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Globalisation and the Feminisation of Poverty: A South African Perspective on Expansion, Inequality and Identity Crises

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Introduction

The raging debate among African intellectuals regarding the implications of globalisation has tended to centre around two major positions, with the point of dispute being the (in)appropriateness of the globalisation agenda. Hence globalisation represents an agenda that has both advocates and critics (Hamelink 1999; Hendricks 1999). A lot has been said, done and published on globalisation and the feminisation of poverty, but as with most economic and social issues, the gender aspects of globalisation have largely been kept at the margins (Pape 2000). Consequently the meaning of globalisation depends on the 'eyes of the beholder' (Genge 2002).

South Africa has been undergoing a process of fundamental economic transformation as a result of policies promoting integration into the global economy. Women are bearing the brunt of the costs of this transformation. They are caught in a cycle of vulnerability which starts with their retrenchment from full-time employment. This form of globalised economic logic of neo-liberalism is costing working class women precious ground won over many years.

Globalisation is manifested today through three main neo-liberal policy measures: privatisation, deregulation of trade, and financial liberalisation. These forms of neo-liberal reforms have been evidenced by the overall withdrawal of the government from its roles of sovereign decision making, providing essential public services, developing and implementing policies aimed at promoting equity, and ensuring adequate public protection for economically, socially, and politically vulnerable populations (Guttal 2000). These trends are accompanied by an increase in the role and power of the private sector, and a surrender of most

economic transactions to the market in the belief that free and unfettered markets will somehow lead to the most efficient allocation of resources and eventually result in economic equality.

The current trends of globalisation, economic reforms, the World Bank's policy of encouraging the privatisation of public services, and the global cut in social spending are only a few of the determining factors which decrease women's participation in the workforce and increase their poverty. Women are most vulnerable in the workforce and retrenchment continues to affect them more and long before their male counterparts.

The globalisation/gender interface and the feminisation of poverty

Globalisation trends and related policies are often thought to be gender-neutral, that is they have similar impact on men and women. However a closer look at the way they affect people reveals significant gender differentiated impacts (Lebakeng & Phalane 2001). Globalisation is an unfortunate phenomenon because the affirmation of differences in identities should open up endless vistas for the creation of true solidarity between otherwise diverse communities. As currently patterned, it has actually ushered in a non-conducive environment as it encourages inequality and reciprocity. Moreover it is unfortunate because it breeds a great deal of resistance and disdain.

The effects of globalisation are so profound that the stark reality in South Africa reflects the continued marginalisation of women in public life. Capitalism has always been a vicious circle with a small minority in the world controlling the resources and the majority living in poverty and destitution. However globalisation is a systematic process whereby the standard of living of poor people is made even worse. The majority of casualties of globalisation are women. This is a worldwide phenomenon driven by business interest, as opposed to a policy-led process where ordinary people can give input, hold governments accountable, and collectively shape their future (Fairshare 2001).

The greatest challenge of tracing and fully understanding the ways in which globalisation affects women is the absence of sex-disaggregated indicators and data in key sectors such as agricultural production and employment, services, and the informal sector. While independent researchers and institutions such as UNIFEM are gathering information and showing how women are affected by current globalised economic trends, many of the indicators and methods used to monitor these trends are in and of themselves not gender sensitive (Mehta 2001).

In reality the employment experience of women under globalisation is uneven and contradictory, often reflecting the polarisation stressed at the Beijing Conference of 1995, as the 'feminisation of poverty' rather than of 'work'. When we further unpack these processes, we find women represent 40 percent of the global workforce, yet they hold less than 3 percent of top executive jobs. In a study issued to mark International Women's day, the United Nations Labour

Agency pointed out that women account for one percent of trade union leaders although 40 percent of trade union members are women (ILO 1998).

These crises have dented the confidence in the integration of global markets and have pointed to some of the shortcomings in the international and institutional environment. The gains of globalisation have not been equitably distributed and the gap between men and women, rich and poor is widening. Even the Finance Minister in South Africa, Trevor Manuel, has conceded that globalisation has brought increased uncertainty and the world appears to be inadequately prepared to deal with the risk and equitably share the opportunities.

One of these shortcomings is gender stereotyping particularly when it comes to jobs. Workplace settings are a reflection of values and priorities of those in power. Men, in their egocentric preoccupation with harbouring traditional thoughts about women, choose to recognise, accept and cultivate the talents and skills of female workers in a manner inconsistent with how they treat most of their male workers. Certain activities or jobs are labelled as men's. This globalised situation indicates that the cards will always be stacked against women without connections in the workplace (Purvis 1995). In most instances gender stereotyping disadvantages women economically and socially, blocking them from a range of opportunities including access to more skilled and high paying forms of employment.

The impact of economic globalisation on women needs to be assessed in light of women's multiple roles as productive and reproductive labour in their families as well as their contribution towards overall community cohesion and welfare, and maintenance the social fabric. On the same level, increases in the prices of food, fuel and essential services such as water and electricity place extra burdens on females in low-income households. Women are usually responsible for managing food and water consumption including ensuring the overall health and welfare of their families. Because of this deep-rooted difference in gender roles and socio-cultural expectations, the impact of globalisation is felt differently by females and males. While economic class, race and culture are also extremely important factors in determining the nature and extent of impacts, by and large, the very same policies and trends are likely to have quite different implications for both sexes (Kehler 2000).

The burden of impoverishment and marginalisation that results from the global integration process affects men and women differently (Mehta 2001). To understand this aspect of globalisation one must see it from the basic premise that women are situated differentially in the capitalist reproduction process. In South Africa the most disturbing feature of globalisation is that different aspects of poverty such as deprivation, powerlessness and vulnerability have gender dimensions (Phalane & Lebakeng 2002).

Among the latter are the rise of female participation in low return, urban informal sector activities. This trend is part of the evidence for the feminisation

of poverty. Consideration of poverty often neglects differentials between men and women in terms of their access to income, resources and services (BRIDGE, 2001). In addition the greater insecurity and lower earning capacity in the informal sector is another reason for the feminisation of poverty. Women are employed in lesser skilled occupations and predominate in the informal sectors and service sector as domestic workers. Their levels of formal education and training are lower and if categorised as professionals, they are predominantly found in the 'feminised professions', for example teaching and nursing (Finnemore & Cunningham 1995).

Globalisation has not affected all countries or regions in the same way, and the country's internal preparedness is critical in how it can take advantage of or be completely overrun by globalisation. Because of differing levels of modernisation, industrialisation and technological capacity, regions and even areas within South Africa have felt the impact of globalisation quite differently.

Research indicates that the structural adjustment policies of the World Bank and the IMF affect women much more deeply than men. A critical one is the under-investment in women. Many parents are reluctant to invest their resources in their daughters with the understanding that sooner rather than later they would be married off to other families (Phalane & Lebakeng 2002). On the other hand, when basic education becomes privatised, or families cannot afford the rising cost of education, it is more often girls than boys who drop out of school because of the belief that boys need formal education more than girls to prepare them for their future social roles. This has further implications for the type of employment that women are able to find when they move into the wage labour market (Sandrasagra 2000).

It is against this background that we delineate the changed labour market context under globalisation and situate women in it. With lower levels of education, women will tend to be concentrated in the lower rungs of the labour market and in jobs that require less formal training or education. The replacement of manual labour with machines and new technology usually displaces more women than men since women have a large education gap to cross compared with men in the same class in order to learn how to use new technologies (Guttal 2000).

When combined with current economic changes this means that women's class, race and gender-based access to resources and opportunities perpetuate inequality and poverty and at the same time decrease women's socio-economic status. This further explains why rural women are the poorest of the poor in the South African context, oppressed by national and international injustices and family systems as well (Phalane 2001). Their lack of access to resources and basic services includes unequal rights in family structures as well as unequal access to family resources such as land and livestock. It is not a cliché but literally true to say that African rural women are not only poorer in society as a whole but also in their own families. Their level and kind of poverty and inequality is experienced

differently and more intensely than that of men and the why socio-economic changes impact on them (Kehler 2001).

Sandrasagra (2000) noted that the opportunities created by the process of globalisation have opened clear avenues for development, but in some cases its benefits have not been equitably distributed, thereby impeding efforts to promote the advancement of women, particularly those living in poverty. Globalisation is market integration—how men, women, rich, poor benefit depends on their relative position in the market (Kiff & Kandirikirira 2002). Competition is a key factor resulting in winners and losers, where those with resources and technology dictate the rules of the game. The poor and women start from a disadvantaged position because they lack resources and technology, so they are the most likely losers. The majority of the poor in South Africa are women.

Gendering Globalisation: Some Implications for Development

The political and cultural dimensions of globalisation have had contradictory social effects on women as workers and as activists. The challenge is to shape policies and processes so that they promote improved living standards and increased gender equality. Further monitoring and policy research on the impact of globalisation is necessary because globalisation is leading to increased inequalities between men and women. Despite new initiatives and commitments, the sad reality is that the situation of the world's women is progressively deteriorating due to globalisation.

The link between gender equality and development means that marginalisation of women must be stopped along with the continued feminisation of poverty. The advancement of women cannot be achieved by passing legislation. Legislation existing on paper is only one side of the story, since rights must be put into practice. As a consequences social development on the national scale must be strengthened and a climate conducive to development must be created.

Problems of inclusion stem from the fact that women are very differently positioned in relation to the markets in different parts of the world. In certain places where they are socially excluded from leaving their homes, the challenge is to find ways for women to participate. This does not advocate the feminisation of the workplace or globalisation, it does not have to be masculine either. Instead, globalised equity policies should include an all inclusive gender and centralised management systems.

If policy makers work only on consequences and do not start to challenge the dynamics of globalisation including exclusion and exploitation that create social injustice, there is the risk of colluding with an unjust stumbling block as we apply projects as sticking plasters that ignore the true nature of the problem. It is possible to take action to contrast the dynamics of inequality and injustice caused by globalisation, and thereby to challenge those with power and to demand account-

ability. From a gender perspective, to be effective women have to be more policy literate with regard to the phenomenon of globalisation.

Governments have to re-examine their roles and responsibilities in the context of globalisation and its impacts on women if they are to make a positive contribution to world development. Women should be able to decide where they stand vis-à-vis globalisation and understand the impact it has in South Africa and on their work. Bridging the gender gap should be the benchmark for deciding to make globalisation work for women. This would require a grounded analysis of the real opportunities the process provides for women. It should involve a thorough analysis of the impact of international trade on women and the poor and embarking on programmes and processes that make international trade work for them.

On a continental level, seeking alternatives to globalisation would involve an in-depth understanding of the power relations between developed and poor economies and an analysis of the alternatives that have already evolved in response to it. To an extent whether it is seeking alternatives to globalisation, or by trying to make it work for women and the poor, countering the negative impact of globalisation can only be effective if it is grounded in a thorough analysis of the current form of globalisation (Kiff & Kandikirira 2002). Its origination, evolution and the thinking behind it must be understood.

Conclusion

For the majority of women, existing socio-economic rights as guaranteed by the constitution remain inaccessible. The result is the perpetuation and increase, as well as the feminisation of poverty. This situation is abominable for women in rural areas, as constitutional guarantees of equality and non-discrimination remain merely theoretical rights that lack implementation in light of globalisation.

Even though recent government policies appear to have opened the doors of work to women, there are quite a substantial number of constraints, which still cast a shadow on the opportunities hitherto created. The greatest underlying factor, though seldom openly admitted, is that the fulfilment of women's strategic needs to rescue them from the doldrums of poverty is seen as a threat, a destabilising agent to social order. Yet what ought to be recognised is the fact that the full measure of impacts of globalisation on women, and the development of progressive policy measures to counter these measures will not receive the attention it deserves until this dominant knowledge and attitudinal base is challenged and reconstructed.

Only the effectiveness of the translation from the theory of equality and non-discrimination into a real practice of empowerment and socio-economic upliftment of women and the poor should be a true criterion determining success or failure to counter the negative impact of the globalisation process. What has become apparent is that forms of inequality exist regardless of prevailing

political ideology. Their manifestation may differ, but the reality is that women's subordination remains constant. Advancement in the interest of women is susceptible to being lost through political, economic and societal change that are deemed generally progressive and those that are destructive.

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