

Passion: Drives the feminist movement

Devaki Jain

Outline of the Essay:

- UN as the source
- The flavour of the times
- My entry into politics and then feminism
- The dividing act :Development aid
- The re emergence of vitality
- New Challenges bring forth new commitments
- The fire is still burning

UN as the source

One of the volumes on the intellectual history of the United Nations, produced by the team of Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij and Thomas Weiss,¹ suggests that the UN is “a market place for ideas”. This description really sums up what it was, I suggest, for the women’s movements too. The experience of learning from women coming from all around the world; the excitement of finding extraordinary similarities of not only gendered living but ideas; of bonds that never broke –arguing, negotiating, loving, merging identities – all of which flowed into that hateful but crucial term, *power*. This power was also a self recognition of our intellectual power, in that sense. A new constituency called “*women*” was created, as was the entry of a powerfully endowed idea called “women” in UN thought². We became powerful, though we could not claim power.

However, for most of us, I believe, UN conferences formed a very small part of our work and participation in the larger spaces. In fact while it gave a base and a space for making ourselves into transnational, it was fed and sustained by national and sub national issues and angst -derived engagements.

The flavour of the times

The decades of the 1950 s and 60s were heady times... The political climate in India, despite all the pitfalls was a continuum of the post-freedom ethos, was underlined by self-reliance and renaissance. There were struggles for freedom

¹Emmerij, Thomas, Richard Jolly and Thomas Weiss, *Ahead of the Curve UN Ideas and Global Challenges*, p10 Indiana University Press 2001. www.unihp.org is the web site of a multi volume project on the origin and evolution of ideas on international social and economic development.

² Devaki Jain, *Women, development, and the UN: a sixty-year quest for equality and justice*, Indiana University Press, December 2005

in the southern continents, for affirmation of political rights. *Emancipation and Liberation* were the words of the era. While Gandhi had left behind a huge moral umbrella, and the most radical, and in many ways most appropriate, ideas for a terribly poor and over exploited India to rebuild herself, it was Socialism that captivated most of the leaders, who were negotiating freedom from the empire.

India was an extremely open society at that time. Gandhi used to quote Rabindranath Tagore to bring home the point: "I would let the winds of the world blow through the doors and windows of my house but I will not be blown away." Gandhi had attracted many women into the freedom struggle. He was unconventional, urging women to challenge their men "Marriage is an institution designed by men to tyrannise women". Imagine, this was said in the 1930s - long before feminism became a vivid ideology.

Many of the women, who emerged from the freedom movement, then became prominent leaders of social and economic struggles and also established national women's organisations³. They led unconventional or non conformist lives. Some were child widows who later graduated and married national leaders or lived with their partners from the movement⁴. Exuberant times in an exuberant and unconventional India.

So when the first UN conference on women to be held in Mexico was announced in 1974, many of us were already engaged in one or other movement for liberation of one thing or the other. I had returned in 1956 from Oxford University in the UK, having taken a diploma in Economics and Political Science, and plunged into a revolutionary movement of that time i.e. the 1950s, namely, the Bhoodan movement. A Gandhian named Vinoba Bhave was walking through India's villages and appealing to the rich and middle peasants to donate land voluntarily to the landless and poor⁵. And seemed to be succeeding, in this unbelievable way of distributing wealth!

This was the same period when I wrote a small book called *The Democratic*

³ Like the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) founded by Aruna Asaf Ali, All India Women's Conference (AIWC) founded by Kamladevi Chattopadhyay,

⁴ Anasuya Sarabhai founded the Textile Labour Association, India's oldest and largest union of textile workers in 1920. Durgabai Deshmukh established the Central Social Welfare Board in 1953. Sarojini Naidu went on to preside over the Asian Relations Conference in March 1947. Kamla devi Chattopadhyay struggled for the township of Faridabad in the outskirts of Delhi. Sucheta Kripalani became the first woman to be elected as the Chief Minister of a state (Uttar Pradesh) in 1963.

(Mark Shepard *Gandhi Today: A Report on Mahatma Gandhi's Successors*, Simple Productions, Arcata, California, 1987, reprinted by Seven Locks Press, Washington, D.C., 1987

*Alternative*⁶, an alternative to capitalism and communism, a non-Marxist but equality driven alternative for economic policy in India for a socialist party called Praja Socialist Party. All at the age of 24! I went on to work for the Swedish economist, Prof. Gunnar Myrdal on his book the Asian Drama in 1958⁷, and then back to Oxford for a better degree in Economics before I began to teach economics at the Delhi University from 1963.

In the 60s and 70s, the University of Delhi was fibrillating. Some of India's most brilliant economists were teaching there: Amartya Sen, Sukhumoy Chakravarty, Jagdish Bhagwati, now at Columbia, and K N Raj. In the evenings we converged, and as in Beauvoir's *The Mandarins*⁸, we debated on India's policies, movements, issues. Most of us became die hard patriots, wanting to live in and develop with India.

I was *the Gandhian* in the midst of these mostly Marxist economists, or the non political women in my Women's college. My walking the villages with Vinoba Bhave had given me clear ideas on what was wrong with the economics⁹ that we were teaching. Gandhi, I believe, had figured out the most relevant economic engine for our country – starting with universalising a livelihood programme for the poor, especially women, which required nothing but their hands¹⁰. He argued for consumption restraint and many other doable ways in which inequality can be melted peacefully.

My entry into politics and feminism

My politics then was already embedded, including the focus on my region Asia, a passion which still persists. But feminism? ... In some sense, I could believe that I was always a part of the women's movement from my childhood – if one could argue that experiencing gendered difference (which later became the basis for struggle) could be considered being part of the "movement". There was a clear demarcation of roles and attitudes between boys and girls, men and women, in the large and very heterogenous joint family into which I was born. Girls learnt dancing and vocal music, did not go out, while boys played outdoor games and were "free". In addition women in groups or sanghas, either affirming their difference or using their conventional space, whichever, were always present in my life. My mother, even as I began to "know" her, was a member of various mahila samajams, including the

⁶ M A Devaki, *The democratic alternative: A working paper forming the basis of discussion at a seminar held in Patna in December 1957 on the occasion of the Conference ... Democratic Research Service in February 1957*, University of Michigan Library (1959)

⁷ Myrdal Gunnar, *Asian Drama: An Inquiry Into the Poverty of Nations*, published by Periodicals Services co., 1968.

⁸ Simone de Beauvoir's *The Mandarins*, W. W. Norton and Company, 1999

⁹ Jain Devaki, *What is Wrong with Economics: Can the aam aurat Redefine Economic Reasoning?*, Durgabhai Deshmukh Memorial Lecture, 15th July 2011, organized by the Council for Social Development.

¹⁰ [ref the khadi prog , hind swaraj]

very colonial ladies' clubs. Whether it was in the princely city of Mysore, where I was born or in Gwalior, where my father was Dewan, she was always an active and much admired part of those societies, alive to the values of women's collectivities. It was the kind of concern and feeling of bonding with women that spread to all of us, her three daughters, and which she expressed in such effective ways throughout her life¹¹.

So perhaps the experience of both -- severe discrimination as well as my mother's love of mahila samajams -- led me, much later, to unknowingly become a feminist? A person who understood discrimination and the value of women bonding for women's affirmation as a simultaneous process...

Against this background I arrived in Mexico in June 1975, for the first UN world conference on women. The conference was the largest and most diverse gathering of women regionally and socioeconomically. *We became, aware of ourselves, i.e. as women but not aware of a global identity or solidarity or even politics.* That identity was one of the important contributions of the UN conferences.

Historians, I presume would agree that it is ideas, and ideologies that spur and maintain struggles, actions, even policies and programs. Ideology, a choice of politics, ultimately is the engine or the spark that keeps persons working on an issue or a cause, and I think it is feminism that sustains the spark, that got lit for me at Mexico. Mexico moved me from a generally concerned person, to a feminist, a believer in the political and economic difference that women represented and voiced.

Working in and out of the UN from then for the next almost three decades, the commitment increased, the energy and learning expanded unrelentingly – often making me feel that I had a gun at my back.

The women's decade 1975-85- connecting and confluence

In the 70s, one of the high points for me, was to hear a woman talk of a corn grinding mill in one of the countries of Africa, may be Mali? Burkina Faso? - I am not sure – and how women used it as a collective tool, for relieving their burden on the body and of time. Strange as it may seem, she was talking about women in her country at a UNESCO conference in Paris¹². In those early days, the sectoral divides were not so sharp. Women's lives were part of UNESCO's quest to define its role in the women's decade – just limited to culture or education.

The corn grinding mill then became the term, the idiom for arguing for common

¹¹ Jain Devaki, *Once were Warriors* in the book *Making a Difference*, edited by Ritu Menon, published by Women Unlimited, New Delhi 2011.

¹² One of the many post Mexico events that UN agencies took up after that first UN sponsored world conference of women

resource or assets for women.... And looking at all this from the “outside “ so to speak, it did not seem so far away from what we heard in the USA of feminist consciousness, women meeting together and feeling exuberant or enabled to realise that they had very similar perceptions and problems and solved them collectively! In the 70’s there was a confluence of ideas relevant to women. An aside: Gloria Steinem was a Fulbright student at Delhi University when I was teaching there and we had become friends. Later, when I re emerged as a feminist, we met in the USA and she shared with me the various ways in which women were empowering themselves, discovering feminist consciousness in their collectives.

The dividing act: Development aid

Another reason that kept us going was the turbulence caused by donor driven projects, when we organised ourselves against such domination.

As the funding from the development wings of various northern governments such as USAID or SIDA etc emerged, the difference began to emerge, boiling as we reached Nairobi in 1985. Why? Firstly, development as a language, as a subject, was directed only towards the under developed countries, later called developing countries –not only separating us, but also assuming a profile of ourselves, the South people, which was inaccurate as well as demeaning.

The WID-WAD groups, advising donors from those “advanced” countries often saw the women in the South [the “developing” countries] in their own image – leading to misleading approaches and projects. Major international development initiatives focused on women in welfarist terms, and clubbed them into pigeonholes of mothers and homemakers¹³. A 1950s USAID programme for women in India, which was later adopted by the Food and Agriculture Organization, had a horrifically skewed gendered schema which gave agricultural knowledge and inputs to men, and home science inputs to women. Contrary to this Middle American mom-and-apple-pie image, women in the South were far too busy being the major growers, processors, and distributors of agricultural goods. Ester Boserup¹⁴ pointed out the striking difference between farming in Africa and in the north.

At the second UN world conference of women, in Copenhagen in 1980, women began to see the “*differences*”, specifically and for me, in the North-South divide. For example, at the official forum, the Secretary General of the Conference, Dr. Lucille Mair, an experienced academic and stateswoman, spoke of the New International

¹³ Jain Devaki, “Women Development and the UN: A Sixty Year Quest for Equality and Justice, UNIHP, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2005, Pgs 80-120

¹⁴Boserup Ester, “Women’s Role in Economic Development”, published by Earthscan, 1970

Economic Order (NIEO), of initiatives to settle the Palestine issue peacefully, and so on. But our Scandinavian women hosts saw this as `politicising' the women's movement, splintering the solidarity with "conventional, traditional, international divides". In the non-official spaces, the understanding of difference was expressed in another way.

Women from the South were uncomfortable with the patronage of their Northern sisters, expressed in the latter's research, analyses and conclusions regarding them. We appeared to be poor and illiterate, trapped in convention and archaic cultures, needing to be drawn into more modern systems. South women objected to the incompleteness and inappropriateness of this analysis and its implied claim of cultural and political superiority. There was also a certain inequality in the descriptions, since Northern women seemed to be economically marginalised and socially trivialised in their own milieu.

I got a chance to examine all this closely, thanks to an invitation from the OECD/DAC/WID in Paris to give a lecture to the group's pre-Nairobi Planning meeting. I read and analysed almost 145 project reports of North South transfers of funds for what was called "women in development" projects; they showed that almost all had a negative impact on poor women because their roles had not been identified and they lost out.

I circulated my lecture which I called, "Development as if Women Mattered: Can Women Build a New Paradigm?"¹⁵ to a selection of women whom I had met in my travels, one from each continent of the South.

Claire Slatter, a journalist in Fiji, when I was Vice Chair of the APCWD, very sharp and knowledgeable about politics in Fiji; Marie-Angelique Savane, the founder of AAWORD, the first continental network of women engaged with development in Africa, whom I met along with Neuma Aguiar in Rio de Janeiro at a seminal conference on women in the labour force in Latin America. Fatima Mernissi whom I had met at Harvard in a feminist dialogue across religious; Peggy Antrobus whom I met in Copenhagen. 85 words can be removed, probably just the names of the women can be put in the footnote...only the names!

All of them felt this reality was their experience, too, so when I invited them to a seminar in Bangalore in 1984 to thrash out our alternative, they came willingly. And there in Bangalore, in my parents' home, was born the *Third World Women's Network, DAWN*¹⁶, which designed a framework for locating women in the development arena, such that it linked poor women's situation, both negative and positive, to the macro economic and political framework of their region: the food crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa, the cultural crisis in North Africa and the Middle East, the debt crisis in Latin America, and poverty and militarism in the Asia-Pacific region. The network suggested that it is only if the struggles and contributions of

¹⁵ OECD, Paris, 1983

¹⁶ Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era

poor women in these regions were seen against this background, could there be an understanding not only of the ‘what’, but an indication of the ‘how’”. The levers to bring about a transformation would be revealed by such a contextual as well as macro analysis.

This intervention by DAWN into the discourse on women and development not only transformed its intellectual underpinnings, but it also shifted the creativity, the intellectual leadership from the ‘Patrons’ in the North to the ‘clients’ in the South.

The Re emergence of Vitality: the Transnational Networks

Over the decades there has emerged a large number of networks of women on a multitude of issues – some regional others international- in subjects ranging from trafficking, legal protections, to globally connected unions of waste pickers! These conglomerates are challenging again the notion of “difference “ , which I mentioned earlier , and providing volumes of knowledge to the “other “ on what is the reality and how to negotiate it away from disaster ... Disaster of the ecological kind or disaster in terms of local wars , violence , even terror . There are examples of women of many international and regional networks of women according to occupation. WEIGO is a global research policy network that seeks to improve the status of working poor, especially women in the informal sector. There are instances of women taking control of resources, of managing economic entities in the developing countries; the key example being the SEWA banks (self Employed Women’s Associations) that provide health insurance and retirement benefits to the working women in rural India. There are also examples of governments including women’s roles in various sectors like the Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana, designed as the sub component of the National Rural Livelihood Mission in India; or the Unions of the home-based workers or the Waste Picker’s Association. **I HAVE ADDED THE NETWORKS HERE WITH THE DETAILS, IF YOU REQUIRE JUST NAMES, YOU CAN CUT IT SHORT TO THAT.** These networks are not necessarily born out of UN gatherings nor do they take their issues to UN and its agencies any more... The UN and its arms and family of institutions have turned into a somewhat encrusted bureaucracy, ceasing to inspire the world of people, but going through the motions of intergovernmental resolutions.

There is increasing regional networking, as it is not only less fund demanding but also gives emphasises the real issues of geography. But the inter regional networking and struggles against the state and its policies, are strong and often effective, even more effective than UN resolutions. **Can be combined in the above paragraph before giving the networks names...**

New global phenomena often stimulate new gatherings of feminists to consider the new contexts. Globalisation, though it has many faces, and is often deconstructed

into its benign and destructive components has been on the agenda of the Feminist movement for some time, especially since the mid 90s.¹⁷ While global gatherings like the World Social Forum¹⁸, sees it as threatening and works to undo it , and here most feminist networks join to learn and to resist, there are places in the globe which see parts of globalisation as emancipatory

One such is the West Asian region, also misappropriately called the Arab region .
 [Amartya Sen refers to this issue and expresses concern at fixing such identities when individuals have multiple identities , which include them in so many other formations .[need to find reference to his book]

Fatema Mernissi¹⁹, who teaches History at the Mohammed V University in Rabat , a feminist and author of classic books such as *Beyond The Veil*, *The Veiled Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation Of Islam*, *Dreams Of Trespass: Tales Of A Harem Girlhood* and one of the founders of *Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)*, in her works such as , *The Digital scherezade* in 2005 identified the rise of the digital revolution and its values for women much before the Arab Spring brought it into the fore “The internet gives the peasants of the High Atlas village of Ait-Iktel, who sell their carpets on the internet²⁰, and the nomads of drought-threatened villages of Zagora and Figuig province at the edge of the Sahara desert, the magic power, for the first time in modern history, to engineer their own image on-line, and not only for their restricted local consumption, but for the universe at large”²¹ This power is now a torch in women’s hands and is lighting up the world around them²².

May be can cut on the quote to shorten

With this knowledge and the knowledge she received from the women carpet weavers of the Atlas Mountains, whose oral history she was recording, Fatema proposed a dialogue in Casablanca between Africans and Asians. She offered to host this along with a network called Caravan Civique, which worked with intellectuals and artisans in that part of the world. ***The women’s situation was a stark illustration of the impact of the negative aspects of globalization as their traditional skills of weaving carpets that told stories and represented many ideas were being effaced by the trend to produce carpets with machines. Yet, as Fatema argued,***

¹⁷ Devaki Jain, “Nuancing globalisation or Mainstreaming the downstream or Reforming Reform”, Nita Barrow Memorial Lecture, University of West Indies, Barbados, November 1999

¹⁸ *The World Social Forum is an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neo-liberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a planetary society directed towards fruitful relationships among Mankind and between it and the Earth.*

¹⁹ www.mernissi.net

²⁰ www.elsouk.com

²¹ Is the Internet Setting Free the Simorgh?Cyber-Islam as a fabulous mirror by Fatema Mernissi Paragraphs from the article “*Der Sagenvogel und das Internet*” in the book “*Was Kommt.Was Geht.Was bleibt.*” Markus Schächter, Editor. Herder Verlag, 2001, p.303-307

²² The best example being the uprising witnessed at the Tahrir Square (2011)

globalisation had liberated people especially women living in that region from the dominance of both male and religious supremacy

64 words remove

Fatema named the process of bringing together the group the “Casablanca Dream²³,” arguing that dreams are the human mind’s creative spaces, where new ideas and visions are born. Dreams suggest travelling, and invoking Sinbad (the sailor) she argued that travelling is a valuable way of knowing and crossing boundaries, something that peace building requires. She challenged the group to work on solving the “enigma” of how to transform globalization into a voyage free of anxiety and fear. She named the meeting “Women Weave Peace into Globalization.²⁴”



The task was to unpack the biases of Eurocentric thinking and defining of the world and to imagine and draw on the various threads to generate and create an integrated pattern for a different world. The question we tried to address was - Could the women’s movement capture an idea, like Gandhi's fistful of salt (a symbolic challenge to colonial rule), around which we could unite and bring to bear our collective power? Could it challenge global politics from a global perspective and move away from a masculinised worldview to one that is inclusive and respects plural ways of being? The Casablanca dream group pursued this question and over the years 2007 to 2011 held many conclaves, shared their analysis with the UN at CSW in 2010 and has published a book in 2011²⁵.

New Challenges bring forth new commitments
Global economic landscape changes

First, the Lehman brothers crash followed by the economic tsunami re generated

²³ www.casablanca-dream.net

²⁴ Mernissi Fatema, *Women Weave Peace into Globalisation*, paper for *The Casablanca Group Meeting*, September 2007

²⁵ Jain Devaki, Elson Diane edited, *Harvesting Feminist Knowledge for Public Policy: rebuilding progress*, Sage Publications Pvt Ltd, forthcoming – October 2011. <http://www.uk.sagepub.com/books/Book237880>

interest and activation especially amongst people like myself economists, on how to galvanise the women's movement to respond and re arrange the world order such that such crisis do not repeat themselves²⁶ The process started at Casablanca turned out to be useful at this juncture as the group met again and again and took to the UN²⁷.

Another significant entry into the global space has been the dramatic shift in the location of economic power – the lively growth engines are now located in the countries of the south. These, what are called emerging economies, have become significant actors. Realising that the earlier powers such as the USA and Europe are in turbulence with not only low rates of GDP growth but continuous internal problems with their financial institutions, the importance of these new configurations such as BRICS [Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa] becomes significant. New configurations like BRICS then offer challenge and potential for the feminist movement to engage.

There are many more conferences now which are inter-Governmental but at the regional level where, what I once called the “women's tent”²⁸, namely the parallel conference of women, is taking place. Associations like India Brazil South Africa, IBSA, are funding projects in the South.

The IAFFE²⁹ conference in China clearly revealed the interest of feminist economists, shifting from the Northern preoccupations, to seeing the extraordinary changes in China. Universities in China were blooming and modern and students were looking to secure futures. Ideas such as developing an India-China Study – impact of rapid rates of growth on women as workers, - followed by policy advocacy of how women were faring as economic contributors were born. A very different game plan and assessment from Beijing 1995. Such pools of knowledge by transnational groups continue and will continue as the world is increasingly a global space – as always swinging from the local to the global and back, a feminist approach to creation and dissemination of knowledge...

In all these events UN and its branches are marginalized. It is now much more the financial institutions and national Governments and regional pacts where the feminist movement engages itself.

²⁶ Devaki Jain, *Gendering the Macro-economic Sky*, for A Panel on Responses to the Economic Crisis: Women's Economic Security and Rights, High-level Intergovernmental Meeting to Review Regional Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and Its Regional and Global Outcomes, 16-18 November 2009, Bangkok

²⁷ a collectively written paper "*The crisis as opportunity - women speak from across the globe*" CSW, 2009, New York

²⁸ Jain Devaki, "Women Development and the UN: A Sixty Year Quest for Equality and Justice, UNIHP, *Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis*, 2005, Pgs 80-120

²⁹ Jain Devaki, *The New World re Order, An Opportunity to Build /Introduce Feminist Political Economy / Ideas*, Working draft For IAFFE, China (Hangzhou), June 2011

Thus 21st century has not stopped, nor changed the enthusiasm and transnationality of the feminist movements, whether in terms of commitment or energy. What has changed is the role or magnetism of the UN. These groups national and international now keep walking without the UN as a tether, working into regional UN agencies or the new regional clubs such as in Asia, SAARC³⁰ or Indo African Summit held in Addis Ababa also with a space for women's voice or even DAVOS.ref

The fire is still burning

³⁰SAARC Chamber Crafts Village – marketing of products produced by women; SAARC Chamber Women Entrepreneurial Council – responsible for job creation, increase business opportunity, build markets, serving the interests of women