

GLOBALIZATION, GENDER, AND WORLD FUTURES

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Summary

Globalization, new technologies, demographic changes, environmental crisis, as well as epistemic changes are all crucial drivers of change that are radically transforming the way we think about and envision our common future. An increased inter-dependence of nations and higher proximity of cultures and civilizations together with the current speed of social change are demanding a better understanding of human differences and similarities, as well as a discussion about visions of possible and desirable world futures. Such understandings and discussions are being hampered by the imposition of a one-dimensional “global” futures vision. Social groups who are in a structural position to invest finances and resources in time and energy to develop and expand ideologies, visions and perspectives that benefit them are carrying out these impositions. In our hierarchically organized world this means that the more dominant social/cultural groups are in the position to exert their own particular ideologies and make them a “global” one.

In such a climate the less dominant social groups are left with two basic choices: (1) to mainstream their own visions of desirable futures into a global vision, or to (2) focus on developing alternatives within a localized context. Women have been actively involved in both processes.

All the current drivers for change can highlight the current systems of capitalist, patriarchal and colonial oppression or can be utilized by women and other disadvantaged social groups to achieve global and local social transformations. Globalization is one such driver where certain aspects of this uneven process are highlighted by the leading world elite and made seen as universal and objective. In this process economic globalization is equated with “globalization,” western and male experiences are equated with “human” experiences and chosen highlights presented in terms of a “global” vision. At the same time, alternative understandings and visions of

globalization are developed by people from gender, class, caste, and race “peripheries” (See *Globalization as if the Entire Globe Mattered*).

1. The Impact of Globalization

The impact of globalization has been well documented. There is some debate over which aspects of globalization are positive and desirable and which ones are negative. The consensus is greater when discussing negative aspects of globalization. These include widening gap between the rich and poor globally and within nation states, further environmental degradation and continuation of cultural colonization. The positive aspects of globalization, that are mentioned the most often, include shift towards the understanding of human differences within the unified view of humanity, increased ecological consciousness, higher cultural interchange, more consumer and employment choices and the opening up of the possibilities in travel, communication, and business.

Since globalization is an uneven process its effects are also felt unevenly. Advantaged social groups, both globally and locally, are more likely to get most of the benefits globalization is offering. The opposite holds true for world’s disadvantaged—they are the ones that are most likely to feel the negative consequences of economic globalization (for example, in the form of structural adjustment policies), environmental pollution and degradation and western hegemonic cultural onslaught. Unfortunately, the positive aspects of economic globalization are not enough to make up for the ecological and economic consequences that are seriously undermining the quality of life, and even the mere existence of the world’s future generations. The belief that markets are somehow “self-corrective” and that “free” trade can be divorced from Western-capitalist colonization and imperialism is misleading. The overwhelming nature of globalization has also created a discourse in which the positive and the negative aspects of globalization are seen as inseparable and globalization itself as process beyond intervention and control. However, as there is not “one globalization” but many various processes that are creating this phenomenon there are always choices to be made in terms of which aspects of globalization can and should be encouraged and which ones need to be subdued. Actions are necessary in order to re-shape the global economy and move toward ecologically sustainable, equitable human development. These changes can and need to be made at a variety of levels. According to Hazel Henderson, these levels include: the family-individual, civic society, provincial and local systems, corporate system, the nation-state, the international system and the global (planetary) system level. While the international and corporate system as well as the nation-state system level are too often seen as the only active players in globalization, the environment and local communities, families and individuals are seen as passive and impotent recipients of sweeping social changes. But can globalization continue without the support of planetary and local (including individual humans and families) ecosystems? And if it can, won’t it eventually self-destruct once the support of planetary and local systems reserves come to an end (in the form of ecological destruction and severe poverty, for example)?

Humans can and need to act before such a negative scenario materializes. Short-term thinking and piecemeal, ad-hoc solutions cannot be sufficient any more with such high

“investments” and important “reserves” at stake. To move beyond current mainstream globalization discourse a different vision of global–planetary–international system is needed. The vision that has the highest potential to subvert a dystopian globalization scenario has been developed by social groups that are the most disadvantaged by the negative effects of globalization. One such group is women from the developing world who suffer negative consequences of triple systems of oppression: patriarchy, colonization and global capitalism. In addition, both women from the developing and overdeveloped world have been putting emphasis on global strategies that will preserve and sustain life. The indigenous and intuitive knowledge of the gender that is more closely involved in the creation and the maintenance of the human life are necessary in order to conserve planetary conditions and sustain future generations.

2. Women are Supporting Globalization but is Globalization Supporting Women?

It is now increasingly recognized that women provide and are expected to provide services that buffer the negative aspects of economic restructuring caused by extension of global capitalism. UN, UNESCO and UNIFEM studies have repeatedly shown that while some women benefit from national economic restructuring (more job opportunities, higher consumer choices) the benefits are usually reserved for educated professional women. In addition, it is the most vulnerable women who suffer from existing inequalities and insecurities being intensified by globalization. Even when women benefit from economic globalization, this happens in an environment that is increasingly hierarchical, unequal, and insecure. Risks and benefits are not being shared equally; in fact, the disproportion between groups that are coping risks and those that are gaining benefits is increasing at the global and national level.

The 1999 UN world survey on the role for women in development dealing with globalization, gender and work issues has found that women are incorporated into paid employment in greater numbers in the past two decades, but usually under conditions inferior to those associated with men’s employment. Women, especially those that are poor, have disproportionately borne the costs of economic adjustment. The welfare demands placed on the family and women also seem to have increased, especially in developing countries.

UNIFEM’s biennial report on Progress of the World’s Women 2000 explores complex and uneven gender effects of globalization and concludes with women’s demands of organizing global interconnections that are more inclusive and more fully human. Women are therefore not seen as only the passive recipients of global changes but as active participants in the creation of our common futures. According to this report, globalization has both intensified some of the existing inequalities and opened up new opportunities for some women. In addition, women are using UN human rights instruments to address women’s economic inequality in different parts of the world, and also new technologies (Internet) for electronic inclusion, campaigns, commerce and consultation. (See *The Internet and Political Economy*)

But while there is a possibility to use the processes of globalization to meet women’s needs and political choices the obstacles are still many, and at some parts of the world these obstacles are enormous. For example, while economic globalization “opens up”

markets, this is done in the context where many of the world's women are excluded either directly (some Islamic societies, for example) or indirectly (multi-tasking at home) from participating in the market economy. Women with little or not education, especially older women, lose out. Apart from gender, class and geographical bias there is also an age bias in the distribution of the benefits of globalization among women (and people in general). The domestic economic sector in which women are disproportionately engaged is conspicuously absent from mainstream theories of globalization as well as from the economic planning and framework that governs globalization.

The creation of the “pyramid of the globalization” is becoming sharper and it is getting more difficult for most women to economically and politically “rise” within the pyramid, as women's strengths tend to be based locally based. There is great deal of evidence that globalization has reduced the influence of the welfare state in overdeveloped nations. This has led to the reduction of benefits that women gained over the past few decades. These benefits are currently not being transferred to the global level nor are multinational companies under systematic pressure to incorporate policies that benefit women.

Apart from supporting economic globalization by disproportionately bearing its negative aspects as well as by unpaid work in private and public sector women also support globalization by migration. Women provide informal unpaid services in the domestic sector in the case of family migration as well as needed labor force if they migrate on their own. Due to a shift in migration policies and increased restriction of international mobility of unskilled people structural barriers to migration for many women—who are less skilled and educated—have been created. But migration of women domestic and service workers is becoming the mainstream migration pattern in some parts of the world.

Not only domestic services are being globalized. Prostitution and trafficking of women is also part of globalization processes. Continuing relations of colonialism and imperialism, further advancing “modernization,” “development,” urbanization and industrialization, and forcing structural adjustment policies globalization has in addition increased the indebtedness of some nations and their unequal status in the world hierarchy. These processes have in turn made many women increasingly vulnerable to exploitation and some states to becoming sex-tourist destinations. Exploring these and other processes, feminist theorists within the international relations field are examining how globalization has also helped create phenomena such as an international political economy of sex, militarized prostitution, sex tourism, mail-order brides and child prostitution. While global diseases such as AIDS have the potential to increase the awareness and “the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole” in the context of patriarchal colonial relationships, AIDS has had the effect of sexual exploitation of the younger and younger girls and boys, who are seen as “newer” and consequently “cleaner”.

The absence of gender and Third World perspectives in the theories of globalization and the universalization of particular (western, male) experiences contribute to the understanding of globalization as the “shrinking of time and space” while at the same

time large number of world's women are forced to spend more time and cover larger territory (looking for food, fuel or jobs) in order to satisfy basic needs for their household and their children.

While there is a focus on the “unification” of our world in western theories of globalization, conflicts in the developing world violently diversify people (nationalize, reify ethnicity, religion and tribe). “Global network society” is created in the world where the access to information superhighway is still a privilege denied many. Global “post scarcity” society is theorized while millions die of hunger and poverty related deaths. While globalization is seen as new phenomena some disadvantaged social groups mostly experience it as a continuation (and cementing at the global level) of processes such as colonization, imperialism and patriarchy.

In this era of globalization, some traditional western feminist concepts also need to be redefined. For example, women who enter the paid labor force are not automatically “empowered” if they do so in an environment in which they also need to supply additional services previously covered by now privatized public sector (health, education, and disability care). Similarly, a working mother does not necessarily provide an example of gender equality for future generations in a situation where daughters have to leave school to replace the mother at home, taking care of younger siblings and doing household chores. The real challenge for global feminism is how to materialize its visions of one world in which inequality based on gender, class, caste, religion, and ethnicity is absent both locally and globally. How to create global peace when globalization also encourages global arms trade and weapons flow? And how to encourage life sustaining futures in situations where mobile capital shifts exploitation of the nature from one “liberated” local space to another with governments more desperate for foreign currency and foreign investments?

But while women are in general coping with the more negative influences of globalization from “above,” they are also leaders in social movements that are developing global visions from “below”. Although both movements might have a similar goal (or vision for the future)—the creation of “one world”—this “common” goal is called upon for different symbolic politics. In the case of globalization from above, corporate capitalism, and the State evoke the image of globalized world in order to (1) increase profits or (2) to justify the implementation of conservative policies. The globalization discourse pushed by corporate capitalism highlights the positive aspects of globalization along almost utopian lines. What are lost in this discourse is that positive globalization experiences are not universal, and that the impact of globalization is differently felt in accordance to belongings to certain social groups (class, race, gender, nationality). This globalization discourse follows developmental modernist evolutionism arguing that the globalization (defined in terms of spreading of “free” markets and neo-liberalist philosophy) will ultimately benefit everyone. On the other hand, images of globality brought by grass roots and modern (“left”) social movements focus on issues of justice, human rights and equality rather than on technological and market forces. While there is great deal of debate among those trying to push globalization from above and even more debate among those trying to push globality from below, these two visions/images (globally) represent two basic models as well as current political choices on how to create positive futures.

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Biographical Sketch

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