Gender and Economic Globalization
Reflections on the IUED Geneva Colloquium 25-26 January 2002

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The following article draws on the discussion of the IUÉD Colloquium on Gender and Economic Globalization. The Colloquium aimed to draw out the impact of economic globalization on gender relations, with a particular focus on poor women in developing countries.

GLOBALIZATION – FOR OR AGAINST WOMEN?

In order to look at the impact of economic globalization on gender relations, and more particularly on poor women’s lives, we are confronted with a complex set of interlinked dynamics. Inequitable

gender relations are integrated into economic globalization and at the same time globalization builds on such inequalities. With globalization, lives are shifting as the different economic, social and cultural institutions informing gender relations change.

But are these changes positive or negative?

The popular myth is that economic globalization has introduced greater openness to trade and capital mobility in a positive way for poor women in the South. However, the true picture is much more fragmented and differentiated for the many millions of poor women living in the South. In reality, only 13 developing countries are engaged fully in economic globalization, and really only in relation to the manufacturing sector.

When the effects on developing countries are studied, today's economic globalization has led not so much to economic growth but rather to a mobility of global capital. If we take the different sorts of work in which poor women are engaged—manufacturing and industrial, rural, informal sector, domestic work for other families, caring for their own family and communities—economic globalization has rarely improved women's situation. If looked at over time, the 1980s saw a major opening up of new types of employment where many young women were able to enter into new types of jobs. This situation had already changed by the 1990s with a defeminisation of labour, particularly in the high-tech sector. The slowing down of employment expansion led to men taking over the new jobs held by women.

In the rural areas growing insecurity and environment degradation, changing population with migration and AIDS and other diseases have preyed even more on poor women than men as they are economically and socially more vulnerable.

In the informal sector where the vast majority of poor women work, economic globalization has made little impact on conditions,
income, or official recognition. And alongside all of the paid out-work in the home economic activities − women's core role in the care economy (her reproductive work looking after home, families, communities) − continues largely outside traditional economic policy and analysis. Indeed, in the name of globalization and economic growth many structures that supported women's caring role (public funding for health, education, community services etc.) have been privatised in the last years, grossly undermining the quality of life for many poor women and their families.

Therefore, in reality, many poor women fall outside the benefits of economic globalisation and those that are engaged in it are rarely secure. In addition, there are also the unheard voices of the women that are so globalised, the mobile women (migrants, sex workers, domestic workers), that are moving around the globe quite outside national or international controls.

Although it is useful to have some general idea of how economic globalization and gender interrelate for poor women, it is almost impossible to generalize. For a more nuanced picture we need to understand which women, which situation, which historical moment. Some women are benefitting, some women are not. And, some women might see themselves as benefitting even if others do not perceive it that way. For example sex workers might prefer to be in Europe working and earning money to send back home instead of being caught in a trap of poverty and disease with no access to resources.

**The Areas Inbetween**

Even if the picture painted is largely one of deprivation and difficulty, this picture is not so different from earlier forms of global economic activity during colonial and the post-War economic development period. Traditional economic power structures feed on deeply embedded gender inequalities with poor women at the bot-
tom. But the above general sketch does not do justice to many poor women's struggles and achievements to survive the economic and social transformations going on around them. What is important to note is that there are some new things happening. Today's economic globalization is also creating windows of opportunity for change, even if it is not automatically for the good. To understand what is new we need to go beyond traditional economic studies and policy assessments and assumptions.

What is needed is an inbetween understanding of globalization and women's different involvement and the diverse implications that has for gender relations. Women's roles as workers, nurturers and carers are changing and so are the opportunities for them to contribute to shaping political, social and economic reality as intellectuals, activists and policy makers who are producing new knowledge about economic globalization, new ways of networking and understanding how the world is working.

There are possibilities for poor women, working collectively or with other women help to provide support and resources, to change traditional social, cultural and economically oppressive situations. Though it can be, in the short term, at a great cost of women's lives, losing their communities and their families, losing love and care, living risky lives fraught with uncertainty, it is important to see that women are agents not victims of economic globalization, resisting, shaping and negotiating the impact of economic globalization on their lives.

**How Are Women Moving Forward?**

In a positive way, the new information and communication technologies, that have accompanied today's form of economic globalization, allow a vast number of politized women, often working in civil society groups, to reach out to poor women and to strategize together in unprecedented ways. There is a strong sense of solidar-
ity, among women “on the picket lines” who are moving and changing globalization in very difficult situations (in times of economic crisis, social breakdown and change) and bringing with their interactions vision and energy to keep each other going.

In less marginal areas, but certainly in support of poor women, women are bringing gender issues in the mainstream processes of the UN conferences into economic debates, and into trade debates. Women’s caucusing in UN meetings has produced a number of strategically critical women and economic justice networks, and alliance building among regions producing different sorts of knowledge and strategies.

Even if making their voices heard, in terms of development institutions there is a long way to go for gender policy to be accepted and for the problems economic globalization is creating to be looked at squarely. There is concern that the World Bank is taking up so many issues that they are knocking out all the other UN agencies working on gender, in a process that coopts rather than consolidates a gender position. The IMF is not gender sensitive, it is questionable whether the work even of UNIFEM on gender budgeting is acknowledged by the IMF and even more doubtful if WTO has understood what is gender or how to incorporate it into a legal framework.

Strategic Directions

When analysing how to improve the lack of voice or knowledge of the impact of economic globalization on poor women in the mainstream debate, the issue is not only about knowledge it is also about power. How do we create a political change that allows poor women’s concerns to be heard and acted upon among people (largely northern institutions with men making the economic decisions) with power what is the so-called win-win situation for them? If we are to address this issue we need much better analysis of how
those power institutions are working, and clear factual and convincing analysis of the complex situation of economic globalisation for gender relations. Here it is important to be asking the right questions. Are we trapped in the so-called language traditional academic readings of economic globalization that ignores gender? How do we close the knowledge gap among the scientists and economists and gender experts? And how do we work within or with powerful economic development and academic institutions without becoming co-opted?

Many feminist economists are courageously pushing academic frontiers in economic analysis, but they rarely reach the important decision making places. The question is how to connect the various groups, knowing and being able to detail well the impact of economic globalisation on poor women and then getting their voices heard in the right places to bring about change.

We have to build on the knowledge and analysis of women working in the South and feminist economists and others who are collecting their stories and analysing and assessing. We have to close the gaps between the realities of poor women in the South and what macro-economic institutions state are the realities.

We have had a decade of UN conferences, and now, for the first time, we have a World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in August and September 2002. Is this one place where women's voices can be heard? Where the knowledge gathered can inform high level economic and development policy debates? Johannesburg could be an event that poor women's voices, needs, visions and hopes for the future are heard. The Women's Agenda 2015 sets an important list of priorities built on 10 years of assessing poor women's struggles with economic globalization.

The challenge is to examine honestly the failures of international institutions to formulate and evaluate financial and trade policies from a gender perspective. It is also to lobby for governments to
address working conditions in the informal sector, and wage inequities in the formal sector, or to integrate women’s unpaid work into national accounting systems. This is one window of opportunity we cannot fail to lose.