



Old Lessons, Fresh Insights, New Strategies: Notes on Mapping Gender Equality and Economic Justice Strategies¹

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At a recent event for activists and donors, a prominent social justice leader in the US bravely framed his speech with two provocative questions, “why are we losing?” and “what do we need to win?”³ While a gentler assessment might say that we are winning some battles and losing the overall war, these two questions are essentially the focus of our meeting in Budapest, February 5-8th. I call these questions ‘brave’ because those of us involved in social change can be a sensitive bunch for good reason. The fact that we are always on the defensive for what we believe, and barely keeping pace with the opposing foes and forces inhibits the kind of critical assessment and thoughtful analysis that are so vital for developing effective change strategies to advance gender equality and economic justice in an ever-shifting global political landscape.

The Budapest meeting is designed with the explicit aim of creating a structured space where a diverse group of experts, activists and strategists concerned about gender equality will assess, analyze and strategize. Building on successes and lessons, we will explore the kinds of strategies and organizational forms that are needed to advance gender equality and economic justice today.

This paper can be seen as a companion to Joanna Kerr’s paper, *From ‘Opposing to Proposing’: Finding Proactive Global Strategies for Feminist Futures*,⁴ which, with similar bold candor, takes stock of gender equality efforts in light of evolving contextual trends, and persuasively argues for the need to revisit and rethink our directions. Building upon her analysis and recommendations, I briefly review some of the contextual, institutional and strategic challenges and gaps we will address in the meeting. They are presented here as a way of explaining ‘the why’ and ‘the how’ of this meeting’s process of collective reflection, analysis and planning. This paper has three parts:

1. Contextual Trends and Challenges
2. Institutional and Strategic Patterns, Challenges and Gaps
3. What is to be Done? Elements for More Effective Change Strategies

To summarize, this paper takes the view that our current approaches to gender equality and economic justice at global and national levels are limited, and that we need to re-inject our vision, analysis, agendas, strategies and organizational forms with sharp political thinking. This

¹ Prepared for the Gender Justice & Globalization Strategy Meeting, organized by the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID), February 5-8, 2004 in Budapest, Hungary.

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³ Deepak Bhargava, Executive Director of Center for Community Change, Washington, DC, speech to the Ford Foundation, 2003.

⁴ This chapter is in *The Future of Women’s Rights: Global Visions and Strategies*, Zed Publishing, 2004.

task demands an in-depth analysis of the dynamics of power, inequality and discrimination that takes into account values, ideas, ideologies, institutions and policy at all levels, as well as gender, race, class, and geography. This is consistent with a ‘justice approach’, briefly described in Kerr’s paper, which draws from much historical thinking and practice.

1. Contextual Forces and Trends

An analysis of the contextual forces shaping the nature and solutions to gender equality and economic injustice are dealt with in detail in Kerr’s paper, and will be discussed in-depth in the meeting. Below, I briefly highlight a few because of their strategic and institutional implications for how and where we engage power. The overarching and transformative force driving many of these shifts is globalization.

- *Neo-liberal Economic Reform*: For two decades, a fixed set of economic reform measures⁵ have been implemented from St. Louis to Nairobi featuring less government, less taxes, fiscal austerity, privatization of essential services, reduction of labor and environmental standards, and ‘free’ trade (discussed by Kerr in more detail). The resulting increases in poverty, unemployment, and the gap between ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ have also exacerbated conflict worldwide. The entire terrain of economic policy has shifted both the identity and power of the key actors and institutions (with the WTO, regional agreements, multinational conglomerates and the IFIs as dominant players) as well as what is considered *acceptable* economic policy.⁶
- *The Shrinking Role and Capacity of National Governments*: This has important implications for equality and justice advocates because budgets and delivery mechanisms for social policy have been gutted, and with them, the possibilities for enforcing and protecting rights. Decentralization, as part of this trend, has in some instances been a blow to women’s equality as authority is devolved to parochial and sometimes oppressive local elites.
- *A Changing and Uncertain Global Governance System*: Some see this shift as the *challenge of two ‘competing’ global governance systems*⁷ with the older UN system, vital for human rights, pitted against the emerging global economic regime of the IFIs, WTO, etc. Simply put, the two appear to represent conflicting interests (peoples’ and labor rights vs. investors’ rights) and different authorities (governments vs. corporate/global).
- *Fundamentalisms*: The growth of religious fundamentalisms with the accompanying explosion of organized mass-based groups has fueled a forceful backlash worldwide against women’s equality and sexual rights of any kind.

⁵ See Finnegan, William, *The Economic of Empire: Notes on the Washington Consensus*, Harpers Magazine, May 2003.

⁶ George Soros refers to this one-size-fits-all approach to economics as ‘market fundamentalism’ in *The Crisis of Global Capitalism*, Public Affairs (Persus Book Group), New York: 1998; also see Cox, Harvey, *The Market as God*, Atlantic Monthly, March, 1999.

⁷ See Jim Shultz, www.democracyctr.org.

- *Conflict, Militarization and a Focus on Security as a Means for Control*: In addition to the important implications this trend has for rights, freedoms and budgets, the changing nature of conflict and war is noteworthy. Private sector actors and interests are increasingly tied to military interventions and local rebel and armed factions (e.g. conflict diamonds, oil, etc.) while private armies are on the rise.
- *Global Dominance of the US Government and its Foreign Policy Agenda that Sanctions Unchecked Power and Preemptive Strikes*: The global economic and military agenda, clearly tied to private sector interests, is the US' agenda and it is dangerously framed as the promotion of 'freedom and democracy'.⁸ To influence this agenda will require more effective linkages between global and US domestic justice efforts.

However, alternative and contradictory trends are also emerging that offer significant opportunities for gender equality and economic justice agendas and strategies. For example, the evolving "crisis of the Washington Consensus" – with the stalling of the US-European trade agenda in Cancun, and the mounting evidence of 20 years of failed economic reform – creates opportunities to define and build support for economic alternatives. The growing activism of consumer rights advocacy groups and the increased linkages between organized labor, NGOs and social movements are promising signs of louder voices and more leverage. In addition, growing direct engagement with corporate actors by NGOs (alongside trade unionists) through lobbying shareholders and other tactics is making some headway. The nascent convergence between the human rights and development agendas is creating opportunities for more holistic approaches and strengthened coalitions, and with it, energy and focus on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights as a key element of a new change agenda. Finally, while gender equality has not been widely institutionalized, dozens of (non-gender focused) NGOs and social movements are bringing gender equality front and center in their agendas and organizations.

2. Institutional and Strategic Patterns, Challenges and Gaps

Related to the above trends, the expansion and evolution of civil society worldwide during the last two decades has reshaped economic and social justice work of all kinds, including gender equality efforts. A critical force behind these changes is the political openings and transitions that have occurred in dozens of countries throughout the world since the late 1980s. This "wave of democratization", as it was called from the early '90s, has increased opportunities for women and all citizens to participate more actively and directly in public life. Yet today, in many places, this 'wave' has stalled in mid-stream (or reversed direction), due to corruption, conflict, rising poverty and many other factors highlighted above and discussed in Kerr's paper.

With the expansion of civil society, there are significant institutional and strategic shifts that affect the nature and impact of gender equality and economic justice work, including:

⁸ See Ted Fishman, *Making a Killing: The Myth of Capital's Good Intentions*, Harpers' Magazine, August 2002.

- *The increasing institutionalization and professionalization of civil society* and “NGO-ization”, that is the growing dominance of NGOs relative to trade unions, social movements, and other important community and grassroots initiatives.
- *The growing engagement with governments, IFIs and other global policymaking institutions*, and the identification of the policy arena as the prime area of action. This has led to more professional staff dedicated to researching, analyzing, arguing and advocating on public policy at all levels, and in some cases, a lesser emphasis on organizing and education, which is essential for base-building.
- *The increasing transnational connections among civil society actors*, creating further opportunities and challenges with regard to leadership, agenda-setting, coordination, representation and accountability.

While these developments have been researched and analyzed in depth,⁹ this meeting will attempt to deal with some of the negative fall-out, bad habits and challenges they have been generated for gender equality and economic justice work and organizations. Some of these are summarized (perhaps mercilessly) below:

- *Depoliticization of Women’s Rights and Social Change Efforts*: On one level, this can be characterized as an emphasis on technical, linear (e.g. logframe) approaches to complex social and political change realities and dilemmas. (At its worst, gender mainstreaming exemplifies this overly simplistic, one-size-fits all approach.) Insufficient, technical approaches tend to circumscribe the conflict inherent in promoting gender and justice and prevent the kind of power analysis that is necessary to devise effective responses to deeply rooted inequality. These approaches also contribute to a destructive hierarchy of knowledge that overvalues academic expertise over the know-how of organizing and strategizing, which are both essential for effective change.
- *Leadership Disconnects*: Knowledge hierarchies, coupled with professionalization and NGO-ization, deepen disconnects and resentments between activists and academics (theory and practice), and between professionals and grassroots or union leaders that undermine NGO-union-movement alliances and new leadership opportunities. Some believe that professionalism has taken the passion, activism and dedication out of justice work, where it is seen as a non-profit career rather than a life-long commitment. Another side of these tensions plays out among younger and older NGO leaders, where younger activists are eager for more life-work balance and question rigid measurements for ‘dedication’ while older counterparts also long for balance but wonder how change can occur on a strict 9-5 schedule. This undercuts intergenerational learning and organizational capacity.¹⁰

⁹ See, for example, *The Way Forward: Citizens, Civil Society and Governance in the New Millennium*, Commonwealth Foundation and Civicus, London: Commonwealth Foundation, 1999. It is important to note that this analysis focuses on broad trends internationally and therefore, may not apply to some countries and contexts.

¹⁰ For a U.S. analysis of this problem see *Generational Changes and Leadership: Implications for Social Change*, Frances Kunreuther, 2002, www.buildingmovement.org.

- *Focus on Short-Term Change*: Reliance on donor funding, among other factors, has increasingly reduced the social change timeframe (at least for NGOs) to a 2-year cycle, which has further contributed to short-term thinking and reactive policy work as well as limiting the diversity of tactics, allies, entry points and audiences.
- *To Engage or not to Engage?*: With limited political, strategic thinking, our organizations find themselves consumed by policy work that gets co-opted or diverts us from more relevant arenas and issues for change. Many groups have cultivated key allies on the *inside* and are reluctant to say ‘no’ to official invitations for polite discussion. Yet, with limited resources and capacity, the question has to be raised: “When is a political space worthwhile?” “*Invited policy spaces*” (like PRSP consultations, some UN processes, etc), with their pre-cooked and controlled agendas, need to be assessed and compared against the alternative of *claiming policy spaces* that advance gender equality and justice interests in both the public and private sectors.
- *Macro-Micro Divides*: With justice groups more present in national and global policy arenas, the gap between the macro- and micro-level change is widening, sharpening an imbalance where policy work is prioritized and organizing and individual empowerment are shortchanged. This less visible base-building, consciousness-raising however, is central to changing the values and ideologies that prevent and reverse gender equality gains.¹¹
- *Promises, Promises*: Gender equality advocacy initiatives tend to concentrate on gaining promises and the language of reform while falling short on the complementary tasks of enforcement and implementation (securing resources, institutional mechanisms, programs and citizen demand) that are vital for advancing equity and rights.
- *What’s the Agenda?* Issue-focused advocacy is important, but to gain wide-spread support and momentum for change, we will need a broad agenda that frames clear alternatives for gender equality and justice agenda within a set of core principles and values. To this end, we will need to increase investments in research on alternatives and communication efforts that tap into public concerns.
- *Social Legitimacy is Not Optional*: Gender equality and social justice tend to be invisible or viewed negatively by most societies. Despite increased policy engagement, we have failed to engage actively in the ‘war of ideas and images’ that would tap into and shape beliefs and values, and create the social legitimacy necessary to gain power and make change.¹² The fact that feminism is rejected as male-bashing or irrelevant will need to be addressed creatively. Groups will need to develop and test new messages along with increased investments in mass communications to gain ground.

¹¹ See ‘*Dialogue for Building Movement Solidarity for Economic Justice, Peace and Women’s Rights*’, Report from the World Social Forum, 2003, Just Associates and AWID, www.justassociates.org; also see, *Making Change Happen*, *ibid*.

¹² The Christian Right in America invests millions in mass communications; they have established and support a vast network of radio and TV stations, and provide funding to popular rock bands aimed at the teenage audiences.

- *Questions of Linkage, Representation and Accountability*: The differences (class, race, cultural and geographic) and divides (between professional feminists, grassroots leaders, academics, women politicians, etc.) make agenda-setting and organization-building complex, but there is no doubt that gender equality activists will need to more effectively tap into the power of their numbers for influence in the coming years. Despite the common tendency to “let 1000 flowers bloom”,¹³ we will need to define organizational forms that both respect differences and forge clear common bonds. Prickly questions continue about who can speak for whom and who’s accountable to whom.
- *Beyond the Usual Suspects*: Effective economic work will take gender equality activists beyond their comfort zone and traditional friends to new allies (unions, media, church or ‘faith-based’ groups, business leaders) and new forms of engagement with the private sector, media, etc. Included in this ‘to-do list’ for new alliances and arenas is the issue of linking with U.S. domestic groups to more effectively influence one of the centers of power.

Rather than view these challenges through a negative lens, our task is to reflect and learn from them, with humor, in order to gain a clearer sense of what is going well and what needs to be strengthened. As Kerr (and Batliwala) point out, we are not much of a learning movement.¹⁴ We race about putting out fires and do not have or take the time to find out what works, what does not, and why. Gender equality activists have always needed to be in several places at once (engaged in personal, organizational and political change). Today we face some new contextual dynamics that may force us to make different and difficult strategic choices, taking into account our differences.

3. What Is To Be Done? Developing Effective Change Strategies

Our vision and our task are best described in the words of Gita Sen as “completing the project of citizenship for all”,¹⁵ which has four dimensions:

- *Political equality, which refers to our interaction as citizens in relation to the state;*
- *Economic equality in relation to property, the labor market and work;*
- *Norms and values that infuse institutions of society; and*
- *Personal equality, which refers to women moving from being viewed and acted on as property in the family, home and relationships.*

To this end, this meeting will get back to basics (of analysis and planning) with a diverse group of experienced activists, strategists and experts from very different contexts and perspectives. Fortunately, this is not the only or the first meeting in recent months to assess and strategize, and thus we benefit from the rich knowledge and thinking produced by recent preceding events as we

¹³ See Ann Marie Goetz, “Women’s Political Effectiveness: A Conceptual Framework”, Chapter 2 in *No Shortcuts to Power: African Women in Politics and Policy Making*, edited by Goetz and Hassim, London: Zed Press, 2003.

¹⁴ Srilatha Batliwala, forthcoming.

¹⁵ Gita Sen, “*Feminist Politics in a Fundamentalist World*”, referenced by Aruna Rao in “*Institutional Change and Accountability: Notes on Strategy*”, presented at Clash or Consensus: Gender and Human Security in a Globalized World, October 2003.

seek to clarify: 1) what we are seeking to achieve with and for women (and men); 2) what are the contextual forces that shape the moment; and 3) what are the strategies and organizational forms we'll need to develop and explore to carry this agenda forward in tough times.

Some of the basic elements for developing and refining our change strategies include:

1) *Revisiting the Meaning and Vision of our Work* – to unpack assumptions and ensure clear communication; we may use a common language of change (from feminism to racial justice) but have diverse interpretations and come from distinct experiences.

2) *Re-injecting Power and Politics into our Analysis and Strategies* - (see below and attached) and with that, embracing conflict and negotiation as central aspects of our work internally (for building organization) and externally (for advocacy).

3) *Revisiting and Refining our Understanding of Key Economic Problems and their Solutions* – to reconnect with changing realities and contexts in order to sharpen understandings of our constituencies (particularly those most affected by these issues) and with them in mind, explore relevant, workable solutions as the basis for alternatives and multi-tiered agendas.

4) Examining the ideologies that underpin dominant economic agendas and their impact on our strategic choices and messages; begin to define the ideas and principles that shape a gender equality and justice worldview that might frame our messages and alternatives going forward.

5) *Critically Assessing and Refocusing the Arenas and Entry Points for Engagement* – to ensure that our agendas are moving forward rather than being coopted.

6) *Thinking Creatively about the Audiences We Need to Reach and Win Over* – and the messages we need to do so, finding ways to adapt electoral and mass media approaches for tapping into and responding to the thinking of our potential constituencies.

7) *Prioritizing Global Efforts to be More Effective and Strategic* – to assess and compare our presence and roles with the UN, WTO, etc.

8) *Seeking and Forging New Allies and Linkages* (horizontal and vertical) - and finding ways to involve old and new allies and constituents in the discussion and refinement of multi-tiered agendas.

9) *Developing a Research Agenda for the Fresh Messages, Ideas, Workable Alternatives and Strategic Actions* (building on existing agendas).

10) *Defining Strategies and Relationships with a Clear Focus on Building Collective Power* – but grounded in a clearer sense of what we are working towards, who we are working with, and the clear differences among us.