

Unfolding Women's Engagement with Development and the UN: Pointers for the Future

Devaki Jain and Shubha Chacko
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ABSTRACT

This paper reveals how the engagement of women with development ideas and approaches, challenged the mainstream views and programs, re claimed agency, i.e. the power to define the agenda and finally how women from the South even led the UN's ventures . Through description and analysis of six decades of the engagement , it comes to the conclusion that all the three actors, i.e. women as represented by the international women's movement, development as currently articulated through the liberal economics paradigm and the UN, weakened by the entry of financial and corporate global players, need to rethink their basic ideas and approaches .

Keywords Women Development United Nations

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Tracing the intellectual history of the United Nations from the perspective of women's contribution to ideas that flew in or out of the United Nations, raises many questions and calls attention to many issues. How do ideas emerge, and on what basis are they absorbed? What are the processes of knowledge construction and valuation, and what is their role in that journey of ideas. What and where lie the politics that informs the progress of these ideas – along with the progress of women? etc. This review also points to the barriers that traditional power hierarchies pose to the creation of and reception to new ideas.

The book entitled *Women, Development and the United Nations: A Sixty Year Quest for Justice* traced some of the major ideas that have shaped the UN's engagement with women and have gained currency and entered circulation. It also spotlighted some of the ideas that were jettisoned or were watered down, why this happened as well as the evolutionary path of many an idea. The time-span covered was 1945-2005.

While my book provides much of the evidence to underpin the arguments and conclusion made in this paper; we also draw from other works and our current engagements. Our physical and political location – that of the South has informed this review even as we drew on a more international feminist scholarship.

It might therefore be useful to look at the evolution of ideas, through the concept of the prism. The reason for this conceptualisation, is to recognise the multi-dimensional, and somewhat non linear aspect of the analysis, the complexity of the tracings, in locating the generation of ideas, map out their outcomes. The review therefore weaves through a wide range of variables, time-periods, issues, other struggles, other topics

Writing History as a Political Enterprise

The writing of women's history is tied with the political struggle for social change. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, one of the early women's historians, says "without question, our first inspiration was political. Aroused by feminist charges of economic and political discrimination . . . we turned to our history to trace the origins of women's second-class status'¹

The best women's history has not only added women's story to traditional narratives, but also used women-centered historical narratives to challenge, modify, disrupt, or even render irrelevant standard categories and methodologies. Women's history therefore challenges the political act of history-making

¹ as quoted by Borgna Brunner in *The History of Women's History*
<http://www.infoplease.com/spot/womensintro1.html>

The claims of universality that traditional historical writings make have been shown as false by feminist historians, among others, as these recordings are based on the experiences, descriptions and ideas of a minority – the powerful groups; ignoring actual differences that exist among people.

Ethnic history (race/caste) labour history (class) and women's history (gender/sex) all share the common objective of re-defining history – and importantly challenging contemporary hegemony of certain so called mainstream ideas through a reconsideration of the past, and giving hitherto excluded subjects a place in history. In all approaches the personal was political with connections to the anti-racist, civil rights, socialist, and feminist movements.²

The review and writing of history, of my book illustrated many of these characteristics and tensions – especially of the location of perceptions of intellectual power, or creativity. By and large it was assumed to be located in the “North” – the European civilization, and mostly in the mental capabilities of men.

The history of the “North” based nations, provide the bench mark for identifying periods, high points in terms of contribution of ideas the identification of sources. Defining moments in history, descriptions of the evolution of thought, intellectual paradigms, critical thinkers are attributed to the world, but that world's boundaries are North derived.

For example, World War II and its aftermath--the defining events of the Northern hemisphere that were, in fact, the impetus for the founding of the United Nations--were not the most important externalities for nations in the South. Slavery, including the use of indentured labor; economic plundering; the effacing of cultural and intellectual identities by the imperial powers were the strong forces that shaped the history of those nations in the forties. For Example it could be argued that Mahatma Gandhi was more relevant to Indian recovery from colonization than Keynes. To the Black people of South Africa, historical periods are defined in apartheid-regime terms, and Nelson Mandela's twenty-seven years in Robben Island on and off between 1952 to 1990 were the definitions of historical time.

As the North followed the trajectory led by such driving forces as Keynesian economics, the Marshall Plan, and new strands of development thought, the South heard a different rhythm of liberation, socialism, and exciting experiments with government. The birth and spread of these ideas, with the naming of their origins is not given the same position in the recounting of the “mainstream” history and periodicity that set the format for the most texts, sadly including the one about women. The past has to be viewed as “a contested and colonized terrain”.

² *Gopal Guru, How Egalitarian Are the Social Sciences in India?, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XXXVII No. 51 December 14, 2002*

The Story As It Emerged

The intertwining of these three threads that the book wove together – Development, Women and the United Nations points to the role of external circumstances; as well as the power of the inside in determining the pattern that finally emerges

- *Development: It's complex Relationship with Women*

The history of women- or gender-and-development theory is interwoven with the history of policy interventions in developing countries and with the history of the women's movement around the globe. Over 60 plus years since the end of World War II, there have been many shifts in how development might best be promoted. "No area of economics," says Irma Adelman, "has experienced as many abrupt changes in its leading paradigm."³

Over these decades, women's engagement with the UN's work in Development, as different from development itself-has been to challenge the terms of reference – open the door to reveal other contours even of the industrial typology, of the hierarchies in values given to various aspects of social and economic organisation, to spaces, - the public and private, to the basis of knowledge creation, to the very notions of theory or bounded ideas . Their engagement, revealed the variety of interpretations and appearances of what can be called *difference* , and the prismatic quality of the concept of *equality* and its accommodation by even the basic mandate of the UN, as envisioned in its charter. The dilemmas these concepts pose are summed up as the *equal but different* debates and also permeate into ideas such as giving of quota to redress inequality.⁴

The initial years

In the initial years women did not receive sufficient attention as a distinct category in development. In fact the First Development Decade 1961-70 declaration of the UN did not mention women. However there had been thinking about the issue of women and development even at this time. For example studies undertaken by UNESCO during that decade 1960-70 essentially dealt with the importance of primary, secondary, and university education for women; and from 1970-75 "investigated the relation between formal education and actual probability of women's employment"⁵

The agenda of most international organisations from the 1950s, in the international economic context, became what can be termed as *developmentalism*. That is a set of ideas that place economic development at the centre of all political endeavours The

³ Irma Adelman, Fallacies in Development Theory and Their Implications for Policy. In Frontiers of Development Economics The Future in Perspective. Gerald M. Meier and Joseph E. Stiglitz (ed) Washington, D.C.: World Bank

⁴ Janette Webb The Politics of Equal Opportunity Gender, Work & Organization 4 (3) , 159–169, Janette Webb (1997) The Politics of Equal Opportunity Gender, Work & Organization 4 (3) , 159–169

⁵ Mignot-Levebvre Y Women and development: ideas and strategies of international organizations POPLINE Document Number: 000233 Revue Tiers Monde, 1980 Oct-Dec;21(84):845-62. <http://www.popline.org/docs/0419/000233.html>

underlying assumption of this approach was that all countries will move through similar stages of development. The second assumption was that there is a linear process from one stage to another that goes from traditional or primitive to modern or industrialized. Underdevelopment seen as inability to exploit resources, and modernisation seen as the goal

For women the connection with developmentalism was complex. They were the markers and clientele of the modernization programme and the idea often was to remove the obstacles that prevented them from participating in the development of the nation. Therefore on the one-hand it raised questions on traditional patriarchal attitudes within families and communities that sanctioned practices such as child marriage and female genital cutting; but at the same time presented modernization as unproblematic concept. Frances Vavrus sums it up saying “developmentalism has made women visible without a concomitant re-visioning of the macroeconomic environment that shapes gender relations.”⁶ (2002)

The attitude of viewing women in Third World countries as those needing to be pushed into modernization is borne out by an example of the programmes for homemakers in the US. This emerged at the eve of the 20th century out of the newly created field of home science, and imparted a class-specific, racialised, and sexualised vision of gender relations with the purpose of transforming farming families into capitalist units of production and consumption.⁷ Through the politics of nation-building and transnational development aid, this model of agriculture development was exported to India (among other countries) under the auspices of a ‘modern’ and ‘scientific’ programme of agriculture development, thereby rendering invisible the politics of class, gender, race, and sexuality which underlay its construction.

This is in contrast to an initiative that was already being launched in India. In 1939, a sub-committee on women to design plan Women’s Role in Planned Economy (WPRE) was set up as part of the structure of the National Planning Committee (NPC), set up to chart the course of future planning in India.

The Report of the Committee presented a realistic picture of the role of Indian women: the nature and extent of their participation in the workforce, discrimination against them in wages and benefits, their special disabilities because of the multiplicity of their roles as workers within and outside the home, and as mothers. In fact, the Committee especially recommended that women’s development must be based on ‘economic emancipation’: ‘The crux of the situation lies, indeed, in the economic position of woman, her right to own or hold or inherit or acquire property; carry on any trade, profession or vocation; or accept any remunerative employment. So long as this fundamental right is not fully conceded, and actually realised in daily life, all talk of relief, remedy or reform would be just hot wind.’ Says the report. Yet

⁶ Frances *Constructing Consensus: The feminist modern and the reconstruction of gender*, 2002 Current Issues In Comparative Education Teachers College, Columbia University, Current Issues In Comparative Education, Vol. 5(1)

⁷ Kim Berry, "Lakshmi and the Scientific Housewife: A Transnational Account of Indian Women's Development and Production of an Indian Modernity." *Economic and Political Weekly* (Special Article) (March 15, 2003).

the policy makers ignored these recommendations and adopted the American Home-science Model instead.⁸

Therefore the journey of ideas has not been a linear progression but more often the arena has been marked by competing frameworks and worldviews; though often it was one or a few that become the dominant one.

For many women, particularly in the South, their group identity is the most important thing in their lives, and women would rather acquiesce to discrimination within these groups rather than resist and lose place within the group.⁹ Thus, fighting group prejudice while fighting for women's empowerment goes to the heart of the modern dilemma between the universalism of human rights and the particularity of cultural experience.

The Women's Decade

Early in the Women's Decade (1975-1985) the equity principle got enshrined and it became even more persuasive by its linkage with the utility principle. Women had been a missing link in development, now they were being found; they could actually be a valuable resource, indeed were half, or more, of a nation's human resources, no longer to be wasted.... The prospect of steering women from the margin to the mainstream was as exciting to some would-be developers as to female recipients of such policies and programmes. "Women in Development" became the Decade's overnight catchphrase, a seductive one, which for a time, at least, could evade the question of what kind of development women were to be drawn into¹⁰. And equally important, what is the development that women design?

From the beginning of the Decade for Women, 1975-85, feminists from the South consistently articulated three major concerns. First, they under-scored the need to link gender-, class- and race-based inequalities and discrimination, and argued that struggles against gender inequality must be accompanied by struggles against other forms of inequality and discrimination. Second, Southern feminists pointed out that to explain gender inequality, it was necessary to look at social structures, development paradigms and macro-policies rather than simply addressing social norms and cultures and WID-focused policies. They emphasized that an improvement in women's lives and opportunities was only possible through structural changes and changes in the macro-policy environments. Third, Southern feminists demanded not simple gender parity or gender balance in representation, but a total transformation of the development agenda from a gender perspective, elaborating a feminist vision of alternative development.¹¹

⁸ Rekha Mehra, (1983): 'Rural Development Programmes: Neglect of Women' in Mehra and Saradomini, *Women and Rural Transformation: Two Studies*, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi.

¹⁰ Lucille Mathrun Mair *International Women's Decade: A Balance Sheet*
Third J.P. Memorial Lecture December 15 1984 Centre for Development and Women's Studies New Delhi 1984

¹¹ Rounaq Jahan: *The Elusive Agenda, Mainstreaming Women in Development*, St. Martin's Press, 1995

Existing development literature shows a gradation of approaches from ‘welfare’ in the earliest period to the ‘empowerment’ in the latest. These gradations are occasioned by the collisions of ideas and contexts. Welfare theories assumed women to be recipients; the logic of development saw them as economically active persons, ‘gender’ as a word replaced ‘women’ because social and gender relations became the standard framework to explain women’s status and situation, which involved men as well. The instrumental value of women became a siren song to influence big actors to loosen up the flow of resources to women. Empowerment as an approach was shaped by the experiences of Third World women, who were consistently in search of a technique to combine the individual and the collective modes, giving priority to process rather than to outcomes.

The introduction of the word ‘gender’ in place of ‘women’ in development and discursive literature it is suggested, has led to its depoliticization. Feminists have voiced the opinion that the “power” has gone out of gender analysis

Indeed feminist post-structuralist approaches to gender suggest that the key questions in any development program should not begin with gender at all and that it would be more productive to understand the different vulnerabilities within a particular population. In a study on the gendered patterns of agriculture in Ghana for example, it was found that it was more useful to ask who produces for subsistence, who produces for market sale and who engages in the non –formal economy. Then the vulnerabilities can be linked to particular social groups and the intervention thus planned in a more meaningful way.¹²

The United Nations: Women Using the Space

Women revealed method as an idea

One of the great advantages that the UN offered the international women’s movement – was that of space. Women worked *with* the existing structures and spaces; strategizing to make the most of them. But they also worked to expand and challenge these structures and spaces. One of the unique ways in which they accomplished this was in the “method” that they chose. Examining this method in some detail illustrates a distinct manner of engagement.

Women's engagement with World Conferences predated the birth of the UN, but it was from 1975 onwards that the world saw these events attracting the participation of large numbers of women¹³

They broke open the UN method of conference, by successfully using the parallel conferences to feed into the official one as well as to build a global consensus. This

¹² Edward R Carr Men’s Crop and Women’s Crops: The Importance of Gender to the Understanding of Agricultural and Development Outcomes in Ghana’s Central Region World development issue Vol 36 No 5, May 2008

¹³ Hilikka Pietilä and Jeanne Vickers. *Making Women Matter: The Role of the United Nations*. London: Zed Books, 1990

inclusion of the outside This was an idea, as it introduced participation, democracy , linking of outside and inside into UN deliberations . These were ideas that then went on to be adopted as a practice into some of the subject specific conferences of the UN, whether it is population, education or environment

One facet of the identity of women inside the UN in the last half a century is tied up with their small numbers, with their being a minority within a huge system. In the very first meeting held in San Francisco¹⁴ to draft the UN charter, there was a minuscule female presence, 'a handful of women' The actual number was four, out of the 160 signatories to the Charter. These women combined forces with other women from the non-governmental organisations, attending the meeting. Nine of the women from the non-governmental organisations sent a petition to the head of the United States delegation asking for inclusion of equal rights for women in the

As a result, while the Preamble to the Charter reaffirmed 'faith in fundamental human rights' and 'the dignity and worth of the human person', it also articulated 'the equal rights of men and women'.¹⁵

The strategic combine of women in the delegations to the UN, the officials within the UN Secretariat and the NGOs outside -- to engineer desirable outcomes -- has led to concrete gains; even in the face of that most of these agents operate in a male-oriented environment

This strategy of coming together and drawing on each other was seen in play when the issue of trafficking in women found place in the primary agenda for the EU in 2001-2002.¹⁶

From a feminist-constructivist perspective, several factors were decisive in turning trafficking in women into a political issue in the context of the European Union:

- (1) actors in the alliance sharing a common feminist identity;
- (2) gender-sensitive frames changing the non-formal institutional rules of the EU;
- (3) political opportunity structures, in particular alterations in the formal rules embodied in the EU as an institution].

These agents shared a particular collective identity that allowed them to form an inter-institutional winning coalition, to mobilize the political elite as well as the public and to gain broad support for their cause. Through their activities members of this particular advocacy network successfully changed the non-formalized institutional norms and rules relevant for the policy-field at stake in order to benefit their cause. They challenged pre-existing frames and introduced new ways of framing and interpreting trafficking in women. Moreover, committed actors strategically used the political opportunity structures that, for example, the Treaty revisions brought about,

¹⁴ The United Nations Conference on International Organisation, 1945

¹⁵ Francine D'Amico Women Workers in the United Nations: From Margin to Mainstream? in Gender Politics in Global Governance Mary Meyer and Elisabeth Prugl Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Maryland USA 1999

¹⁶ Alison Woodward Building Velvet Triangles: Gender in EU Policy Making - Paper in Revision from European Consortium for Political Research 28th Joint Sessions Copenhagen April 2000

such as a strengthening of the powers of the European Parliament, and turned formalized institutional rules to their advantage.

Earlier stories of such triangular alliances include Jessie Street, an Australian delegate, with the backing of powerful networks and good connections, suggesting that all positions in the UN should be open to women. [This was based on a similar provision of the Covenant of the League of Nations in San Francisco, in 1945.] This led to Article 8 being incorporated. So women have been in the UN since it came into being, but it has taken many decades for efforts to get more of them, especially in the top positions -- yet the UN continues to be male-dominated.

The **'triangle'** was used both to strengthen each other as well as to advance the cause of women through better programming and visibility. In the seventies, the ECA supported NGOs by asking member-states to allow NGOs to nominate one-fourth of the trainees to the training programmes. At the same time, its women's programme from 1974 onwards was able to draw the support of NGOs, government officials, academics, other organisations [outside Africa] through their inclusive approach and advocacy, and thus gained in strength. The African Training and Research Centre for Women and ECA became the models for others and were cited by many, including the CSW, and used as examples while setting up the APCWD¹⁷

Similarly the UN Conferences as spaces have been used in numerous ways by women. The Conferences helped mobilise national and local governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to take action on major global problems during the preparatory process leading up to the World Conferences; and to point the links between the local and global. Women therefore from all over networked, advocated and debated their own as well as each other's causes. (Non-blacks speaking with their black sisters against Apartheid and racism; heterosexuals supporting the cause of sexual-minorities) They have launched campaigns and mobilised women from all over as well as used the opportunity to mobilise public opinion on various issues. (For example the sixteen day campaign against violence against women) They have lobbied with country delegates as well as UN system itself. And the volume and degree of participation of women at these conferences has increased tremendously. (For example there were 6000 members at the parallel conference at Mexico and 17,000 at Beijing) Women have also begun getting involved at all stages of the preparatory processes as part of NGO forums, caucuses and as official delegates

The series of international conferences celebrating the UN Decade for Women (1976-85) highlighted the unique problems facing women in the South and encouraged the development of organizations to foster research and writing by the Third World scholars. The scholarship emerging from these organizations has strengthened the voice(s) of Southern scholars and activists, and is providing the basis for feminist theorizing and action grounded in Southern realities (more recently called the "empowerment" approach to women's development). It has also inspired links with feminists in the North concerned with global and gender inequality in a commitment to understanding class, race and gender inequality in a global context thus provided an intellectual meeting-point for like-minded feminists from around the world

¹⁷ Margaret Snyder, *Transforming Development: Women, Poverty and Politics*, Intermediate Technology Publications, 1995, London, (22)

However, while women have gained in terms of sophistication and clout distinctive changes has taken root from the late 1980s onwards, with the United Nations. UN as a huge establishment has evolved a style of working, with its own procedures, systems, spaces and culture that . There were changes at the level of national governments as well, with the growth of professional and civil services. Increasingly, diplomats and civil servants began to take the place of erstwhile 'political' women. National machineries in most countries, created and placed in the professional-bureaucratic mode, corresponded with desks created in donor agencies to look after women in development and then, at gender. Gender analysis became a professional discipline, which could be learnt through training and other kinds of exposure to knowledge. References to patriarchy, to the history of women's struggles, to feminist movements etc. became less in development literature. As contentious issues in areas such as population (abortion, reproductive rights), environment (consumption patterns of the developed world) and women (sexuality and sexual preferences) gave rise to sharp dissensions between countries in world conferences where some political and religious leaders tended to take extreme positions, negating their ratification of the UN conventions, efforts were started to reduce the scope of the divides by the use of sanitized language. The instrumental approach to women's advancement, favored by institutions such as the World Bank, also came in as a convenient tool for masking the relational aspect of gender as well as the crucial links between poverty, power and politics.

WOMEN Within and Without

Challenging dichotomies and other separating classifications

Within feminism, knowledge and research are, seen as means of uncovering and altering facts, altering data, finally for altering conditions in human societies. Towards this objective feminism is constantly testing and expanding concepts and definitions, destabilising social relations and social constructs and challenging social conditions and also "solutions" offered

The critiquing of the supposedly oppositional categories (public/private knowledge/experience, culture/nature, rational/emotional) has resulted in women daring to juxtapose these groupings together and resisted a fragmentation of societal functioning into the economic, the social and the political. Therefore even while the UN mainstream human rights regime that had been tutored in the tradition of clear divisions, the Commission on the Status of Women resisted as regards women's rights. Both DEDAW and CEDAW combine both sets of rights.¹⁸ Linking conventionally fragmented themes leads to redefining concepts and questions centring round women. Women questioned the logic of integration of women into existing formats of development that were basically inequitable.

This technique of converging or bundling together, conventionally separated categories, and of seeing the whole through the parts was repeated in many other

¹⁸ Arvonne S Fraser. "The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, (The Women's Convention) In *Women, Politics, and the United Nations*, edited by Anne Winslow_(Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1995).

domains. For example they bundled together the categories that UN's work usually separates– i.e. security, human rights, and development; challenging that the divisions itself as gendered and arguing that the strict compartmentalization leads to distortion rather than refinement.

CEDAW was also historic in that challenged the boundaries between the public, the private and the national and the international.

The public private dichotomy had resulted in the public *polis* being viewed as the domain of men – rational, equal, disinterested, impartial and independent - and the domestic *oikonomika* as the domain of the women - emotional, different, partial and dependent.¹⁹ The feminist critique of the theory and practice of democratic liberalism points out that liberal theory, built on the above set of complimentary dichotomies excludes women in two ways: by denying them the full set of rights and privileges given to men and by taking for granted a definition of citizenship that excludes all that is traditionally female²⁰. Feminists recognised that it wasn't so much that women were being excluded from political activity, but rather that their activities were excluded from the way politics was defined.

At the same time feminists have through their theorising, actions and interventions made sure that they have impacted the United Nations. Some of these include CEDAW becoming one of the most widely ratified human rights conventions within the UN; the acceptance that the “human rights of women and of the girl child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of human rights”. This was accompanied by the requirement that women's rights be mainstreamed into all parts of the UN system. Recognition of the debilitating effects of gender specific violence in denying women enjoyment of human rights , eliminating violence against women is a human rights obligation upon states was asserted at Beijing, at Vienna and in the General Assembly. The collection and collation of gender aggregated data within the UN is of great practical importance in mapping the position of the world's women and in finding a factual basis for urging change. The Tribunals established by a Security Council resolution in the post 90s period is the first international tribunal explicitly granted jurisdiction over rape as a crime against humanity.

However these have not been unmixed. Campaigns around violence against women, and reproductive rights have led to these issues being accepted to a larger degree within human rights discourse, but it has also put into the shade the need to look at the denial of women's rights in other areas, such as economic and social rights. In the same way, the War Crimes Tribunal focussing its attention on Yugoslavia and Rwanda has turned attention away from the ongoing regular incidents of rape in all armed conflict

Identifying new economic categories

The Homeworkers Convention passed by the ILO in 1996 is the story of a change of perception and ideas and the confluence of many players, at various levels and stages

¹⁹ S. James, ‘The good enough citizen: female citizenship and independence’, in G.Bock and S. James (eds), *Beyond Equality and Difference*, London and New York, Routledge, 1992

²⁰ *ibid*

of the campaign to ensure that the convention was passed. The push to change came from below but it snowballed into a Convention because it was able to gather the support of various actors – academics, governments, NGOs, trade-unions, grassroots level organisation and the UN. Fundamentally the campaign was a “multidimensional struggle against the ideologies of domesticity and patriarchy.” Since the identity of “worker” and thereby its accommodation in the collectivities bargaining and legal arrangements, stemmed from a particular mode of production, namely factory-based “capitalist” other modes of production and trade, other types of work and workers were excluded from institutional arrangements. The battle initially was to get the concept of “homeworkers” on to the agenda

The Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era –an expanding network of women, researchers, and activists from the economic South, made their first striking impact at the NGO Forum at Nairobi in 1985. Third World women found a voice that was to challenge and change the discourse on women and development. By locating women's experience of development in the colonial and neo-colonial context and the macro-economic policies that reflected this colonial relationship, we introduced an analytical framework that was to change the terms of the debate on women's issue worldwide. . . . It provided the global women's movement the tools for advancing a different perspective on all development issues, from environment to human rights, from population to poverty.²¹

Thus, the concerns and knowledge about poverty and its links with macroeconomics were exposed at Nairobi and it was established that an "only for women agenda" would not suffice. This was the kind of point that Vida Tomšič and the NAM had been making earlier.

The shift of leadership to the South

Over the years women from the south politicized development – and gave currency to the politics of development and its location in the larger scenario of global economic landscapes. The four UN World conference on Women – 1975, 1980, 1985, 1995 are often seen as landmarks in moving women's quest for equality and justice forward.

What is not often highlighted is the striking shift in the leadership of these conferences into the hands of women from the newly liberated countries. The secretary generals of the Copenhagen 1980 and Beijing 1995 conferences were women from the South and interestingly from socialist backgrounds -. Lucille Mair of Jamaica and Gertrude Mongella of Tanzania . The leader of the NGO conference in Nairobi was another political stalwart, this time from Barbados , Nita Barrow..

Lucille Mair linked macro issues of imperialism and ‘violence of development’ with the violence women face within the more intimate spaces. Her engagement with the UN was not uncritical. While she welcomed progress made for women's equality; was acutely aware of the limitations. While third world women play important roles in economic production process, they are hostage to the micro macro forces, which

²¹ Peggy Antrobus,. "A Caribbean Journey: Defending Feminist Politics." In *Developing Power*, edited by Arvonne S. Fraser and Irene Tinker. New York: Feminist Press, 2004.

they are struggling to influence.²²

Another actor that emerged in the international space was a formation that was markedly political – challenging the traditional East Vs. West politics of the United Nations. This was the Non- Aligned Movement, an independent political umbrella for the South, different from G 77 , which was trammled up in the UN . Vida Tomsic a Yugoslavia Minister for Social Politics 1945-46 and later in 1950s a Member of the Executive Council. was the President of the People’s Assembly, and architect of the NAM pre-Nairobi Conference New Delhi in 1985.

This pre-Nairobi NAM meeting then fed into the Nairobi document and worked to voice the concern of women from developing and the socialist countries and pointed to difference in approach, circumstances and aspirations of these women.²³ “Actions of the international community in individual social fields ...have had limited effect. The consequences cannot be eliminated unless the action goes to the causes; to its roots in anachronistic and unjust international economic and political relations.”

Thus these women in partnership with civil society representatives from the south changed the terms of reference of women’s quest, from equality with men to a just and unexploitative world.

Linking women’s quest to the larger quest becomes the rhythm

One of the tensions at international fora like the conferences was that while many Western feminists were of the view that women’s issues should be politicized, Third World women through their separate caucuses had sought to broaden the agenda and “treat feminism as a fundamental political movement connected as much to their communities for liberation and autonomy as to work against gender discrimination.”²⁴

For Southern feminist activists and scholars, gender discrimination has always operated through other forms of exclusion and oppression: colonialism, caste, class, race, region, religion, and so forth. So gender relations operate through these other social and institutional structures, determining their status not only vis-a -vis men and women of their own social group, but also men and women of other groups. Therefore building analysis from the experience of poor women in South led **to many new and exciting ideas**. For example they were instrumental in pushing for other indicators of progress (which later became the human development report), the bottom’s up approach, (which got translated into participatory development) etc. The debates on household economics,²⁵ the idea, concept, measuring tool of the household as a unit on which you can build ideas like security of food or safety, was **challenged** and converted into individual security.

²² Lucille Mathrun Mair “International Women’s Decade: A Balance Sheet”Third J.P. Memorial Lecture New Delhi December 15 1984 CWDS New Delhi

²³ Women in the Development of Socialist Self-Managing Yugoslavia. Belgrade: Jugoslovenska stvarnost 1980

²⁴ Cheryl Johnson-Odim Common Themes, Different Contexts Third Work Women and Feminism- Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991 317)

²⁵ Pollak, R.A. 1985. "A Transaction Cost Approach to Families and Households." *Journal of Economic Literature* 23: 581-608.

There has been much research and debate on the inaccuracy, inappropriateness and inadequacy of the statistics on women's work. There is of course the main criticism that even if women are engaged in activities similar to men i.e. income earning, marketable, falling within the definition of gainful activity as defined by the data collection systems. They are not fully counted for various reasons. Some because it is non monetised: some because the questionnaires as designed do not "net" these assurances.²⁶

Feminists, especially from the Third World, have argued that rather than positing the individual aspects of the civil and political human rights, as opposed to the collective aspects of the social and economic human rights, the two can be approached as an integrated and mutually interdependent whole. This broad approach then encompasses a whole array of human rights in the development processes -- the civil and political rights, including the right to participation, the right to freedom, the right to self-determination and the right to equality and social, cultural and economic rights such as the right to health, the right to food, right to livelihood, the right to information. The so-called 'solidarity' rights in terms of the right to development and the right to environment are also encompassed in this perspective.²⁷

Women, Development and the United Nations Today- Critical Analysis

In a sense all three issues that this essay has dealt with – the Development project, the United Nations and the Women's movement have held promise of an improved quality of life for large section of people who are otherwise excluded, discriminated against and oppressed.

A health-check of the three, reveal that while they have delivered on some of the promises; they also belied many of the hopes vested in them. However we propose that the problem is beyond a mere inadequacy on the delivery of what was undertaken; rather the faultlines run deeper in the very conceptualising and knowledge base from which these are constructed. Therefore in our way forward we need to unpack and reassess these basic foundations that inform the three forces or variables

The development project was spawned immediately after the Second World War and was to deliver people from poverty, inequality, ill-health and ill-literacy into well-being. Since the Second World War, international trade (a sign of an integration of economies that is supposed to lead to development) has grown consistently faster than output and now accounts for approximately 25 percent of world GDP. Other measures of globalization include the enormous expansion of international financial markets, the spread of new technologies that have revolutionized international communications and encouraged the development of transnational patterns of production and

²⁶ Lourdes Beneria Accounting for Women's Work in the Women Gender and Development Reader, Zed books 1997

Julie Aslaksen, and Charlotte Koren. 1996. "Unpaid household work and the distribution of extended income: the Norwegian experience, " Feminist Economics, 2 (3), 1996: 65-80

²⁷ Nicole Alex , Alice Carlson, Maureen Gilligan, Kerri Schoenhut
<http://www.eckerd.edu/academics/bes/irga/human.rights/solidarity.html>

consumption, and the fourfold increase in foreign direct investment flowing to developing and transition economies over the past decade²⁸.

However, this overall picture masks large, growing disparities among the developing countries; not all countries have been able to take advantage of the benefits of globalization. Since about 1980, the fastest-growing economies of Asia and Latin America have been characterized by high rates of domestic savings, declining dependence on agriculture, and a rapid growth in trade, especially of manufactured exports.

Poverty and Inequality remains high

While there are widely varying conclusions on the impact of globalization on poverty and attempts to define poverty in many different ways. Now the figure that around 3 billion people live on less than USD2 a day has gained circulation.²⁹ The ILO's Global Employment Trends, 2007 says that there were some 1.37 billion working poor living on US\$2 a day in 2006 – for a global poverty figure, perhaps you would need to check with UNDP or World Bank figures). Critiques have pointed out that this is a large underestimation of the extent of global income poverty and leads to an incorrect inference that it has declined. What has been agreed upon is that the poverty and deprivation affects vast populations today even while there is unprecedented riches today.

Multiple inequalities lock in income levels of the poor, disadvantaged and populations in backward area, and the trickle down effects of growth is limited to the margins of the high growing enclaves and urban conglomerations.³⁰ There has also been an increase in regional inequality, especially in the incidence of rural poverty. This rise in inequality has implied that, despite better growth, poverty reduction has been sluggish.³¹

Therefore *development*, which was pursued as a “process of enlarging people’s choices” in order for the people to “lead long and healthy lives, to be knowledgeable and to have a decent standard of living” (Human Development Reports. Glossary of Terms) has disappointed.

Wolfgang Sachs in his scathing criticism of development says, “The idea of development stands like a ruin in the intellectual landscape. Delusion and disappointment, failures and crimes have been the steady companions of development and they tell a common story: it did not work.... Nevertheless, the ruin stands there and still dominates the scenery like a landmark.”

²⁸ . The World Bank, *World Development Indicators 1997* (The World Bank, Washington, D.C., 1997), p. 289.

²⁹ For example Koffi Anan, former UN Secretary General, in a [speech](#) on the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, 17 October 2000, said “Almost half the world’s population lives on less than two dollars a day, yet even this statistic fails to capture the humiliation, powerlessness and brutal hardship that is the daily lot of the world’s poor.”

³⁰ Aseema Sinha Globalization, Rising Inequality, and New Insecurities in India <http://209.235.207.197/imgtest/TaskForceDiffIneqDevSinha.pdf>

³¹ Reducing Poverty and Inequality in India: Has Liberalization Helped? Raghendra Jha <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/economics/publish/papers/wp2002/wp-econ-2002-04.pdf>

Even if we do not agree with this extreme position there are innumerable technical reports that show that development does not work, and political ones that point to how unjust it is. Now ecological considerations of the development project throw up not only the huge damage and destruction that has been wrought in the name of development, but also that development as it is conceived today cannot be sustained. In fact climate change has been described as *the* defining human development challenge of the 21st Century. The Human Development Report 2007/2008 argues, climate change poses challenges at many levels. In a divided but ecologically interdependent world, it challenges all people to reflect upon how we manage the environment of the one thing that we share in common: planet Earth. It challenges us to reflect on social justice and human rights across countries and generations

Much of the practical and political impulses of the anti-development stance is seen in what are called the “new social movements” – which are a heterogeneous and varied lot. Their challenge that they present is often seen as move towards “claiming territory from the developmentalist state” or a move towards “polycentrism”

It is the aspirations of these “ordinary people” that the birth and operation of the **United Nations**, was to embody. It is a legal entity, pledged originally by 51 countries but now 189 nations, - to provide a space for international dialogue on issues concerning them individually and collectively, as well as to design policies and actions which would enhance the lives of the individuals, the “people” of all those nations. A remarkable institution, and one on whose shoulders rest two of the most important issues confronting the world to day – peace and justice. Over the last fifty years the organization has addressed an unimaginably vast array of challenges, hinging around these two major poles. Taking an overview, it could be suggested that the UN has negotiated and nudged to make the world a better place for its people.

However it is today gripped by a crisis of legitimacy and relevance. The power landscape is changing drastically in many parts of the world, and many countries are struggling to safeguard their borders and their sovereignty. The UN is withering away in international space due to the superceding of the economic globe

The United Nations has in its history been able to overcome many more difficult crises: the blockade of Berlin, the aggression against Egypt in 1956, the war in Korea, the war in Vietnam... it survived all of these and continued to work.

Many argue that United Nations is the only existing institution that can contribute to the democratisation of international institutions especially for poorer countries. The richer ones can depend on diplomacy and their own business network; they can handle their foreign policy without the United Nations

However besides crisis like the erstwhile Yugoslavia issue or the current invasion of Iraq there are also serious allegations that the major economic powers have succeeded in eroding the role and functions of the U.N. In areas other than security, with the onset in the early 1980s of the Reagan-Thatcher era of minimising the role of the state both at the national and international level, a deliberate, concerted and well-planned campaign was spearheaded mainly by the ‘haves’ of the world, to emasculate and enfeeble the inter-state system represented by the U.N.

Hardcore economic issues relating even to the developing countries, such as financial flows, interest rate and exchange rate fluctuations, inflation, external indebtedness etc., are no longer allowed to be discussed within the forums of the U.N. This is in contrast to the position till the beginning of the 1970s when ideas such as trade preferences for developing countries, commodity price stabilisation, were all advanced and agreed upon within the U.N.

The growing power of the corporates which are now called global corporations in recognition of their power and reach across boundaries, implies that States are no more the main political entity that matters.

In a bid to reinvent itself the UN has undertaken a series of reforms. The aim of the reform process is to improve efficiency and effectiveness by rationalising the work and possibly the structures of UN agencies, funds and programmes. There are wide range of criticism to the process from the accusation that the reforms do not go far enough to question on proposals to expand the Security Council while preserving the veto powers of the 5 Permanent Members etc. Antonio Papisca's paper (Human Rights Centre, University of Padua, August 2005)

However there are other more fundamental questions that have been raised, An Ambassador of a developing country, who has been heavily involved in the reform negotiations expressed his concerns by saying, "Under the guise of achieving greater efficiency and avoiding duplication, I believe the developed countries want to devoid the UN of its role in development, and leave it to deal only with security, post-conflict, humanitarian and environment issues." ³²

The increasing collaboration between the UN and corporates is also an area of concern. The fear is that this will lead to a reluctance to criticize corporations which are central players in the human rights, environmental and development dramas unfolding every day across the globe. The corporates have very few checks right now and the UN is compromising a role it could play of being a watchdog on these powerful entities. The deeper concern is that the role of agenda setting within the UN is indirectly being handed over to these corporates.

The women's movement

By the time the Nairobi conference was held in 1985, at the end of the Women's Decade the international women's movement had ten years of intense interaction. Even though the international women's movement predates the UN – it moved into a new phase during the period of the International decade 1975-85. A deeper solidarity was born out a understanding that while the goals of the movement might be similar – of freedom, equality and justice; –women's situations vary in different countries and therefore there was a need for multiple strategies. Fuelled by grassroots organizing

³² Martin Khor UN Reform Process Hotting Up South North Development Monitor March 27, 2006 <http://www.globalpolicy.org/reform/topics/general/2006/0327hotting.htm>

around various issues the international women's movement represented varied voices and claims.

The Beijing conference that followed ten years later 1995 was seen as historic in the fact that there was an mobilisation of feminist advocates, activists and academics in the international political arena; as also that it displayed the diversity of the international women's movement at its best.

However one of the insights from the March 2005 Beijing +10 conference in New York was that over the past decades, two trajectories relative to women and development have unfolded. The first trajectory is the emergence of a strong political presence of the women's movement in the national and international scene. The need to engage in gendered analysis that recognizes both difference and inequality and its implications for development design is now widely acknowledged. The other trajectory reveals that the situation on the ground for many women, especially those living in poverty and in conflict-ridden situations, seems to have worsened, despite the fact that it has been addressed specifically by both the state and development thought.

At present, there is a tendency to uncritically regard international agreements and commitments to women's rights or gender equality made at the United Nations World Conferences as gains for the women's movement. Conceptual advances - such as recognition of women's rights as human rights, reproductive health and rights, or rape as a war crime -- are gains in changing international mindsets or laws and do push the women's rights agenda forward. However, while the advances in rhetoric and public recognition of women's rights are high this has not been borne out in reality, in changes in the lives of women - especially poor women. Vanessa Griffin talks of this as the "Emperor has no clothes factor" - that is, perceiving the growing disjunction between what is most widely stated and accepted as progress for women's rights by NGOs or feminist analysts and what continues to exist in reality for the majority of the world's women -- unchanging patriarchal oppressions and widespread poverty.

In addition to impacts of globalization, the rise of conservative and fundamentalist forces defines the contexts within which feminist engagement takes place at the international level. These forces present diverse faces in different situations, but their impacts across various UN processes and negotiations are consistently frustrating to goals of gender equality and justice. "In UN spaces, therefore, women's rights activists have to simultaneously confront the unconditional support of seemingly 'pro-gender equality' governments for the neoliberal economic agenda that is biased against poor countries and perpetuates women's oppression, and also the repressive objectives of conservative and fundamentalist forces seeking patriarchal control over women, especially through consistent opposition to women's sexual and reproductive rights."

This is indeed a challenge for a movement that is also becoming increasingly fractured and rife with internal tensions. Currently, most women's organisations tend to focus on a single issue or at best a narrow set of issues (e.g., reproductive health, education, economic empowerment, violence, etc.) with few links to one another. "This creates a structural fragmentation of global women's movements, which is quite different from a conscious and strategic division of labour. The lack of a division of labour in

relation to the different issues also accounts for the North/South divide within global women's movements. For instance, with regards to the multilateral and bilateral trade agreements that are being negotiated, there are many instances where Northern organizations could better focus on educating the public and lobbying their own governments instead of coming to Southern countries 'to build capacity.'

There are also doubts about focus on concepts such as "gender equality" is a move away from women's resistance to patriarchy and away from feminist concepts of transformation of social institutions to ensure women's rights and empowerment. However it also true that the fact that gender equity has gained popularity and the increased funding and visibility has produced enormous gender research, gender training, advocacy and analyses. And while some are apolitical and weak, others are fairly well sophisticated and valuable.

The fears though of reducing the vision and aspirations of a movement into a series of narrow and technically conceived targets; as done by the MDGs are not without founding. The task then is to The challenge therefore is how to re-vision the MDGs – both in substance and processes to make them people-centred in their agenda. To expand the goals so that the concerns of women become central to the; and backing this up with resources and processes.

While understanding that the Beijing Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals have played a critical role in making the issue of gender visible and offering frameworks to gauge progress; considering that the globe has changed in significant ways - in its politics and its economics, its landscapes of institutions and laws, and its approaches and ideologies to transformation since Beijing (1995) and more dramatically since the opening of this 21st century, it is suggested that the women's movement (especially of the South) would take note of the current scenario and develop a new framework. The need of the hour is move away from just be defending past gains or becoming tied down by UN documents. We need to seek new forms of engagement with these and other UN processes

But even as we stand on shaky grounds that are prone to seismic tremors; this very shifting ground beneath our feet offers cracks of opportunity and hope.

One such hope is a recent initiative that I have been part of called the Casablanca quest – which is to seek and elaborate a **Powerful Idea**, which could draw the feminist movement to work together , if possible over come their extraordinary capacity to emphasise diversity and difference.

So that feminists, despite and because of their diversity and pluralism, can become a new force in international politics. 'It is a force of ideas, invention and commitment rather than economic resources, of courage, morality and justice instead of technology and tanks. This force is the diplomacy of the disempowered, addressing, modifying and seeking to transform every issue on the international agenda with the realities, knowledge, pain and demands of the dominated; it is part of our own transformation from victimhood to survival, and from survival – whether of personal or structural violence – to power.' (from *A Diplomacy of the Oppressed*.)

What is needed now and it can be done if women put their minds together is for women's brilliant struggles, to be treated as a BODY of knowledge, chiseled into **theory**, into an intellectual challenge to what "is" i.e. the currently dominant social science theories / ideas. An **intellectual theoretical construct** out of the ground experience, which can claim **space** in the world of theoretical discourse.

The idea is to forge the **new** path with women's *gyana*³³ - an Indian concept which roughly translates to knowing ,meaning knowledge. which includes "experience". – for feminists to use their most powerful tool for attracting “justice”. Namely their *gyana* , and that this would undermine the intellectual inheritance.

Some initiatives are beginning in this direction one is a process which is being fostered by the UNDP, and which comes broadly under the frame of “Interrogating and Rebuilding Progress: Through Feminist/women’ s Knowledge”. It is aimed at bringing together a group of feminist thinkers – primarily from the South with the diversity of intellectual backgrounds and experience – to reflect on forms of progress and the implications for poor women in the South. In particular we seek beyond fragmented assessment in relation to particular goals and targets to reflect more deeply on the kinds of societies that are being created and the extent to which they can achieve social justice. This calls for an interrogating and rebuilding concepts, measures and methods for achieving progress. Other such initiatives are coming to play globally and this is where a new story needs to begin

³³ "Invoking Gyana, Women's knowing, as a vehicle for rebellion", a background paper for Casablanca Dream *Women Weave Peace into Globalisation*, 12-15 Jan 2007.
www.devakijain.com/writings/feministreflection.html