the margins to the mainstream agenda, and secure commitments to policy changes needed to attain gender equality.

Working to advance a feminist agenda through the UN conferences - in what might have been considered a privileged global space where mostly, *global* NGOs interacted with representatives of nation states - was a steep learning curve for networks like DAWN. To effectively use the unprecedented opportunities of the conferences to secure gains for women through global agreements arrived at by consensus between states meant learning the skills of lobbying and negotiating, and mastering the arts of drafting text and introducing language and definitions.

None of the agreements that emerged from the 1990 Conferences were easily won. Indeed these conferences, especially ICPD and Beijing, were veritable battle grounds between feminists and fundamentalists, led by the Vatican. Moreover, the solid gains for women achieved through the ICPD in respect of reproductive health and rights, which were reaffirmed and expanded on in the Beijing BFA, had to be vigorously defended during the +5 reviews of these Conferences, between 1999 and 2000. DAWN has documented the extent to which a small minority of religious fundamentalists and their allies were able to hold the negotiations to ransom in their efforts to reverse the Cairo and Beijing agreements during the plus 5 reviews (Sen & Madunagu 2001). The unholy alliance amongst fundamentalists of differing faiths, aimed at undermining women's rights and gender equality, highlights the double burden for feminist activists engaged in the fight against globalisation, who assert 'the need for *both* economic justice and gender justice in an increasingly globalised and fundamentalist world' (Sen & Madunagu 2001).

Since 1995, feminist organisations engaged in advocacy within global inter-governmental fora have had to learn to navigate through the choppy seas of complex North-South politics over economic justice issues (including debt, poverty, structural adjustment and WTO), to follow emerging alliances and blocs and the strategic positioning of fundamentalist states which traditionally oppose women's rights, to discern friends and foes. DAWN often found itself fighting on two fronts - against intransigent Northern states on

economic justice issues, on the one hand, and against some Southern states resistant to women's equality and rights, on the other.

With the plus five reviews now over, DAWN's advocacy in global inter-governmental/multi-lateral fora is currently primarily centred on the Financing for Development Conference and the WTO. Our engagement in the FfD process (led by DAWN Latin America/REPEM - the Cartagena Initiative) has become focused on articulating what kind of development should be financed, and advocating taxation on global financial and currency transactions. Our work on trade is still at an early stage though we are beginning to make an impact, in concert with the International Gender and Trade Network (formed in the aftermath of the WTO meeting in Seattle), in which several DAWN members are actively involved. DAWN has produced two papers on gender and trade - one for the Seattle meeting and another for Doha - and at both meetings DAWN representatives were centrally involved in the NGO demonstrations that were staged, although the Doha demonstrations did not receive anything like the kind of media coverage attracted by the Seattle 'riots'.

In the age of globalisation, increased activism at the global level on a number of fronts is unavoidable. We have been drawn into joining the growing global civil society movement which provides the only countervailing force to the combined power of the world's leading states (the G7/G8) and organised corporate interests. We support a wide number of campaigns each year initiated by other networks and groups, and attend numerous meetings convened by other organisations, while continuing to produce new analysis and challenge mainstream thinking.

The tensions and challenges involved in activism or advocacy at the global level are numerous. DAWN is constantly engaged in appraising and evaluating its own work, assessing the costs and benefits of engagements we enter into, clarifying our understanding of both issues and strategies, and reminding ourselves of the many pitfalls and risks we face.

We are ever aware of the risks of co-optation in participating in multilateral fora or in institutional reform initiatives. We enter such engagements only after much internal debate and clarification of our purpose in doing so. And we bring our engagements to an abrupt end, especially in institutional reform initiatives, if it becomes clear that these entail little possibility of achieving substantive policy change.

With the recent experience of the +5 reviews, we are also now acutely aware of how global conferences can be used to erode earlier agreements. While we may be watchful and attentive to some areas and successfully guard against any erosion of hard-won gains, others may escape us if we are not holistic in our approach, in close touch with other movements fighting economic globalisation (eg labour and environment) and tuned into the interplay of agendas. A recent critical piece by a trade unionist which alleged NGO co-option in effectively dismantling the rights of workers guaranteed by longstanding ILO agreements and conventions at the World Conference

Against Racism is a case in point. For this reason we are opposed to the proposal for a fifth world women's conference, which is seeking endorsement from the women's movement, and have made our reasons clear to those involved in the initiative. The current global environment is not at all conducive to advancing gains for women through a new round of inter-governmental negotiations. In DAWN's assessment, the risks of seeing gains made seriously eroded or, worse, reversed are simply too high.

In the last four years, DAWN has also stepped out of the comfort zone of the women's movement to begin to build partnerships with male-led NGOs and networks. This has been a conscious effort to make advocacy for gender justice a priority within progressive non-feminist organisations, as well as within the broader global civil society movement for global economic justice of which they are a part. DAWN's globalisation work propelled us to engage directly in the global civil society movement that has emerged in the second half of the 1990s, galvanised by the effectively organised resistance to the proposed MAI and by subsequent organised global campaigns since the Asian crisis for currency transaction taxes (CTT) and other controls on the global movement of finance capital, and now fuelled primarily by opposition to the WTO. This work too has not been without its tensions.

Within the broader anti-globalisation movement, there have been the risks of mis-representation of issues, and a general muddying of the waters as a result of anarchist takeovers of demonstrations. Since September 11, the conflation of anti-globalisation activism with anti-Americanism may see a toning down of the anti-globalisation movement particularly in the North, as a result of the 'with us or against us' pronouncements by Bush. Shades of MacCarthyism are already evident. Yet now, more than ever before, resistance to the holders of global economic and military power, and clarity on who and what we are fighting is critical. As Gita Sen has cogently put it, 'Our enemy's enemy is not our friend'.

As feminists from the South we cannot allow ourselves to be muddled by focusing primarily on what the US has done to bring this upon itself, though we acknowledge the patent truth of that and condemn the countless unconscionable acts of terrorism perpetrated by the US in various parts of the South. Our struggles against fundamentalism in all its manifestations and hues (whether based on religious/cultural/traditional or economic orthodoxy) stem from a clear and unequivocal recognition of the oppression and misery that fundamentalism entails for women. Indeed, DAWN names the evils which hurt women most and which obstruct the realisation of the kind of world we envision as: globalised greed, militarism and patriarchal fundamentalism, in all its diverse but related forms (DAWN Statement, November 2001).

Within the Southern- centred anti-globalisation movement, which from last January began convening an annual gathering in Porto Alegre called the World Social Forum (an alternative to the World Economic Forum), DAWN is continuing to work to make 'friendly bandits' within Southern networks and organisations more gender-aware or conscious, and more committed to taking on board the struggle for gender justice. This work has not been easy either.

It is one thing to have separate panels addressing 'gender issues'; quite another to be included in the main panels and plenaries, and there is much territoriality around certain globalisation issues, like the CTT. Attempts by feminists to raise gender issues in trade in the lead up to the Seattle Ministerial in 1999 were denigrated by a 'progressive' Southern NGO which, in an article on its web-site, referred to 'gender activists and animal welfarists baying for space within the multilateral trading system' (Francisco 1999).

We remain un-deterred however. Our agenda of mainstreaming gender justice will we hope be advanced through a new initiative that DAWN is just beginning, which is focused on linking our themes - PEG, SL, S&RH&R and PR&ST. The work involves engaging selected male-led and region-based NGOs which meet our criteria (eg are credible, able to draw on good researchers and activists in their region, demonstrate receptiveness to gender issues, are respectful of DAWN's work etc) into an integrated analysis and capacity-building programme which we hope will be reflected in more gender-aware analysis and advocacy by these organisations in future.

How to preserve a distinct identity as a South feminist network within the large fora of civil society will continue to remain a challenge for DAWN. We believe we have however already come a long way towards achieving that, primarily because of the fact that we do produce independent analysis and as such have credibility and a profile both within the women's movement and within the community of progressive NGOs. We jealously guard our independence and our feminist position and we insist that women's sexual and reproductive health and rights are key requirements for the attainment of global human rights, equitable development, and gender justice.

References:

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