

# Unfolding Women's Engagement with Development and the UN: Pointers for the Future

## Abstract

This article reveals how the engagement of women with development ideas and approaches challenged mainstream views and programmes, and reclaimed agency – that is, the power to define the agenda. Through description and analysis of six decades of this engagement, it comes to the conclusion that all three groups of actors – that is, women as represented by the international women's movement; those involved in development as currently articulated through the liberal economics paradigm; and the UN, weakened by the entry of financial and corporate global players – need to rethink their basic ideas and approaches.

*Keywords:* women, development, the women's movement, United Nations

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Tracing the intellectual history of the United Nations, from the perspective of women's contribution to ideas that have flowed in or out of the United Nations, raises many questions and calls attention to many issues. How do ideas emerge, and on what basis are they absorbed? What are the processes of knowledge construction and valuation, and what is their role in that journey of ideas? What are the politics that inform the progress of these ideas – along with the progress of women – and where do they derive from? This article also points to the barriers that traditional power hierarchies pose to the creation and reception of new ideas.

The book entitled *Women, Development and the United Nations: A Sixty Year Quest for Justice* traced some of the major ideas that have shaped the UN's engagement with women and have gained currency and entered circulation. It also spotlighted some of the ideas that were jettisoned or watered down, and why this happened, as well as the evolutionary path of many an idea. The time-span covered was 1945-2005.

While the book provides much of the evidence to underpin the arguments and conclusion reached in this article, we also draw on other works and our current engagements. Our physical and political location – that of the South – has informed this review even as we have drawn on a more international feminist scholarship.

The review weaves through a wide range of variables, time periods, issues, other struggles, other topics, and tells the story through the following topics or themes.

- The Backdrop
  - Writing history as a political enterprise
  - The story as it emerged
- The Three Components of the Analysis
  - Development
  - The United Nations
  - The women’s movement
- Women, Development and the United Nations Today – Critical Analysis
- A Thought for the Future: Harvesting feminist knowledge for rebuilding theories and systems

## 1. The Backdrop

The full story of how and what the women of the world contributed to ideas about rights, equality and development within the UN remains largely untold – it is usually collapsed within the more common narrative of the UN’s historical-institutional achievements in the areas of women’s rights and women’s emancipation. Over the past six decades, different layers of meaning surrounding an idea of gender equality, a value endorsed in the UN’s Charter, have been uncovered. A new constituency in UN politics, called ‘women’, has been created; likewise, a powerfully endowed idea, also called ‘women’, has entered UN thought. The search for what equality actually means for women has not stopped, either within or outside the UN. The writing of this history has been a deeply revelatory process.

### Writing history as a political enterprise

Recovering, re-discovering and writing women’s history has been acknowledged as a political struggle for social change. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, one of the early women’s historians, says:

‘[W]ithout question, our first inspiration was political. Aroused by feminist charges of economic and political discrimination...we turned to our history to trace the origins of women’s second-class status’ (quoted in Brunner, website, 6 May 2007).

The project to redress the skew in historical accounts began by ‘discovering’ famous women, pointing to direct and indirect references to women’s participation during ‘historical events’ and adding women’s story to traditional narratives. The question that feminists had to ask was a more fundamental one: why had this history been pushed aside? Besides looking afresh at the evidence already available the task was to explore new spheres and new sources of material.

Women-centred historical narratives were used to challenge, modify, disrupt, or even render irrelevant, standard categories and methodologies. The telling of women’s history thus became a political act of history-making.

The claims to universality that traditional historical writings make have been shown as false by feminist historians, among others, as these recordings are based on the experiences, descriptions and ideas of a minority – the powerful groups – ignoring the differences in power and influence that exist between people.

Ethnic history (race/caste), labour history (class) and women’s history (gender/sex) all share the common objective of re-defining history and, importantly, of challenging the contemporary hegemony of certain so-called mainstream ideas through a reconsideration of the past, and giving hitherto-excluded subjects a place in history. In all approaches taken by the anti-racist, civil rights, socialist and feminist movements the personal was political (Guru, 2002).

Writing *Women, Development and the United Nations: A Sixty Year Quest for Justice* illustrated many of these characteristics and tensions – especially in relation to perceptions of the location of intellectual power, or creativity. By and large such faculties were assumed to be located in the ‘North’ – within European civilisation – and to reside with men.

The history of ‘Northern’ nations provides the benchmark for identifying periods or highpoints in terms of the contribution of ideas and identification of sources. Defining moments in history, descriptions of the evolution of thought, intellectual paradigms, critical thinkers are attributed to the world, but that world’s boundaries are largely defined by the North.

For example, World War II and its aftermath – the defining events of the Northern hemisphere that were, in fact, the impetus for

the founding of the United Nations – were not the most important externalities for nations in the South. Slavery, including the use of indentured labour; economic plundering; the effacing of cultural and intellectual identities by the imperial powers – all these were the strong forces that shaped the history of Southern nations in the 1940s. It could be argued that Mahatma Gandhi was more relevant than Keynes to Indian recovery from colonisation. To the black people of South Africa, historical periods were defined in apartheid-regime terms, and Nelson Mandela’s 27 years on Robben Island, on and off between 1952 and 1990, were the definitions of historical time.

As the North followed the trajectory led by such driving forces as Keynesian economics, the Marshall Plan, and new strands of development thought, the South heard a different rhythm of liberation, socialism and exciting experiments with government. The birth and spread of these ideas, with the naming of their origins, is not given the same position in the recounting of ‘mainstream’ history and periodicity that set the format for most texts, sadly including the one about women. The past has to be viewed as ‘a contested and colonised terrain’.

To find ourselves, women generally and women of the South in particular, in this overbearing knowledge base was one of the most difficult, frustrating and even eventually unsuccessful endeavours of our struggle with this book. We turned to feminists such as Kumari Jaywardene and Oyeronke Oyewumi who challenge the Eurocentric basis of some feminist concepts (see, for example, Jaywardene, 1986; Oyewumi, 2002).

However, even though we were aware of the politics of knowledge creation and the process of history writing, we were not able to completely break free from androcentric and Eurocentric frameworks or sources of information. It was our strong commitment to the South, as well as a wide network of South-based scholars, practitioners, professionals and activists, who are friends and sympathisers, that helped us access less well-known facts, stories and ideas, enabling us partly to move away from the dominant discourses.

### **The story as it emerged**

The book set out not only to address the ways in which the UN has addressed women’s issues but also to demonstrate how the UN has been enriched by its engagement with the worldwide women’s

movement.

The narrative of these engagements can be divided into five chronological periods, each phase having a discernible thrust. The first was 1945-1965, in which the preoccupation was with legal equality; the second was 1966-1975, where the issue of integrating women into development, as well as the gulf between the existence of women's legal rights and women's ability to exercise these rights, were the focus. During the third phase of the narrative, 1976-1985, the concentration was on progress for women in priority areas of employment, health and education. Along with these there began an intense questioning of the development paradigms themselves. Between the 1986 and 1995 – the fourth phase – the UN sought to respond to the failure of the Decade for Women to achieve the improvements that were sought; simultaneously a host of world conferences on issues ranging from environment to population were held and the idea of mainstreaming gender concerns into all of these issues gained popularity. The last phase, 1996-2005, could be described as one of dismantling and reassembling notions of gender equity in development – a process in which all concepts were questioned and deconstructed and a new synthesis began to emerge.

However these are broad categorisations that have the flaw of being sweeping and overgeneralising in their characterisation. Every period, as we noted, was marked by a dynamic interplay of various forces and ideas. Even at the very beginning when the quest for legal equality was dominant we find that women were bringing in issues of women's work, health and other concerns.

Summing up the 60-year engagement of women with the UN and development in broad brush strokes is therefore difficult. However, some striking achievements can be listed. For instance, it can be argued that women brought about an essential shift in how they were perceived – and moved from being seen as objects to becoming subjects. The early thinking and intervention viewed women merely as victims or beneficiaries who would receive protection or supplies and services. The long engagement resulted in women claiming agency. Women also gave a human face to the 'cold' UN, as Bella Abzug put it. They came in larger and larger numbers to the United Nations, bringing in various problems and issues, and because they believed that they could make a difference.

They challenged several hierarchies of categorisation such as those of private and public, local and global, among others. They also challenged traditional leadership claims; and one outstanding

shift that they accomplished was in the intellectual leadership of internationalism. Over two decades women from the South emerged as leaders even as they questioned stereotypical notions of the ‘Third World woman’ and shifted the agenda to include concerns that arose from the various locations.

Throughout this process of shifting the agenda, the United Nations has played a unique role: as a catalyst for change, as a global standard-setter for the eradication of gender discrimination; as a forum for debate; and as an unparalleled source of balanced, comprehensive data on the status of women worldwide. However, the women’s movement has been ambivalent about the United Nations – worried that being too ‘UN-centric’ would undermine the vitality and the alternative character of women’s activism; and at the same time seeing the importance of engaging with this body, and making it more responsive and prepared to incorporate a feminist perspective into its documents and organisations.

## **2. The Three Components of the Analysis**

The intertwining of the three threads, which the book wove together – namely, development, women and the United Nations – points to the role of external circumstances as well as the power of internal factors in determining the pattern that finally emerges. Our article is limited to a few examples of ideas and debates that have contoured the landscape of development – particularly the interface of women and development as illustrations of the dynamics as well the politics that inform the progress of these ideas – along with the progress of women.

### **Development and its complex relationship with women**

The history of women – or gender-and-development – theory is interwoven with the history of policy interventions in developing countries and with the history of the women’s movement around the globe. Over 60-plus years since the end of World War II, there have been many shifts in the thinking on how development might best be promoted. ‘No area of economics,’ says Irma Adelman (2000: 103), ‘has experienced as many abrupt changes in its leading paradigm.’

Over these decades, women’s engagement with the UN’s work in development has resulted not only in programmes for women but also a challenge to the terms of reference. The door was opened to

reveal other less well-known contours; this resulted in the challenging of typologies and questioning of hierarchies of values given to various aspects of social and economic organisation, to spaces, and to the bases of knowledge creation. The very notions of theory or bounded ideas were put under scrutiny. Their engagement revealed the variety of interpretations and appearances of what can be called *difference*, and the prismatic quality of the concept of *equality* as well as its accommodation even by the basic mandate of the UN, as envisioned in its Charter. The dilemmas these concepts pose are summed up as the '*equal but different*' debates and also permeate into ideas such as the giving of quotas to redress inequality (Webb, 1997).

### *The initial years*

In the initial years women did not receive sufficient attention as a distinct category in development. In fact the First Development Decade (1961-70) declaration of the UN did not mention women. However, there had been thinking about the issue of women and development even at this time. For example, studies undertaken by UNESCO during that decade essentially dealt with the importance of primary, secondary and university education for women; and from 1970-75 the organisation 'investigated the relation between formal education and actual probability of women's employment' (Mignot-Levebvre, 1980).

The agenda of most international organisations from the 1950s, in the international economic context, became what can be termed as *developmentalism*: that is, a set of ideas that place economic development at the centre of all political endeavours. The underlying assumption of this approach was that all countries will move through similar stages of development. The second assumption was that there is a linear process from one stage to another that goes from traditional or primitive to modern or industrialised. Underdevelopment was seen as inability to exploit resources, and modernisation the goal. 'Development' in that sense required a state of underdevelopment. Without the prior construction of this contrasting pair, intervention would not make sense.

The struggle between North and South has of course been a central focus of development issues for the last 50 years. Indeed, the great difference between the era of developmentalism and the era of globalisation has been the relative strength of the two sides. While in the first era, the South seemed to be improving its position, if only slightly, the second period was marked by attempts to

push back this progress by a triumphant North, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union. But this pushback has now come to face new setbacks: the deadlock in the World Trade Organization; the split among the spokesmen of the North about the wisdom of the Washington Consensus; and the growing and unrelenting protests and resistance from the global South to this agenda.

For women the connection with developmentalism has been complex. They are the markers and clientele of the modernisation programme and the idea often was to remove the obstacles that prevented them from participating in the development of the nation. Therefore on the one hand developmentalism raised questions about traditional patriarchal attitudes within families and communities that sanctioned practices such as child marriage and female genital cutting; but at the same time it presented modernisation as unproblematic concept. Frances Vavrus (2002) sums it up thus: '[D]evelopmentalism has made women visible without a concomitant re-visioning of the macroeconomic environment that shapes gender relations.'

The attitude of viewing women in Third World countries as those needing to be pushed into modernisation is borne out by an example of the programmes for homemakers in the US. This emerged at the end of the 20th century out of the newly created field of home science, and imparted a class-specific, racialised and sexualised vision of gender relations with the purpose of transforming farming families into capitalist units of production and consumption (Berry, 2003). Through the process of nation-building and transnational development aid, this model of agricultural development was exported to India (among other countries) under the auspices of a 'modern' and 'scientific' programme of agricultural development, thereby rendering invisible the politics of class, gender, race and sexuality that underlay the construct.

This is in contrast to an initiative that was already being launched in India. In 1939, a sub-committee called Women's Role in Planned Economy (WPRE) was set up as part of the structure of the National Planning Committee (NPC).

The Report of the WPRE presented a realistic picture of the role of Indian women: the nature and extent of their participation in the workforce, discrimination against them in wages and benefits, and their special disabilities because of the multiplicity of their roles as workers within and outside the home, and as mothers. In fact, the Committee especially recommended that women's development be based on 'economic emancipation'. Yet the policy makers ignored these recommendations and adopted the American home-science

model instead (Mehra, 1983).

Yet another problem with the modernisation agenda is its emphasis on the 'free individual'. For many women, particularly in the South, their group identity is the most important thing in their lives, and women would rather acquiesce to discrimination within these groups than resist and lose their place within the group. Thus, fighting group prejudice while fighting for women's empowerment goes to the heart of the modern dilemma between the universalism of human rights and the particularity of cultural experience.

### *The Women's Decade*

Early in the Women's Decade (1976-1985) the equity principle was enshrined and it became even more persuasive by its linkage with the utility principle. Women had been a missing link in development; now they were being found. They could actually be a valuable resource, indeed they were half, or more, of a nation's human resources, and no longer could that resource be wasted. The prospect of steering women from the margin to the mainstream was as exciting to some would-be developers as to female recipients of such policies and programmes. 'Women in development' (WID) became the Decade's overnight catchphrase. This was a seductive idea, which for a time, at least, could evade the question of what kind of development women were to be drawn into (Mair, 1984). And equally important, what is the development that women design?

From about midway through the Decade for Women, 1976-85, feminists from the South started to articulate three major concerns. First, they underscored the need to link gender-, class- and race-based inequalities and discrimination, and argued that struggles against gender inequality must be accompanied by struggles against other forms of inequality and discrimination. Second, Southern feminists pointed out that to explain gender inequality, it was necessary to look at social structures, development paradigms and macro-policies rather than simply addressing social norms and cultures and WID-focused policies. They emphasised that an improvement in women's lives and opportunities is only possible through structural changes and changes in the macro-policy environments. Third, Southern feminists demanded not simple gender parity or gender balance in representation, but a total transformation of the development agenda from a gender perspective, elaborating a feminist vision of alternative development (Jahan, 1995). The mainstream discourse remained wedded to the project of bringing women in,

to integrate them into the development process.

### *The lost decades?*

The decade 1985-1995 was one of unusual turbulence. From the early 1980s, laissez-faire policies and 'free market' capitalism were prescribed as the panacea for the ills of development by a range of advocates that included Margaret Thatcher in Britain, Ronald Reagan in the United States, and institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. The prescription was to 'get the prices right' and open up markets. Structural adjustment policies required decreased government spending and made loans to the less-developed countries and the transition countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia only on acceptance of these policies. The only policy issue that was left virtually untouched was the big defence spending of countries. Recommending cuts in defence expenditures was seen as interference in internal matters.

By the 1985 UN World Conference on Women in Nairobi, the status of poor women in Third World countries was already deteriorating, as the World Bank and other international agencies began to apply structural adjustment policies, leading to the 'lost' development decades of the 1980s and 1990s.

Another significant change was the end of the Cold War, symbolised by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which changed configurations of power within the UN. The disintegration of the East and West blocs critically impacted on the approach to development. The socialist bloc had supported approaches that required a strong state, a thrust towards public provision of basic services, and a more equitable global economic programme such as the New International Economic Order (NIEO). It was often an ally of the newly liberated states as they attempted to forge coalitions such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) or the Group of 77 to negotiate with their former colonial masters.

Women's journey with the UN in this period was in many ways a watershed. The momentum built up in the International Women's Decade continued, and women continued their work of engaging with the intricacies of inequality, critiquing development design (both at the overall level and with particular reference to women), and enlarging grassroots networks. The explosion of knowledge continued and women's studies was recognised as a discipline. It provided one more space, this time an intellectual space, for women to develop their understanding and their advocacy.

Alternative measures of progress emerged, the most vivid being

the Human Development Indices. Ways of thinking about the informal sector changed; it moved from being a residual and undesirable sector of the economy to a vital economic force.

A dominant characteristic of the UN during the decade was the mobilisation of women to influence policy and the emergence of women as leaders. This decade is also associated with a flood of UN conferences and achievements in terms of incorporating advice on issues and sectors other than those identified as 'women's' issues.

However, on the ground, support for alternative development strategies weakened and inequality grew between rich and poor, between the North and the South, with devastating effects on poor women and children. Regional economic groups such as the European Union and the North Atlantic Free Trade Association (NAFTA) assumed new importance. Structural adjustment policies contributed to the 'feminisation of poverty', as government budgets were cut in health, education and other vital services. Safety nets, technical fixes and instrumentalist approaches to women's empowerment became the solutions offered. Besides these being totally inadequate and akin to bandaging a cancerous growth, a deeper feminist critique of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) also holds that such approaches, as followed by the World Bank, reinforce traditional gender roles. Therefore programmes that were devised included those where mothers had some access to free basic health services and literacy programmes. They were then able to perform their domestic responsibilities better, but beyond this the prevailing gender relations were left intact – both within the household and the larger community.

The instrumental value of women became a siren song to influence big actors to loosen up the flow of resources to women. For example, in line with the new focus on privatisation, WID's goals shifted to microenterprises for women, with the formation of collective credit organisations.

### *The turn of the century*

By the turn of the century, the convergence of militarisation, globalisation, and conservatism had dealt a blow to the progress that was being made on the social justice front by the UN. However, there was also progress in several areas. The gendering of various dimensions related to the theatres of war culminated in the now-famous Security Council Resolution No. 1325 on women, peace and security, which was a first for women. The period also ushered

in the beginnings of what can be called the political maturing of the women's movement. As the worldwide women's movement had established its political identity over the previous decades, through its effective participation in world arenas, it was possible for that movement to engage with other movements with a strong sense of self.

After two decades of learning and growing, the women's movement had reached a political maturity, evident at Beijing in its ability to accommodate difference, articulate clear goals and policies for national governments and the UN, and speak to the world about its agenda for change. Gender as a concept was introduced and soon replaced the word 'women' in the development and discursive literature – leading to a depoliticisation of the women-and-development agenda. Feminists voiced the opinion that the 'power' had gone out of gender analysis.

Indeed, feminist post-structuralist approaches to gender suggest that the key questions in any development programme should not begin with gender at all and that it would be more productive to understand the different vulnerabilities within a particular population. In a study on the gendered patterns of agriculture in Ghana, for example, it was found that it was more useful to ask who produces for subsistence, who produces for market sale and who engages in the non-formal economy. Then the vulnerabilities can be linked to particular social groups and the intervention thus planned in a more meaningful way (Carr, 2008).

Dominant development models have been based on the appropriation of resources from the South by the North and the transfer of ideas, technologies and methodologies from the North to the South. But the need of the hour is build alternative models based on equality, mutual respect, true participation and accountability to all women.

### **The United Nations**

At the international level, there is certainly no authority that could match the legitimacy enjoyed by the United Nations, by virtue of its universal membership. Experience of more than 60 years has shown that decision-making at the United Nations can be slow and its decisions may lack implementation. There are other more efficient bodies like the G8 but they do not have the same broad-based legitimacy as the United Nations. UN legitimacy flows from the composition of the group, not from its problem-solving capacity.

Not only has the number of Member States more than doubled since 1945, but the nature of global, and indeed of national governance, has also changed. The fact that every member of the UN declares that they share common principles (freedom, peace and development for all) which are still rejected by most of them in their individual behaviour, is a paradox that weakens it but also provides a hope that a consensus can be built that will move the world towards these ideals.

The current UN mission statement mentions three major objectives: peace and security; development and aid; freedom and human rights. In the case of the first objective the relationship between the two terms – peace and security – seems to have been turned upside-down. The second objective, development and aid, will probably remain substantially intact; but there is a serious need to review the macro-economic hypotheses upon which development theory and practice have been constructed, in order to capitalise better on the valuable experience and knowledge that the UN itself has accumulated in humanitarian aid and development. The third objective, freedom and human rights, poses questions on democracy and the UN's role vis-à-vis sovereign member-states as well the use and abuse of issues of human rights for political mileage.

The United Nations needs to revisit the fundamentals of the international system. This challenge is no less than one of reinventing global governance in the interests of a more equitable global dispensation. The poor, then, will not appear on the radar of the rich only through riots, as squatters, or because of the threat of refugees, but as part of a global agenda that seeks to address disparity (Cil-liers, 1999).

### *Women expand their space and that of the UN*

One of the great advantages that the UN offered the international women's movement was that of space. Women worked *with* the existing structures and spaces, strategising to make the most of them. But they also worked to expand and challenge these structures and spaces. Women who were planning to push their agenda through the complicated organisational systems of the UN needed special ways of working and needed to forge alliances to make use of special structures and configurations of space. If the UN was the theatre, the women were the players who used various styles of acting to reach their objective. Ways of working with men had to be modulated, divides had to be bridged; they had to use informal methods

to supplement formal patterns of interactions, lateral movements rather than hierarchical.

### *Alliances and networks*

One facet of the identity of women inside the UN in the last half a century is tied up with their small numbers, with their being a minority within a huge system. In the very first meeting held in San Francisco to draft the UN Charter – the United Nations Conference on International Organisation, 1945 – there was a minuscule female presence, ‘a handful of women’. The actual number was four, out of the 160 signatories to the Charter. These women combined forces with other women from the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) attending the meeting. Nine of the women from the non-governmental organisations sent a petition to the head of the United States’ delegation asking for inclusion of equal rights for women in the Charter.

As a result, while the Preamble to the Charter reaffirmed ‘faith in fundamental human rights’ and ‘the dignity and worth of the human person’, it also articulated ‘the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small’ (D’Amico, 1999: 21).

The strategic combination of women in the delegations to the UN, the officials within the UN Secretariat and the NGOs outside – to engineer desirable outcomes – has led to concrete gains; in spite of which, most of these agents operate in a male-oriented environment

Earlier stories of such alliances include Jessie Street, an Australian delegate, with the backing of powerful networks and good connections, suggesting that all positions in the UN should be open to women. (This was based on a similar provision of the Covenant of the League of Nations in San Francisco, in 1945.) This led to Article 8 which states that the UN ‘shall place no restrictions on the eligibility of men and women to participate in any capacity and under conditions of equality’. So women have been in the UN since it came into being, but it has taken many decades of effort to get more of them, especially in the top positions – and the UN continues to be male-dominated.

The ‘triangle’ was used effectively so that the three groups could strengthen each other as well as to advance the cause of women through better programming and visibility. In the 1970s, the Economic Commission of Africa (ECA) supported NGOs and, with the help of member-states, succeeded in winning the right of NGOs

to nominate one-fourth of the trainees to the training programmes. At the same time, its women's programme from 1974 onwards was able to draw the support of NGOs, government officials, academics, other organisations (outside Africa) through their inclusive approach and advocacy, and thus gained in strength. The African Training and Research Centre for Women and ECA became the models for others and were cited by many, including the CSW, and used as examples while setting up the UN Asia Pacific Centre for Women and Development (Snyder, 1995).

In their engagement with the UN, women have also used networking as a crucial way to influence the agreements and actions of the UN, and to monitor the implementation of the agreements. Support from the networks has helped bring cases to the Human Rights Commission, and the consultative status that many networks have at the UN has allowed them a legitimate voice in these corridors of power. Voices that are otherwise outside the official discourse (such as those of poor women and women of colour) could now be brought in. Networks have also made it possible for a wide variety and large numbers of women to participate, be it NGONET at the UNCED process or the Tribune at Mexico.

Networks also used UN instruments to strengthen local actions. Sara Longwe, Director of the African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) and founder of the Zambian Women's Association suggests that the Women's Convention helps the women's movement in Africa, especially in her country, Zambia. The women of her country can leverage this instrument since the governments 'want to look good after they sign the women's treaty' (Karl, 1998).

### *Conference journeys*

Women's engagement with world conferences predated the birth of the UN, but it was from 1975 onwards that the world saw these events attracting the participation of large numbers of women (Pietilä and Vickers, 1990).

They broke open the UN conference method by successfully using the parallel conferences to feed into the official one as well as to build a global consensus. This allowed for the voices of the 'outside' to enter the 'inside' or the formal United Nations and the official documents. These were ideas that then went on to be adopted as a practice in some of the subject-specific conferences of the UN, whether on population, education or environment.

Similarly, the UN conferences as spaces have been used in numerous ways by women. The conferences helped mobilise national and local governments and NGOs to take action on major global problems during the preparatory process leading up to the world conferences; and to point out the links between the local and the global. Women from all over the world, therefore, networked, advocated and debated their own as well as each other's causes (for example, non-blacks speaking with their black sisters against Apartheid and racism, and heterosexuals supporting the cause of sexual minorities). They have launched campaigns and mobilised women from all over as well as using the opportunity to mobilise public opinion on various issues (for example the 16-day campaign against violence against women). They have lobbied country delegates as well as taking on the UN system itself. And the volume and degree of participation of women at these conferences has increased tremendously (for example, there were 6000 members at the parallel conference at Mexico and 17,000 at Beijing). Women have also begun getting involved at all stages of the preparatory processes as part of NGO forums, caucuses and as official delegates. 'Through the Linkage Caucus, we are trying to prevent collective amnesia and not only hold on to gains from previous UN Conferences but to build on those platforms' (Abzug, 1996)

The series of international conferences celebrating the UN Decade for Women (1976-85) highlighted the unique problems facing women in the South and encouraged the development of organisations to foster research and writing by the Third World scholars. The scholarship emerging from these organisations has strengthened the voice(s) of Southern scholars and activists, and is providing the basis for feminist theorising and action grounded in Southern realities (more recently called the 'empowerment' approach to women's development). It has also inspired links with feminists in the North concerned with global and gender inequality in a commitment to understanding class, race and gender inequality in a global context, thus providing an intellectual meeting-point for like-minded feminists from around the world.

However, while women have gained in terms of sophistication and clout, distinctive changes have taken root from the late 1980s onwards, within the United Nations. The UN as a huge establishment has evolved a style of working, with its own procedures, systems, spaces and culture. There were changes at the level of national governments as well, with the growth of professional and civil services. Increasingly, diplomats and civil servants began to take

the place of erstwhile 'political' women. National machineries in most countries, created and placed in the professional-bureaucratic mode, corresponded with desks created in donor agencies to look after women in development and, then, to work on gender issues. Gender analysis became a professional discipline, which could be learnt through training and other kinds of exposure to knowledge. References to patriarchy, to the history of women's struggles, to feminist movements, and so forth, became fewer in the development literature. As contentious issues in areas such as population (abortion, reproductive rights), environment (consumption patterns of the developed world) and women (sexuality and sexual preferences) gave rise to sharp dissensions between countries in world conferences where some political and religious leaders tended to take extreme positions, negating their ratification of the UN conventions, efforts were started to reduce the scope of the divides by the use of sanitised language. The instrumental approach to women's advancement, favoured by institutions such as the World Bank, also came in as a convenient tool for masking the relational aspect of gender as well as the crucial links between poverty, power and politics.

## **The women's movement**

### *Challenging dichotomies and other separating classifications*

Within feminism, knowledge and research are seen as means of uncovering and altering facts, altering data, and finally altering conditions in human societies. Towards this objective feminism is constantly testing and expanding concepts and definitions, destabilising social relations and social constructs, and challenging social conditions as well as 'solutions' offered.

There are many instances of these. One subject area where there has been much research and debate concerns the inaccuracy, inappropriateness and inadequacy of the statistics on women's work. The main criticism has been that even if women are engaged in activities similar to men – that is, for example, income-earning, and producing marketable goods and services, which fall within the standard definition of gainful activities as defined by the data collection systems – they are not fully counted. Other economic activities are even more invisible, some because they are non-monetised and others because the questionnaires as are not designed to 'net' these (Beneria, 1997; Aslaksen and Koren, 1996).

The Homeworkers Convention passed by the ILO in 1996 is the story of a change of perception and ideas and of the confluence of many players, at various levels and stages of the campaign, to ensure that the convention was passed. The push to change came from below but it snowballed into a convention because it was able to gather the support of various actors – academics, governments, NGOs, trade unions, grassroots organisations and the UN. Fundamentally, the campaign was a ‘multidimensional struggle against the ideologies of domesticity and patriarchy’ (CRHW, 1997). Since the identity of ‘worker’, and thereby its accommodation in the collectivities bargaining and legal arrangements, stemmed from a particular mode of production, namely factory-based ‘capitalist’, other modes of production and trade, and other types of work and workers were excluded from institutional arrangements. The battle initially was to get the concept of ‘homeworkers’ on to the agenda. Women’s work within the household, the ‘private’ sphere, is seen as inconsequential, unskilled, mindless and worthless. Work outside the home, the monetised ‘public’ sphere, is seen as gainful, skilled, valuable.

The public-private dichotomy had resulted in the public *polis* being viewed as the domain of men – rational, equal, disinterested, impartial and independent – and the domestic *oikonomika* as the domain of the women – emotional, different, partial and dependent (James, 1992). The feminist critique of the theory and practice of democratic liberalism points out that liberal theory, built on the above set of complimentary dichotomies, excludes women in two ways: by denying them the full set of rights and privileges given to men and by taking for granted a definition of citizenship that excludes all that is traditionally female (ibid). Feminists recognised that it wasn’t so much that women were being excluded from political activity, but rather that their activities were excluded from the way politics was defined.

The critiquing of the supposedly oppositional categories (public/private, knowledge/experience, culture/nature, rational/emotional) has resulted in women daring to juxtapose these seemingly contradictory groupings together and resisting a fragmentation of societal functioning into the economic, the social and the political. Therefore, even while the UN mainstream human rights regime had been tutored in the tradition of clear divisions, the Commission on the Status of Women resisted as regards women’s rights. Both the Declaration for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (DEDAW) and the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimina-

tion Against Women (CEDAW) combine both sets of rights (Fraser, 1995).

This technique of converging, or bundling together, conventionally separated categories, and of seeing the whole through the parts, was repeated in many other domains. For example, women bundled together the categories that the UN's work usually separates – that is, security, human rights, and development – arguing that such division itself was gendered and that strict compartmentalisation leads to distortion rather than refinement. CEDAW was also historic in that it challenged the boundaries between public and private, and national and international.

Feminists, especially from the Third World, have argued that rather than positing the individual aspects of civil and political human rights, as opposed to the collective aspects of social and economic human rights, the two can be approached as an integrated and mutually interdependent whole, thereby bringing together supposedly separate rights. This broad approach then encompasses a whole array of human rights in the development processes – civil and political rights, including the right to participation, the right to freedom, the right to self-determination and the right to equality; and social, cultural and economic rights such as the right to health, the right to food, the right to livelihood and the right to information. The so-called 'solidarity' rights in terms of the right to development, humanitarian assistance, peace and the right to environment are also encompassed in this perspective (Marks, 2004).

At the same time feminists have through their theorising, actions and interventions made sure that they have had an impact on the United Nations. Some of these include CEDAW becoming one of the most widely ratified human rights conventions within the UN, and the acceptance that the 'human rights of women and of the girl child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of human rights' (UN, 1993). This was accompanied by the requirement that women's rights be mainstreamed into all parts of the UN system.

Recognition of the debilitating effects of gender-specific violence in denying women enjoyment of human rights, eliminating violence against women is a human rights obligation upon states was asserted at Beijing, at the Vienna Conference on Human Rights and in the General Assembly. The collection and collation of gender-aggregated data within the UN is of great practical importance in mapping the position of the world's women and in finding a factual basis for urging change. The tribunals established by a Security Council resolution in the late 1990s period were the first interna-

tional tribunals to be explicitly granted jurisdiction over rape as a crime against humanity.

However, these achievements have not been unmixed. Campaigns around violence against women, and reproductive rights, have led to these issues being accepted to a larger degree within human rights discourse, but they have also put into the shade the need to look at the denial of women's rights in other areas, such as economic and social rights. In the same way, the War Crimes Tribunal focusing its attention on Yugoslavia and Rwanda has turned attention away from the ongoing regular incidents of rape in all armed conflict.

### *Politicising development*

One of the tensions at international fora like the conferences was that while many Western feminists were of the view that women's issues should be politicised, Third World women through their separate caucuses had sought to broaden the agenda and 'treat feminism as a fundamental political movement connected as much to their communities for liberation and autonomy as to work against gender discrimination' (Johnson-Odim, 1991).

For Southern feminist activists and scholars, gender discrimination has always operated through other forms of exclusion and oppression: colonialism, caste, class, race, region, religion, and so forth. So gender relations operate through these other social and institutional structures, determining their status not only vis-à-vis men and women of their own social group, but also men and women of other groups. Therefore, building analysis from the experience of poor women in the South led to many new and exciting ideas. For example, Southern feminists were instrumental in pushing for other indicators of progress (which later became the Human Development Index), and for a bottom-up approach (which got translated into participatory development). The debates on household economics (Pollak, 1995), the idea, concept, measuring tool of the household as a unit on which you can build ideas like security of food or safety, was challenged and converted into individual security.

Linking conventionally fragmented themes leads to redefining concepts and questions centring round women. Women questioned the logic of integration of women into existing formats of development that were basically inequitable. The Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era – an expanding network of women, researchers and activists from the economic South – made their

first striking impact at the NGO Forum at Nairobi in 1985. Third World women found a voice that was to challenge and change the discourse on women and development. By locating women's experience of development in the colonial and neo-colonial context and the macro-economic policies that reflected this colonial relationship, we introduced an analytical framework that was to change the terms of the debate on women's issues worldwide...It provided the global women's movement with the tools for advancing a different perspective on all development issues, from environment to human

### The shift of leadership to the South

Over the years women from the South politicised development – and gave currency to the politics of development and its location in the larger scenario of global economic landscapes. The four UN world conferences on women – 1975, 1980, 1985, 1995 – are often seen as landmarks in moving women's quest for equality and justice forward.

What is not often highlighted is the striking shift in the leadership of these conferences into the hands of women from the newly liberated countries. The secretary-generals of the Copenhagen (1980) and Beijing (1995) conferences were women from the South and, interestingly, from socialist backgrounds – Lucille Mair of Jamaica and Gertrude Mongella of Tanzania. The leader of the NGO conference in Nairobi was another political stalwart, this time from Barbados, Nita Barrow.

Lucille Mair linked macro issues of imperialism and 'violence of development' with the violence women face within the more intimate spaces. Her engagement with the UN was not uncritical. While she welcomed progress made for women's equality she was acutely aware of the limitations. While Third World women play important roles in economic production processes, they are hostage to the micro and macro forces that they are struggling to influence (Mair, 1984).

Another actor that emerged in the international space was a formation that was markedly political – challenging the traditional East-versus-West politics of the United Nations. This was the Non-Aligned Movement, an independent political umbrella for the South, different from the G77, which was trammelled up in the UN. Vida Tomsic, a Yugoslav, and architect of the NAM pre-Nairobi conference held in New Delhi in 1985, was of the opinion that: 'Actions of the international community in individual social fields...have had limited effect. The consequences cannot be eliminated unless the action goes to the causes; to its roots in anachronistic and unjust international economic and political relations' (Tomsic, 1981: 2; as quoted in Pavlic and Harnelink, 1985).

This pre-Nairobi NAM meeting then fed into the Nairobi document and worked to voice the concern of women from developing countries and the socialist countries and pointed to differences in approach, circumstances and aspirations of these women.

rights, from population to poverty (Antrobus, 2004).

Thus, the concerns and knowledge about poverty and its links with macro-economics were exposed at Nairobi and it was established that an ‘only for women agenda’ would not suffice.

### **3. Women, Development and the United Nations Today – A Critical Analysis**

In a sense all three issues that this essay has dealt with – the development project, the United Nations and the women’s movement – have held promise of an improved quality of life for large sections of people who are otherwise excluded, discriminated against and oppressed.

A health-check of the three reveals that while they have delivered on some of the promises they also belied many of the hopes vested in them. However, we propose that the problem is beyond that of mere inadequacy on the delivery of what was undertaken; rather, the faultlines run deeper and lie in the very conceptualising and knowledge base from which these are constructed. Therefore, in our way forward we need to unpack and reassess these basic foundations that inform the three forces or variables.

#### **Failure of development**

The development project was spawned immediately after the Second World War and was to deliver people from poverty, inequality, ill-health and illiteracy into well-being. Since the Second World War, international trade (a sign of an integration of economies that is supposed to lead to development) has grown consistently faster than output and now accounts for approximately 25 per cent of world GDP. Other measures of globalisation include the enormous expansion of international financial markets, the spread of new technologies that have revolutionised international communications and encouraged the development of transnational patterns of production and consumption, and the fourfold increase in foreign direct investment flowing to developing and transition economies over the past decade (World Bank, 1997: 289).

However, this overall picture masks large, growing disparities among the developing countries; not all countries have been able to take advantage of the benefits of globalisation. Since about 1980, the fastest-growing economies of Asia and Latin America have been characterised by high rates of domestic savings, declining dependence on agriculture, and a rapid growth in trade, especially

of manufactured exports.

### **Poverty and inequality remain high**

While there are widely varying conclusions on the impact of globalisation on poverty and attempts to define poverty in many different ways, the figure that around 3 billion people live on less than US\$2 a day has increasingly been circulated.<sup>1</sup>

The ILO's Global Employment Trends, 2007, says that there were some 1.37 billion working poor living on US\$2 a day in 2006.<sup>2</sup> Critics have pointed out that this is a large underestimation of the extent of global income poverty and leads to an incorrect inference that it has declined. What has been agreed upon is that the poverty and deprivation affects vast populations today even while there is unprecedented riches today.

Multiple inequalities lock in income levels of the poor, disadvantaged and populations in backward areas, and the trickle-down effects of growth are limited to the margins of the high-growing enclaves and urban conglomerations (Sinha, 2005) There has also been an increase in regional inequality, especially in the incidence of rural poverty. This rise in inequality has implied that, despite better growth, poverty reduction has been sluggish (Jha, 2004). Therefore, *development*, which was pursued as a 'process of enlarging people's choices' in order for the people to 'lead long and healthy lives, to be knowledgeable and to have a decent standard of living' (Human Development Reports, Glossary of Terms) has disappointed.

Wolfgang Sachs, in his scathing criticism of development, says: 'The idea of development stands like a ruin in the intellectual landscape. Delusion and disappointment, failures and crimes have been the steady companions of development and they tell a common story: it did not work... Nevertheless, the ruin stands there and still dominates the scenery like a landmark' (Sachs, 1997: 1).

Even if we do not agree with this extreme position there are innumerable technical reports that show that development does not work, and political ones that point to how unjust it is. Now

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1 For example Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary-General, in a speech on the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, 17 October 2000, said: 'Almost half the world's population lives on less than two dollars a day, yet even this statistic fails to capture the humiliation, powerlessness and brutal hardship that is the daily lot of the world's poor.'

2 The World Bank's estimate is that 1.1 billion people are living on less than \$1 a day (<http://iresearch.worldbank.org/PovcalNet/jsp/Introduction.jsp>).

ecological considerations of the development project throw up not only the huge damage and destruction that has been wrought in the name of development, but also that development as it is conceived today cannot be sustained.

In fact climate change has been described as *the* defining human development challenge of the 21st century. The Human Development Report 2007/2008 argues that climate change poses challenges at many levels. In a divided but ecologically interdependent world, it challenges all people to reflect upon how we manage the environment of the one thing that we share in common: planet Earth. It challenges us to reflect on social justice and human rights across countries and generations.

Much of the practical and political impulses of the anti-development stance is seen in what are called the ‘new social movements’ – which are a heterogeneous and varied lot. The challenge that they present is often seen as a move towards ‘claiming territory from the developmentalist state’ or a move towards ‘polycentrism’.

### **The United Nations: Losing relevance and legitimacy**

It is the aspirations of ‘ordinary people’ that the birth and operation of the United Nations was to embody. The UN is a legal entity, pledged – originally by 51 countries but now 189 nations – to provide a space for international dialogue on issues concerning them individually and collectively, as well as to design policies and actions which would enhance the lives of individuals, the ‘people’ of all those nations. It is a remarkable institution, and one on whose shoulders rest two of the most important issues confronting the world to day – peace and justice. Over the last 50 years the organisation has addressed an unimaginably vast array of challenges, hinging around these two major poles. Taking an overview, it could be suggested that the UN has negotiated and nudged to make the world a better place for its people.

Today it is gripped by a crisis of legitimacy and relevance. The power landscape is changing drastically in many parts of the world, and many countries are struggling to safeguard their borders and their sovereignty. The UN is withering away in international space due to the superseding of the economic globe. The UN has had a history of setbacks and crises – the blockade of Berlin, the aggression against Egypt in 1956, the war in Korea, the war in Vietnam, the missile crisis, and so forth – and of threats to its survival. However, it has managed to stay afloat and continue to work. Many argue that

the United Nations is the only existing institution that can contribute to the democratisation of international institutions, especially for poorer countries. The richer ones are better placed to depend on other channels of diplomacy and establish their own business network; they can also handle their foreign policy without much help from the United Nations. Others argue that this is precisely what they do in actuality and that the UN provides them with a fig leaf to hide behind and gain respectability.

However, besides crises like the erstwhile Yugoslavia issue or the invasion of Iraq, there are also serious allegations that the major economic powers have succeeded in eroding the role and functions of the UN. In areas other than security, with the onset in the early 1980s of the Reagan-Thatcher era of minimising the role of the state both at the national and international level, a deliberate, concerted and well-planned campaign was spearheaded, mainly by the 'haves' of the world, to emasculate and enfeeble the inter-state system represented by the UN. Hardcore economic issues relating even to the developing countries, such as financial flows, interest rate and exchange rate fluctuations, inflation, external indebtedness and so forth, are no longer allowed to be discussed within the forums of the UN. This is in contrast to the position that pertained up until the beginning of the 1970s, when ideas such as trade preferences for developing countries, and commodity price stabilisation, were all advanced and agreed upon within the UN. The growing power of the corporates, which are now called global corporations in recognition of their power and reach across boundaries, implies that the nation-state is no longer the main political entity that matters.

In a bid to reinvent itself the UN has undertaken a series of reforms. The aim of the reform process is to improve efficiency and effectiveness by rationalising the work and possibly the structures of UN agencies, funds and programmes. There is a wide range of criticism of the process, from the accusation that the reforms do not go far enough to questions on proposals to expand the Security Council while preserving the veto powers of the five Permanent Members. There are, however, other more fundamental questions that have been raised. An ambassador of a developing country, who has been heavily involved in the reform negotiations, expressed his concerns by saying: 'Under the guise of achieving greater efficiency and avoiding duplication, I believe the developed countries want to devoid the UN of its role in development, and leave it to deal only with security, post-conflict, humanitarian and environment issues' (Khor, 2006). The increasing collaboration between the UN and

corporates is also an area of concern. The fear is that this will lead to a reluctance to criticise corporations which are central players in the human rights, environmental and development dramas unfolding every day across the globe. The corporates have very few checks right now and the UN is compromising a role it could play of being a watchdog on these powerful entities. The deeper concern is that the role of agenda-setting within the UN is indirectly being handed over to these corporates.

### **Challenges for the worldwide women's movement today**

By the time the Nairobi conference was held in 1985, at the end of the Women's Decade, the international women's movement had 10 years of intense interaction. Even though the international women's movement predates the UN it moved into a new phase during the period of the international decade, 1976-85. A deeper solidarity was born out an understanding that while the goals of the movement might be similar – freedom, equality and justice – women's situations vary in different countries and therefore there was a need for multiple strategies. Fuelled by grassroots organising around various issues the international women's movement represented varied voices and claims.

The Beijing conference that followed 10 years later, in 1995, was seen as historic in the fact that there was a mobilisation of feminist advocates, activists and academics in the international political arena, as also because it displayed the diversity of the international women's movement at its best.

However, one of the insights from the March 2005 Beijing +10 conference in New York was that over the past decades, two trajectories relative to women and development have unfolded. The first trajectory is the emergence of a strong political presence of the women's movement in the national and international scene. The need to engage in gendered analysis that recognises both difference and inequality and its implications for development design is now widely acknowledged. The other trajectory reveals that the situation on the ground for many women, especially those living in poverty and in conflict-ridden situations, seems to have worsened, despite the fact that it has been addressed specifically by both the state and development thought.

At present, there is a tendency to uncritically regard international agreements and commitments to women's rights or gender equality made at the United Nations world conferences as gains for

the women's movement. Conceptual advances – such as recognition of women's rights as human rights, reproductive health and rights, or rape as a war crime – are gains in changing international mindsets or laws and do push the women's rights agenda forward. However, while the advances in rhetoric and public recognition of women's rights are high this has not been borne out in reality, in changes in the lives of women – especially poor women. Vanessa Griffin talks of this as the 'Emperor has no clothes factor' – that is, perceiving the growing disjunction between what is most widely stated and accepted as progress for women's rights by NGOs or feminist analysts and what constitutes the lived reality for the majority of the world's women – unchanging patriarchal oppression and widespread poverty.

In addition to the impacts of globalisation, the rise of conservative and fundamentalist forces define the contexts within which feminist engagement takes place at the international level. These forces present diverse faces in different situations, but their impacts across various UN processes and negotiations are consistently frustrating to goals of gender equality and justice. 'In UN spaces, therefore, women's rights activists have to simultaneously confront the unconditional support of seemingly "pro-gender equality" governments for the neoliberal economic agenda that is biased against poor countries and perpetuates women's oppression, and also the repressive objectives of conservative and fundamentalist forces seeking patriarchal control over women, especially through consistent opposition to women's sexual and reproductive rights' (Randriamaro, 2004: 1).

This is indeed a challenge for a movement that is also becoming increasingly fractured and rife with internal tensions. Currently, most women's organisations tend to focus on a single issue or at best a narrow set of issues (for example, reproductive health, education, economic empowerment, violence) with few links to one another. 'This creates a structural fragmentation of global women's movements, which is quite different from a conscious and strategic division of labour. The lack of a division of labour in relation to the different issues also accounts for the North/South divide within global women's movements. For instance, with regards to the multilateral and bilateral trade agreements that are being negotiated, there are many instances where Northern organisations could better focus on educating the public and lobbying their own governments instead of coming to Southern countries "to build capacity"' (Randriamaro, 2004: 11).

There are also doubts about focusing on concepts such as ‘gender equality’ and fears that this is a move away from women’s resistance to patriarchy and away from feminist concepts of transformation of social institutions to ensure women’s rights and empowerment. However, it is also true that the fact that gender equity has gained popularity, and the increased funding and visibility has produced an enormous amount of gender research, gender training, advocacy and analysis. And while some are apolitical and weak, others are fairly sophisticated and valuable.

The fears, though, of reducing the vision and aspirations of a movement into a series of narrow and technically conceived targets – such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – are not without foundation. The challenge, therefore, is how to re-vision the MDGs – both in substance and processes – to make them people-centred in their agenda; to expand the goals so that the concerns of women become central to the goals; and to back this up with resources and processes.

While understanding that the Beijing Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals have played a critical role in making the issue of gender visible and offering frameworks to gauge progress, considering that the globe has changed in significant ways – in its politics and its economics, its landscapes of institutions and laws, and its approaches and ideologies to transformation since Beijing (1995) and more dramatically since the opening of this 21st century – it is suggested that the women’s movement (especially of the South) take note of the current scenario and develop a new framework. The need of the hour is to move away from just defending past gains or becoming tied down by UN documents. We need to seek new forms of engagement with these and other UN processes

## 4. A Thought for the Future

### **Harvesting feminist knowledge for rebuilding theories and systems**

Even as we stand on shaky ground that is prone to seismic tremors, this very shifting ground beneath our feet offers cracks of opportunity and hope. We suggest that our own, namely the feminist voice and tools for negotiating what we aspire for – a world of equality, peace and justice – needs to be developed through harvesting our knowledge and turning it into more hard-core treatises on reason-

ing, leading to powerful ideas.

In other words, we need to shift our focus away from our earlier spaces and move our negotiating tools to highlight not only our location in the political economy, but also the brilliance of our struggles which have pointed to what should be the content of development, our activist approach. We need to build ideas, in the sense of theoretical and philosophical constructs. We need not only reconstruction of various epistemologies, and our analysis of the problems of knowledge construction (Jain, 2002), but actual creativity in constructing 'new' theories, new compositions, emerging naturally out of what we would like to call the feminist experience

We suggest that in a sense we need to rebel against the given constructs and mantras at the level of ideation (Jain, 1997). Rebellion, however, to be effective, requires a mass; mass requires solidarity...and solidarity requires an idea which inspires and induces that solidarity. Our quest here should be for that idea around which we can unite. We call it Gandhi's fistful of salt.

When Gandhiji picked up a fistful of salt from the beaches of Gujarat, he was not trying to give free salt to the people of India. It was a symbol, an idiom of political assertion, but expressed in a language, a vocabulary, that represented the masses of people, not the elites. When President Mandela said in his inaugural speech, 'We want *bread, water and salt*' it was not that he wanted to limit the lifestyle of his people to bread with salt and water: it was to signal the aspirations of the masses, again through a vocabulary that was representative of political assertion and that identified with the deprived.

In our reading of history we are of the opinion that campaigning by itself, is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for change (Jain, 2000). There has to be a core theory – in fact theory survives history even more robustly than practice as we see from Marx and Gandhi – so an analytically powerful idea, a truth which grips the imagination, and the felt need of a mass, has an impact which makes a difference.

A core theory is needed so that feminists, despite and because of their diversity and pluralism, can become a new force in international politics. 'It is a force of ideas, invention and commitment rather than economic resources, of courage, morality and justice instead of technology and tanks. This force is the diplomacy of the disempowered, addressing, modifying and seeking to transform every issue on the international agenda with the realities, knowledge, pain and demands of the dominated; it is part of our own transformation from

victimhood to survival, and from survival – whether of personal or structural violence – to power’ (Ashworth, 1999).

What is needed now – and it can be done if women put their minds together – is for women’s brilliant struggles to be treated as a body of knowledge, chiselled into theory, into an intellectual challenge to what ‘is’ – that is, the currently dominant social science theories and ideas. What is needed is an intellectual theory constructed out of ground-level experience, which can claim space in the world of theoretical discourse.

The idea is to forge the new path with women’s *gyana* – an Indian concept which roughly translates as knowing, or knowledge, which includes experience – for feminists to use their most powerful tool for attracting ‘justice’ (Jain, 2007).

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