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# Historical Reflections on DAWN: An Interview with Gita Sen

Ashwini Tambe and Alissa Trotz

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**G**ita Sen is a professor of public policy at the Indian Institute of Management in Bangalore (IIMB), India, and an adjunct professor of global health and population at the Harvard School of Public Health. Her work includes research and global and national policy advocacy fueled by ground-level work to enhance gender equality and equity in poor communities. As a founding member of the South-based network Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), she has strong links to many organizations in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, the Pacific, and Asia. She is the author and editor of a number of publications including “Gender Inequity in Health: Why It Exists and How We Can Change It” (special supplement, *Global Public Health*, 2008) and *Engendering International Health: The Challenge of Equity* (MIT Press, 2002).

The University of Toronto’s feminist state theory symposium featured a special plenary on DAWN. This plenary, sponsored by South-South Encounters, highlighted the work of DAWN as a trailblazing network of feminist scholars, activists, and policy advocates located in Africa, Asia, the Pacific, Latin America, and the Caribbean. The event featured founding member Gita Sen. Before Sen’s arrival from Bangalore, we posed a series of questions to her, including how DAWN members are positioned with respect to their individual states, how to think about feminism and feminists’ thorny relationship with states in the global South that are in the midst of navigating structural adjustment programs, and how DAWN engages with an emergent neoliberalism. Sen’s responses are highlighted below in the form of an interview.

*Ashwini Tambe and Alissa Trotz:* As one of DAWN’s founding members, could you share a brief sense of the context in which a network like yours emerged and functions?

*Gita Sen:* Reflecting on DAWN’s twenty-five years, from 1984 until now, with our varied positions and engagements with the ideal and the reality of the state is not easy. While over the years, a number of us have earned our living as academics, DAWN is positioned in the messy world outside academe, where change is the dominant reality and confusion ever present, where the excitement of reflection, self-reflexivity, analysis, and conceptualization jostles for space with the challenges of running a far-flung network (in 1987, when the one-person secretariat was located in Rio, it would take all of three weeks for a letter to travel from Trivandrum, where I was then based, to Rio—a peaceful and less hyperventilating time). We have had our share of struggles over how to make a network like DAWN embody feminist principles without being fundamentalist about it; to be enriched by but also to handle our own diversity (the South as we know well is not a cultural monolith except perhaps in a Huntingtonian “othered” sense); to be effective in doing our work while handling time zones and time schedules

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but, at the same time, to be flexible and open to new challenges and ideas; and to cope with the new world of flexibilized labor and the paucity of full-time jobs.

*AT and AT:* How has DAWN's praxis shifted over the years? How has your relationship to states changed?

*GS:* DAWN's work can be characterized across three phases: 1984–90, 1990–2001, and 2001 to the present. The group of twenty-five or so women who came together in mid-1983 in Bangalore to brainstorm about women and development was a mix of academics, people from the nongovernmental organization (NGO) world who had been part of the United Nations' (UN) Mexico City and Copenhagen conferences on women, Marxist-feminists, and others. Across this diversity, our principal concern was that the growing women's movement on development and poverty, which was "first world" dominated (no surprise), was subordinating the larger critique of development itself to a liberal notion of gender equality. Or as we put it, "What is the point of arguing for a larger share of a poisoned pie?" This question, and its implication that feminist struggles needed to privilege and prioritize locating gender equality in relation to other questions—What kind of development? What kind of state? What kind of global arrangements? What kind of society?—resonated strongly at the third world conference on women organized by the UN at Nairobi in 1985.

What made the DAWN critique of development as well as of many of the existing feminist approaches of the time particularly trenchant and appealing to many was its focus on the dominant crises of the time—debt, fuel, and food; its grounding in the Marxist-feminist double-headed concept of production-reproduction; and its call on women to collectively empower ourselves to challenge and to engage with the state at multiple levels. At the time, we had no particularly sophisticated theory of the state, and our focus was mainly on national governments. The Marxist-feminist critique of the state included both (1) the necessity to challenge its structural location in relation to dominant classes, its racism and sexism (at the time no one was particularly aware of or speaking about

its heteronormativity and homophobia), and its violence and (2) a recognition that the creation of public policies sensitive to feminist concerns with government as its engine was essential.

In this sense, we were embedded in both the critique of the state and a continued belief in the necessity (if not the promise) of the developmental state. We were not then, and are not now, anarchists, nor are we communitarians who believe that the entire "development project" is flawed and should be abandoned. (Our belief is nearer to "Hey, life is flawed, but we have to live it.") More seriously, we believe that in the larger flow of history—colonial, neocolonial, neoliberal, neoconservative—as feminists, we cannot do without the developmental state.

The second phase stretched roughly across the 1990s. In 1990 DAWN held a major inter-regional meeting, with around (I think) 140 people from all over the South, in Niteroi, an area adjunct to Rio—poorer, more industrial, uglier. Four kinds of issues brought us together: (1) we had been working at the regional level since 1985, bringing together feminist activists, academics, and policy advocates, to analyze the impacts of the different crises in greater depth, and we needed to know what this all added up to in terms of being able to propose alternatives for collective or state action; (2) we needed to revamp the organizational structure of a network that was not a professional body, not a social movement in the traditional sense, that combined multiple functions (or at least had multiple ambitions) in a time when communications weren't what they are today; (3) we had to generate a "third world" feminist response to the huge hole left by the disappearance of the "second world" post-1989 and the fall of the Berlin wall and learn to start speaking of ourselves as the South; and (4) while also taking advantage of the opportunities provided by the spaces that people like ourselves and others had created at the global level (specifically at the UN) through the critique of structural adjustment, through the growing threats to the natural environment, through the emergence of the human development paradigm and new openings for human rights including sexual and reproductive rights—the conferences of the 1990s were opening up an exciting era, even as structural

adjustment programs (SAP) became softer, more subtle, but no less dangerous.

That 1990 meeting shaped DAWN's trajectory over the next decade. We began working more seriously on the environment, but most of all on sexual and reproductive health rights, in addition to our continuing work on economic development (the World Summit for Social Development [WSSD]). Our structure became more streamlined, and we evolved new ways to collect, aggregate, and reflect the analyses, experiences, and voices of women from the South. In doing this work, we confronted and I think overcame challenges of representation, diversity, and cultural differences among women in the different regions. At no stage, however, was our core stance vis-à-vis the state really challenged by other Southern women—critical but not anarchist—except sometimes obliquely when we were among radical (usually male) environmentalist communitarians.

We also began seeing the potential for the UN's emergence as a global quasi state through a strengthening of the foci and modalities of global governance. We threw ourselves into the UN conferences of the 1990s and were key to the emergence of the feminist South-North coalition on sexual and reproductive health rights and to the emergence of new networks like the International Gender and Trade Network (IGTN) as the World Trade Organization (WTO) began gaining strength.

In the period since 2001, we have focused on the question of what two decades of neoliberal reforms had done to the developmental state. From DAWN's South feminist perspective, one aspect of state transformation was a product of the struggle, played out at global, regional, and national levels, for economic justice versus gender justice in the form of sexual and reproductive autonomy and rights. But on the other side was the transformation of the state itself during the hard era of structural adjustment reforms through the more disguised restructuring of the 1990s, on to the neoconservative hegemony of the 2000s. The "marketization of governance," and especially of economic governance, was a direct consequence and was critiqued in DAWN's platform volume on the theme of political restructuring and social transformation (PRST).

The result was an asynchronicity between normative gains made by the women's movement in terms of human rights and sexual and reproductive autonomy and rights and their practical realization through state-supported policies and programs. Even as the discourse on population shifted radically from neo-Malthusian population control to a rights-based approach, the funds needed to realize this shift were wanting, even for traditional family planning. This contradiction was reflected also in a widening gap within the women's movement between those who worked on sexual and reproductive rights and those who worked on poverty, livelihoods, or macroeconomics.

*AT and AT:* How do you view the UN? How did DAWN founders navigate their various relationships to their "own" states?

*GS:* Is the UN in a sense really a quasi state? It is an extremely challenging question indeed. At one level, the UN has some of the features of a state: legislative power through the General Assembly, a security and disciplining arm through the UN peacekeepers and the Security Council; and an executive branch through the UN Secretariat and specialized agencies. But all of these are weak and constantly under challenge. Most important, the UN's developmental role of the 1960s and even 1970s was severely gutted and taken over by the Bretton Woods institutions (BWI) during the transformative period of the global economy post-1971.

Where the UN has been and continues to be strongest is in norm setting and being the ground for global negotiations on noneconomic issues—human rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and the environment (although this has strong economic implications). We were able to make very important headway in the space of norms and to protect them against the challenges posed by religious extremists such as the Vatican. Importantly, the discourse was changed, and the language of women's rights came to the center, even though it always had to be defended. (Our approach has been that the best defense is a strong offense and to keep pushing the envelope on women's rights even in the core of the neoconservative hegemony of the previous eight years.)

For feminists, the UN became a potent space to learn to negotiate and challenge (we learned to sit with veteran diplomats, and we also learned the intricacies of language), but fewer and fewer feminists working at the global level engaged anymore with the hard economic issues of trade, debt, and the financial crisis (or, if they did, had any real capacity to do so) even though these were always among the top priorities for women in the South, expressed over and over again in local, national, and regional gatherings.

In dealing with states through the UN, DAWN had to address the enormous challenge posed by the struggle to simultaneously obtain economic justice and gender justice (or erotic justice)—the position of the Group of 77 versus that of the European Union. This problem continues today in the negotiations over Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR) at the UN. Which side are we on? We have to deal with fluid and constantly shifting positions and terrains. This situation can be seen in the current negotiations on the financial crisis on the one hand and gender architecture on the other: our struggles are over the contradictions not just between the developmental state and the disciplinary state but also between proponents of economic equality and proponents of gender justice including sexual and reproductive health and rights. This has referents at both the global and the national levels, where our alliances shift depending on the issue. If we throw other justice issues (intersectionality and indigeneity, caste, and race inequalities) into the blend, the mix becomes potent and bubbles with tensions, unresolved contradictions, and constant threats of conflict.

The world of the twenty-first century is indeed complex for feminist advocates. In DAWN we have attempted to navigate this terrain using a number of strategies: developing an analysis of what we call the “interlinkages” among the different issues on which we work—globalization, sexual and reproductive health and rights, political ecology, and the state and social transformation; deepening our advocacy for women’s rights in the context of the financial crisis; and working to advance women’s sexual and reproductive rights while opening ourselves to the

debates and politics on gender and sexuality. In this confusing new world that is emerging, we have realized that the generation of younger feminists holds the key to new approaches and fresh ideas. We have consciously opened ourselves to fruitful exchanges and mutual learning. Despite all the confusions of the present time, the world from this vantage point is full of energy, enthusiasm, and hope. And that is what sustains us. S