Women’s Agency for Gender Justice: Experiences of African Women

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Protocol

I feel greatly honoured to be invited to this very important event to share my experiences from the point of view of poor African women currently smarting under the pangs of globalization and its associated programmes. My perspective on this issue derives from an ongoing research conducted by Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) on the political economy of globalization.

Understanding Globalization

First I would like to describe my experience as the facilitator of a workshop on “Gender and Globalization” in Calabar, Nigeria, early

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2 Anglophone Regional Coordinator of Development Alternatives with Women for A New Era (DAWN), African Region.
in 2001. When participants were asked what usually came to their minds when the term globalization was used the responses I got included: “worldwide”; “universal”; “technological advancement”; “part of the whole”; “explosion of ideas and information”; “everything about humanity”; “the way in which the world is becoming interdependent”; “global village”, etc. All responses convey a feeling of irresistibility, something ordained and invincible. They also convey the notion that globalization is inevitable and unstoppable.

They also refer to the impression that globalization is, after all, not totally new or strange, since it appears to have common features with our extended family systems. Thus many ordinary people assume that globalization refers to the age-long communal life of traditional African families. That is what they understand by the global village. Renato Ruggerio, ex-director of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) once said, “we are creating a single global economy”. The images that this type of conceptualization of globalization convey substantiate the belief in the “gains of globalization” and its inevitability.

Following the responses by the workshop participants, questions were raised for the participants to illustrate their assertions with the realities of human existence and reproduction in the various communities they came from. At the end of the debate, the participants went into small groups to discuss in detail the politics that sustain globalization: privatization, deregulation and removal of subsidies from social services, etc. The outcome was a turnaround. Some of the outputs from the participants were as follows:

• “Globalization makes us aliens in our own country; globalization is causing greater economic marginalization of the Third World countries like Nigeria”.

• “It causes inflation and deepening poverty; it deepens gender inequality; it kills small scale industries; it provides cheap labour to foreign companies; it brings about affluence for a few, mostly
men; it erodes empowerment of women; it brings about exploitation of the poor; it blocks local initiatives and excellence; it increases dependency and new forms of colonisation; it encourages the importation of foreign culture; it causes environmental destruction”.

Eventually the participants unanimously reached a new understanding of the concept of globalization based on the realities of their lives as opposed to the slogans with which globalization is advertised and promoted. You can see that globalization creates intellectual poverty that deadens consciousness and so people gabble slogans without reflecting on the realities of their lives.

Globalization is indeed an “unequal movement and imposition of goods, ideas, information, services, cultural and economic activities in terms of production, distribution and consumption as well as unequal trade and investments across the political boundaries of nation states. It implies a growing openness of national economies to economic activity by companies and business institutions (private and public) from other political entities. It involves greater unequal interdependence between different national economies. It includes integration of local economy into global economy through forced harmonization of what is produced, exported and imported within a nation in accordance with the demands of international economy and following the dictates of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) the appointed ‘referee’ for the ‘game’ of globalization. Most importantly, the focus is the promise of higher profits in response to uneven competition in the global market. This means that decisions taken by our governments in Africa, companies and even trade unions are influenced by WTO demands". Globalization goes beyond economic, social, political and environmental spheres as it impacts on mental and intellectual regimes as an opium, deadening consciousness so that the majority accept what is said uncritically. They do not see that the resources (human and material), the wealth and

the assets of the nations in the South are increasingly being concentrated in the hands of a few people – foreign and local – while the vast majority of the people including women and children are increasingly being dispossessed and driven deeper into poverty.

**The Challenges of Globalization**

Many African states have passed through different phases of economic restructuring programmes. From the 1970s to the mid-1980s, many African states adopted import-substitution and export-oriented production programmes. From the late 1980s, many of these countries opened their doors to the machination of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and therefore started the implementation of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). From the early 1990s they started endorsing trade liberation that led to the breakdown of trade barriers, turning these countries into dumping grounds for all sorts of foreign goods. As local industries could no longer compete with the “globalized” multinational companies, most of them entered great financial difficulties and eventually downsized; victims include millions of workers – the first to be affected are women.

With the withdrawal of government subsidies from social services, and the adoption of privatization in the face of inflation, mass economic hardship deepened while there was a sustained increase in the cost of all goods and services including food, health care, education, transportation, etc. This situation can hardly promote sustainable livelihood for African communities which members are mostly women. On January 1, 2002, in the name of deregulation – an ingredient of globalization – Nigerian Government increased the prices of all petroleum products. Labour leaders were clamped down by the police and prosecuted.

A number of recent events have shown an upsurge of civil society activism in some countries of the South in response to the challenges of globalization. For instance, in May 2001, a large number
of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) from Africa - East, West, South and North as well as the Middle East - met in Accra, Ghana, to discuss the challenges facing the peoples of Africa and of other developing countries as a result of globalization. The forum also provided the opportunity to develop framework for intervention by CSOs for effective confrontations with these challenges. Of major concern were issues surrounding WTO, the Cotonou Agreement and the US-Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), paying particular attention to the dangers these issues create for the democratic rights and development of African economies and equitable needs of the people. An extract from the declaration issued in that meeting reads:

“The World Trade Organisation Agreements processes and the institutions of the WTO are imbalanced against African and other developing countries. In essence, the agreements (in particular on agriculture, trade-related investments measures (TRIMS), trade-related intellectual property rights (TRIPS), services) serve principally to prise open markets for the benefits of trans-national corporations, at the expense of national economies, workers, farmers, women and other groups in the developing world, and the environment. The WTO system, rules and procedures are un-democratic, un-transparent and non-accountable and have operated to marginalise the majority of the people. Those governments that dominate the WTO systems have refused to recognise and address the problems. Instead, they have been pushing for further liberalisation through introduction of new issues for adoption in WTO”.

Since Seattle civil society groups from Africa and all over the world have campaigned against the inequalities of the WTO system, which represents the globalization-global economic regulation. These campaigns focus on the revision of the existing agreements - which are grossly unequal - in order to protect the peoples' livelihoods and their right to development.

Governments in Africa and other developing countries have also mobilized to redress some of the imbalances and inequalities of
globalization entailed by WTO agreements as the implementation of these agreements has damaged their economies and threatened the livelihoods of their people. This was clearly demonstrated at the Doha, Qatar, conference. There again, the major powers in the WTO showed their insensitivity by ignoring the protests of CSOs and the demands of the developing countries.

We must recall that in November 2000, the United States of America and the European Union colluded with the WTO Secretariat to use the Ministerial Workshop in Libreville, Gabon, to force African Ministers to support their plan for a new round of talks. This behaviour is unethical and arrogant and totally disregards the collective decision of the African team opposing the new round and even calling for a review of existing WTO agreements.

Different kinds of backdoor tactics have been adopted by the highly industrialized countries to introduce regional and bilateral agreements that have been difficult to push through WTO. Examples include the domestic law enacted by the US, the so-called African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) and the Cotonou agreement. The AGOA is used to trap African governments forced to give up their legitimate rights under the WTO while securing opportunities for US businesses against the interest of Africa's domestic economic development. Through AGOA, the carrot of illusory benefits and profits is dangled before African countries in exchange for their adopting provisions relating to TRIPS, investment and financial liberalization.

Similarly, the Cotonou Agreement pertains to existing aid relationships between EU and African countries. The trade component of the agreement contains provision for African governments to comply with all kinds of dubious measures in WTO agreements. It further pressures African countries to fully comply with the TRIPS agreements of WTO. African countries are required to negotiate for the adoption of provisions on consumption and investors protection which the EU sought for in the WTO but could not pass.
because of the opposition from African governments. They manipulate their information and communication technologies to extract agreements through backdoor tactics against people’s interests.

In summary, globalization results in greater economic interdependence among countries through international trade, capital flows and international production, facilitated in its current form by new technologies of information and communication. Since discriminatory ideologies already exist and result in differential positions of women and men in productive and reproductive spheres and in terms of access, opportunities and control of resources as well as decision making/policy positions, globalization is bound to have serious repercussions on gender inequality.

GLOBALIZATION AND GENDER: WOMEN AND SOCIAL STRUCTURES IN AFRICA

Since colonial times, African political and socio-economic structures have been built on the exclusion of women from the public sphere. The African family system provides the framework for inequality, male dominance and power and discriminatory gender roles between men and women with exploitation and subjugation of women at the core. Even the legal systems, while recognizing human rights, sanction male leadership.

Women in the traditional African context live and work at multiple levels of unpaid domestic work as daughters, sisters, nieces, wives and mothers. Girls and women care for male family members, young and old. These domestic engagements completely tie down the woman and leave her with no room for recreation or vacation, with serious implications on the health and status of girls and women. As healthcare services are declining and getting more expensive – thanks to privatization – women face additional difficulties in taking care of their health problems. Little wonder that
as globalization digs deeper into the system, mortality rates of mothers and their infants increase.

Free-market global capitalism along with the policies of privatization, deregulation, trade and financial liberation that foster globalization have led to massive retrenchments. These retrenched workers have fallen back on families for social protection. Women and girls largely bear the burden of sustaining such families. This also means that women come under greater family and community control resulting from greater globalization. We know that with increased control comes greater gender-based violence.

Privatization has brought about all sorts of unholy alliances between the state and religious institutions. When the state abandons its functions of social services provision, religious and quasi-religious institutions step in, pretending to provide such services. These trade-offs between the state and religion place women under greater control and constitute a sell-out of women’s health and rights. In certain situations, the ascendancy of religion has been seen to have serious adverse effects. It is alleged that in some African communities, where the HIV/AIDS pandemic has the highest toll on women, religious organizations go into shops to buy off condoms and burn them.

Advocates of globalization argue that it brings about economic growth, contributes to job creation and to poverty reduction. They pay little attention to the differential impact on women and men, perhaps forgetting or ignoring the fact that pre-existing structural gender inequalities in access to resources, power and decision making, already place women at a disadvantage. Williams\(^4\) puts it as follows:

“Gender inequality implications arise because trade liberalisation, per se, does not eliminate existing gender inequality in access to

\(^4\) Williams, Mariama: Gender, Trade Policy and the WTO. See web page: <http://www.modelwto.org/create/meetings/referate/woman.shtml>.
resources, power and decision making. Rather, trade liberation may build on or exacerbate the negative conditions already affecting women's lives”.

**Gender, Globalization, HIV/AIDS in Africa**

In many African communities, the socialization process makes young people believe that sexual intercourse is an appropriate return for gifts from male partners and puts people, particularly girls and women, at risk of sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS.

As poverty deepens the phenomenon of female sexual exploitation for material and financial returns also progresses. Furthermore, increasing unemployment and underemployment occasioned by globalization has led to movements of cheap labour across borders, and then to increasing sex trade and hence increasing risks of HIV/AIDS infection.

Free trade, a strong conditionality of globalization has caused the dumping of all kinds of weapons and ammunitions in Africa and has provided the tools that are used to settle communal and ethnic conflicts by going to war. The displaced people and refugees resulting from such conflict situations are mostly women and children. This is another reason for the increased spread of HIV/AIDS in Africa, as girls and women get raped by both the warriors and the peace keeping forces.

These health problems are worsening as most African governments are unable to provide healthcare, a condition created by agreements in the implementation of globalization.
The notion internalized in most African communities is that the primary functions of African women is human reproduction and domestic responsibilities, while men are the “breadwinners” or “income earners”, even where the relative contribution of women to the labour force and hence to the family income has increased remarkably.

Indeed, advocates of globalization have argued that it has encouraged women's participation in the market economy by creating new job opportunities. There are several dimensions to this issue. In poor rural communities in Africa structural barriers to women's access to education are such that women lack the training and skills for any employment that could raise their status. They become easily available for recruitment as cheap labour – to increase investors' profits.

In addition, women lack access to land and other productive resources. So they remain largely peasant farmers on a land they do not own, and then whatever they are able to produce is for household use as they work on small portions planting food crops. They have no access to fertilizer as the distribution is affected by macro economic policies designed and stipulated in WTO agreements on agriculture. Globalization deprives women of an access to modern techniques in agriculture and continues to confine them in subsistence farming to produce food for the family, while men have access to fertilizer and can produce cash crops for export. Thus agriculture, a sector where most African women are, is heavily gendered at their detriment – thanks to globalization.

More and more women are leaving the overworked lands to go into other communities to buy harvested food crops to sell. This process releases many women from the household that “tradition” regards as women's “sector”. These women earn an income and are more directly responsible for part of household food provision and in
many cases where the male is unemployed, these women become the major income-earner among poorer households.

Up to 80% of women, particularly in West Africa, combine paid employment with trading and are competing with men in the informal sector of petty-trading. Here again women have been the agents of change in their household and community sustenance. Women, whether in the strictly agricultural sector or in formal employment, skilled or not, are more and more involved in many forms of income-earning activities and becoming less and less dependent on male partners. They even earn more.

The response of the World Bank to poverty in Africa, has been to provide “micro credits” to women as an input in the various “Poverty Alleviation” programmes mounted by African governments. This is another dimension of gender discrimination. For why should women be pushed into micro credits? Why this marginalization of women? If society is now convinced about the inherent ability of women to be good managers, and therefore willing to trust them with loans, why should they be limited to “micro credits”? Who then controls the macro credits? At what cost to their lives do they have to struggle to repay these loans when the output go into family sustenance?

"The Gains of Globalization"

Women and the poor are generally the last to benefit from governmental measures in all spheres - economic, social or political. Government policies persistently lack of gender analysis and fail to analyse the likely impacts of implementation of such policies and impacts on women of changes in public expenditure schemes. Prior to the introduction of Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs), most African countries health services for school children, maternity health services and family planning services were free for women and low-income groups. With the removal of subsidies from social
services, a SAP conditionality, free social benefits were suppressed, and the conditions supporting women in meeting their physical and mental health needs disappeared.

The advent of the new forms of globalization further compounded the situation with the introduction of privatization. This is the background for women's lives in the context of globalization. Hence, even where more women have entered the labour market, which is considered as one of the "gains of globalization", two issues can be raised. First, would more women be in the labour market with or without globalization, given the increasing educational advancement of women resulting from social development? Secondly, what kinds of jobs are available in the labour market for women? How much have the gender stereotypic jobs improved the economic status of women given the expenditures occasioned by inflation, currency devaluation and privatization? So how gainful are these gains?

The opportunities that women and girls have to travel beyond local, regional and international boundaries are considered as other gains of globalization. Could some of these travels be violations of the rights of these girls and women through trafficking? Indeed, some of these girls and women may in fact consent to be transported to other places for greener pastures but they certainly do not necessarily consent to forced prostitution or slave-like labour which many of these victims face. Many of these travellers are poor, they have little or no education and also lack legal literacy and so have no chance in the formal labour sector. Consequently, they become vulnerable for cheap labour in the globalized world. It is therefore a lucrative venture to transport poor and ignorant girls and women from Africa and other developing countries to factories and industries of the industrialised countries for cheap labour to increase profit.

How can the migration of unskilled persons be a gain when they are exploited and their bodies even violated? Yes, there are gains but we also need the gender lens to examine them closely.
CONCLUSION

Women in Southern communities through their lives and through their strivings to sustain and reproduce lives in their families and communities, have shown that there are alternative paradigms of development – paradigms that address social development as human development and well-being. With “micro credits” and meagre gender discriminatory wages, they have made a difference in the lives of their communities. This then is about women’s agency, their ability to perform different structural roles, to make a difference in sustaining lives at all levels and in all sectors. What needs to be done is learning and analysing and using this undervalued, unseen human agency – as demonstrated by the realities of women's lives – to create alternative frameworks for development and for sustainable livelihood. These poor women have demonstrated that there must be alternatives to these new designs of imperialism – these new forms of globalization.

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