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Neolib, Neocons and Gender Justice: Lessons from Global Negotiations

by Gita Sen





Occasional Paper 9

**Neolib, Neocons and Gender Justice:
Lessons from Global Negotiations**

by Gita Sen
September 2005

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acronyms

DAW	UN Division for the Advancement of Women
DAWN	Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era
ESCAP	Economic and Social Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific
FIM	Forum Internationale de Montreal
HIV/AIDS	Human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome
ICPD	International Center for Peace and Development
LGBT	lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender
NGO	non-governmental organization
SLACC	Some Latin American and Caribbean countries
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund

summary résumé resumen

SUMMARY

This paper is a reflection on the environment within which the struggle for gender justice is currently under way in the global arena. It also steps back to provide an analytical frame to explain the core of the tensions between gender justice and other elements of social/economic justice, and the strategic implications of the multiple sites in which gender relations operate. It draws from the experiences of feminists who engaged in analysis and advocacy while participating in the negotiations of the United Nations conferences of the 1990s. These conferences—on environment, human rights, population, social development, women, habitat, children, HIV/AIDS, small island states, food security, racism—and their five- and 10-year reviews have provided a unique opportunity for negotiating a progressive social agenda in a systematic and ongoing way.

But even as such an agenda was being spelled out, the global economic policy terrain was almost entirely subordinated to neoliberal economic thinking dominated by the Washington Consensus. The interplay between these two sets of forces is our subject matter. The paper also comments on the implications for gender justice of the shift to a unipolar world order, and in particular, the movement from the neoliberal era to the neoconservative one.

The work of feminist and other scholars and activists following the conferences of the 1990s showed clearly that security of livelihoods and an enabling economic environment are an important basis for moving forward to meet reproductive and sexual health needs through well-functioning health systems (Petchesky 2003). Yet some of the very countries that were most vocal in their support for sexual and reproductive rights were also the most hard-nosed in South–North economic negotiations. These tensions came to the fore not only in the UN conferences themselves, especially Cairo and Beijing, but also in their “plus five” reviews. Despite this, considerable advances were possible on reproductive and sexual health and rights during the 1990s because of the limited control over state power by religious fundamentalists.

This scenario has undergone a major change in the neoconservative period, with much stronger control over key levers of state power by religious fundamentalists on the one hand, and the rise of neoconservative political economy on the other. The first decade of this century has seen significant and tangible evidence of this in key conferences on HIV/AIDS, children, and population, as well as in many other sites. This paper builds on previous analysis of the earlier phase to draw out implications for the current terrain in which feminists and allies are struggling to maintain hard-won gains and move forward.

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RÉSUMÉ

Ce document est une réflexion sur l'environnement dans lequel se poursuit la lutte pour la justice sexuelle dans le monde. L'auteur prend aussi du recul pour fournir une grille d'analyse qui permette d'expliquer l'essentiel des tensions entre la justice sexuelle et d'autres éléments de la justice sociale et économique, et de tirer les conséquences stratégiques de la multiplicité des espaces dans lesquels interviennent les rapports sociaux entre hommes et femmes. Elle s'appuie sur l'expérience de féministes qui ont fait un travail d'analyse et de sensibilisation alors qu'elles participaient aux négociations des conférences organisées par les Nations Unies dans les années 90. Ces conférences, qui ont porté sur l'environnement, les droits de l'homme, la population, le développement social, les femmes, l'habitat, les enfants, le VIH/sida, les petits Etats insulaires, la sécurité alimentaire, le racisme, et l'examen de leurs retombées cinq et dix ans après ont été des occasions sans pareille de négocier un programme social progressiste de manière systématique et continue.

Mais au moment même où ce programme se définissait, le terrain de la politique économique mondiale était presque entièrement occupé par la pensée économique néolibérale, elle-même dominée par le consensus de Washington. L'interaction de ces deux types de force est précisément le thème de ce document. L'auteur traite aussi des répercussions qu'ont eues sur la justice sexuelle le passage à un ordre mondial unipolaire et, en particulier, l'avènement de l'ère néoconservatrice après l'ère néolibérale.

Les travaux réalisés par des féministes et d'autres intellectuelles et militantes à la suite des conférences des années 90 ont montré clairement que la sécurité des moyens d'existence et un environnement économique favorable sont des conditions importantes pour la satisfaction des besoins de santé gynécologique et génésique dans un système de santé bien rodé (Petchesky 2003). Cependant, certains des pays les plus assidus à défendre les droits en matière de sexualité et de procréation ont été aussi les plus intraitables dans les négociations économiques Sud-Nord. Ces tensions sont apparues au grand jour non seulement dans les conférences des Nations Unies elles-mêmes, en particulier au Caire et à Beijing, mais aussi dans les conférences d'examen tenues cinq ans plus tard. Malgré cela, il a été possible de réaliser des progrès considérables sur les droits et la santé en matière de procréation et de sexualité dans les années 90 parce que les fondamentalistes religieux n'avaient qu'un pouvoir limité sur l'Etat.

La situation a complètement changé pendant la période néoconservatrice, marquée, d'une part, par une tenue beaucoup plus ferme des principaux leviers de l'Etat par les fondamentalistes religieux et, de l'autre, par la montée de l'économie politique néo-conservatrice. On en a eu des preuves tangibles et multiples pendant la première décennie de ce siècle, lors des grandes conférences sur le VIH/sida, les enfants et la population, et à bien d'autres occasions. Ce document s'inspire d'une analyse de la phase antérieure pour tirer les conséquences qui s'imposent pour la situation actuelle, où les féministes et leurs alliés se battent pour conserver des acquis durement gagnés et aller de l'avant.

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RESUMEN

Este documento refleja el entorno dentro del cual se está luchando actualmente por la justicia de género en el mundo. También da un paso para atrás para darnos un marco analítico que explique las tensiones centrales entre la justicia de género y otros elementos de la justicia social o económica y las implicaciones estratégicas de los múltiples sitios en que operan las relaciones de género. Se inspira en las experiencias de feministas que se dedicaron al análisis y a la promoción al mismo tiempo que participaban en las negociaciones de las conferencias de las Naciones Unidas de los años 90. Estas conferencias – sobre el medioambiente, los derechos humanos, la población, el desarrollo social, la mujer, la vivienda, los niños, el VIH/SIDA, la seguridad alimentaria, el racismo – y sus revisiones cada cinco o diez años – han brindado una oportunidad única para negociar un programa social progresivo de forma sistemática y seguida.

Pero aun cuando se estaban acordando los detalles de un programa de este tipo, el ámbito de la política económica estaba casi completamente supeditado al pensamiento económico neoliberal dominado por el Consenso de Washington. La interacción entre estas dos fuerzas constituye nuestro tema principal. El documento también comenta las implicaciones para la justicia de género del cambio en el orden mundial hacia la monopolaridad, y especialmente, el cambio de la era neoliberal a una época neoconservadora.

El trabajo de feministas y demás académicos y activistas después de las conferencias de los años 90, muestran claramente que la seguridad de los medios de vida y de un entorno económico habilitador forman una base importante para satisfacer las necesidades de salud reproductiva y sexual mediante sistemas sanitarios que funcionen bien (Petchesky 2003). Sin embargo, algunos de los países que apoyaban más fervientemente la lucha por los derechos sexuales y de reproducción eran los más refractarios en las negociaciones económicas entre el Norte y el Sur. Estas tensiones se hicieron sentir no solamente en las conferencias de la ONU, particularmente en El Cairo y Beijing, sino también en sus revisiones ‘más cinco’. A pesar de esto, se lograron avances considerables en cuanto a los derechos de reproducción y de salud sexual durante los años 90 por el control limitado sobre el poder del Estado que tenían los fundamentalistas religiosos.

Este escenario ha cambiado mucho en el período neoconservador mediante, por un lado, más control por parte de los fundamentalistas religiosos sobre los niveles claves del poder estatal y, por otro, el auge de una economía política neoconservadora. La primera década de este siglo ha producido pruebas tangibles e importantes de lo dicho en conferencias claves sobre el VIH/SIDA, la infancia, la población, y también en muchos otros foros. Este informe parte de análisis previos de la fase anterior para extraer las consecuencias para el terreno actual en el que los feministas y sus aliados están luchando para mantener sus logros difíciles y avanzar hacia delante.

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introduction

The decade of the 1990s was an outstanding one for bringing issues of reproductive and sexual health and rights, violence against women, and male responsibility for gender power relations to the centre of global and national debates on human rights and human development. This was

the product of a complex and contradictory set of forces as well as diverse actors and alliances. It was the result of several phases of activism by feminists and their allies even during this relatively short period. From the early struggles to move beyond the neo-Malthusian population control paradigm that had dominated policy making for over half a century, the terrain of struggle for women's human rights has moved on to later and more complex phases. Sexual rights and the HIV/AIDS pandemic on the one hand, and the political economy of globalization and economic restructuring on the other, have become central to this terrain, even as population "controlistas" continue to fight rearguard actions.

This paper is a reflection on the environment within which the struggle for gender justice is currently under way in the global arena.¹ It draws its information from the experiences of feminists who engaged in analysis and advocacy while participating in the negotiations of the UN conferences of the 1990s.² These conferences—on environment, human rights, population, social development, women, habitat, children, HIV/AIDS, small island states, food security, racism—and their five- and 10-year reviews have provided a unique opportunity for negotiating a progressive social agenda in a systematic and ongoing way. But even as such an agenda was being spelled out, the global economic policy terrain was almost entirely subordinated to neoliberal economic thinking dominated by the Washington Consensus.³ The interplay between these two sets of forces is our subject matter.

The paper also comments on the implications for gender justice of the shift to a unipolar world order, and in particular, the movement from the neoliberal era dominated by the presidency of Bill Clinton in the United States to the neoconservative period under President George W. Bush Jr. The juxtaposition of social progressivism with economic neoliberalism already posed dilemmas and tensions for women's rights activism during the Clinton presidency in the United States, and prior to 11 September 2001. In particular, the strong support of the economic North during the Clinton era for women's reproductive and sexual rights stood in uncomfortable juxtaposition to its intransigence in global economic negotiations on world trade, financing for development and debt repayment. This created major problems for those concerned to promote women's human rights in *all* dimensions. As we will argue, it made it particularly difficult in global negotiations to have an integrated and clear stance against cultural relativism wearing the guise of religion and tradition, and to build stable political alliances for women's human rights.

The work of feminist and other scholars and activists following the conferences of the 1990s showed clearly that security of livelihoods and an enabling economic environment are an important basis for moving forward to meet reproductive and sexual health needs through well-functioning health systems (Petchesky 2003). Yet some of the very countries that were most vocal in their support for sexual and reproductive rights were also the most

1 The focus on the global stage in this paper is not intended to privilege the global over national or local sites. But it does recognize its importance for women's human rights.

2 The author's experiences and those of her colleagues in the Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) network provide the basis for this reflection.

3 For a short critique of neoliberalism see DAWN (1995).

hard-nosed in South–North economic negotiations. These tensions came to the fore not only in the conferences themselves, especially Cairo and Beijing, but also in their “plus five” reviews. Despite this, considerable advances were possible on reproductive and sexual health and rights during the 1990s because of the limited control over state power by religious fundamentalists.

This scenario has undergone a major change during the administration of President Bush Jr., with much stronger control over key levers of state power by religious fundamentalists on the one hand, and the rise of neoconservative political economy on the other. The first decade of this century has seen significant and tangible evidence of this in key conferences on HIV/AIDS, children, and population, as well as in many other sites.

This paper builds on previous analysis of the earlier phase (Sen and Correa 2000; Sen and Madunagu 2001; Correa and Sen 2001) to draw out implications for the current terrain, in which feminists and allies are struggling to maintain hard-won gains and move forward. It also steps back to provide an analytical frame to explain the core of the tensions between gender justice and other elements of social/economic justice,⁴ and the strategic implications of the multiple sites in which gender relations operate.

4 Ideally, gender equality ought to include elements of social/economic justice, and vice versa. However, proponents of social/economic justice between nations, classes or other groups, often ignore gender. Supporters of gender equality also sometimes ignore the environment of economic inequality and other forms of social injustice within which gender is located. In doing so, both sides leave out key aspects of the lived experience of women's lives.

II.

multiple sites of
gender relations:
strategic
implications

Recognition that gender relations of power are not simply located in a single site of human interaction has been incipient during much of the debate within women's movements and organizations during the late 19th and 20th centuries.⁵ This recognition became particularly focused in the third wave of the global women's movement from the late 20th century on. It is during this period that the debates about "public" versus "private" spheres, nature versus culture, coalesced into clarity about the distinctions and linkages between two important sites where gender relations are played out. Feminist anthro-

pologists and economists have used the language of production versus reproduction: that is, subordination within households (based on relations of inheritance/property, the division of labour/the "care economy", sexuality, child-bearing and rearing, and personal autonomy) versus gender relations in communities, labour markets, and political and legal systems. In both sites, the chief focus has been on power relations and hierarchies between women and men: in other words, gender relations as we usually understand them.

But this recognition has not sufficiently addressed the third site in which women are oppressed: as members of oppressed economic classes or castes, or on grounds of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or nationality. This third site and its strategic implications have not been adequately analysed within the women's movement. This constitutes a gap in feminist theorizing because subordination and oppression/exploitation in all three sites are linked and constitute the lived realities of women's existence. Typically we tend to think of the first two sites as the loci of gender relations while the third is sometimes left hanging, in a conceptual sense.

Understanding the need to overcome and transform power relations in the first two sites was itself partial and somewhat ad hoc in the earlier waves of the women's movement.⁶ The current third wave has a clearer conceptual understanding of the first two sites, but inadequate theorizing about the connections to the third site has left us without effective political tools in key struggles at both global and regional/national levels.

Women's political movements have had to address the tensions of struggling for gender justice (in the first two sites) while addressing the implications of women's presence in struggles as members of oppressed classes, castes, races, nations and so on.⁷ These tensions have long been present within women's movements and between women's organizations and other organizations. An often cited example is the tension between the birth control movement of the early 20th century in the United States and anti-racism struggles. Key founders and members of the feminist birth control movement were suspected of being ambiguous in their relation to the racist eugenicists

5 Reference is often made to three waves of the international women's movement: the first wave in the late 19th to early 20th century, the second covering the mid-20th century, and the third the late 20th century and onwards (Antrobus and Sen 2005).

6 Antrobus and Sen (2005) has a longer discussion of this issue.

7 In this paper we refer to this third site of women's oppression—as members of subordinate classes, castes, races, nations and so on—by the term "social/economic justice". Gender justice itself has both social and economic elements, but we use gender justice in this paper to refer to those aspects that are the result of gender power relations alone. An example of the three sites is the instance of a *dalit* woman who is a landless agricultural labourer in India. She may be oppressed by (a) not being allowed to draw water from the village well (caste), (b) being paid less than the minimum wage (class), and (c) being beaten at night by a drunken husband (gender). For the purposes of this paper, we refer to the first two as social/economic, and the third as gender.

of the time. Another illustration is the attitude of male leaders of nationalist movements who, while being eager to draw on the presence of women in their struggles, have been also enthusiastic votaries of sending women back to the home once the movement's goals have been achieved. This has also been true of many situations where women have been called out of the home to fulfil their patriotic duties in times of war or armed conflict, only to be sent back to the arena of domesticity once the conflict ends.

Women's attempts to secure gender justice and parity with men within social movements have all too often been resisted on the grounds of the importance of not creating divisions within the movement. They have in many situations been met with the promise that issues of gender justice will be addressed as soon as the other (and more important?) issues of economic or social justice have been dealt with. At the same time, women's movements that have not addressed other social or economic justice issues have often been limited in their efficacy. *The main question is how to address the subordination and oppression of women on account of gender relations on the one side, and as members of oppressed classes, nationalities, races and so on, on the other.*

Women's organizations and other social movements have, in practice, given a variety of responses to this central question. Women's organizations have sometimes co-operated with dominant classes or races, as in the case of some of the birth control pioneers and the eugenicists; the resulting alienation from the struggles of oppressed classes or groups has created a wide divide between struggles to change gender relations and other struggles. At other times, and especially (but not exclusively) during critical nationalist, anti-racist or anti-caste struggles, women have acquiesced in putting gender justice on the back burner. Within the most progressive sections of the women's movement, there is a tacit understanding that the ideal line to take runs between these two extremes: that is, women should ally with movements for social justice, but struggle within them to change gender practices and understanding.⁸

This is often easier said than done. Anti-feminist beliefs and practices are rife within many social movements. Transforming these to where the movement becomes genuinely supportive of gender justice can be a long-drawn-out and exhausting struggle.⁹ In addition, social movements are built through processes of internal consolidation as well as external alliance building. While a movement's own gender practices may not be too problematic, its allies may be much worse on gender justice. For instance, the movement to cancel the "odious" debts of Southern countries often works in alliance with the Catholic Church whose current hierarchy is vehemently opposed to gender justice. While debt cancellation may improve the national economic autonomy of some Southern countries, making it possible for their governments to better address some of the livelihood and basic needs of both women and men, putting gender justice on the back burner may also have serious negative consequences for women.

8 The engagement of women's organizations with the structures and practices of the World Social Forum and the attempt to transform them provides one contemporary illustration.

9 A similar problem exists with regard to movements for justice on grounds of race, caste or nationality.

Thus, the tension between social/economic justice and gender justice may be more deep-rooted in practice than women's organizations have recognized to date. The hard fact of the matter is that there is no simple congruence between the three sites of women's oppression. Being on the side of the oppressed along one dimension does not guarantee an equally progressive approach to other dimensions of oppression. Being in favour of social/economic justice does not guarantee that one is supportive of gender justice or that one even understands what it entails. Conversely, being in favour of gender justice certainly does not assure support for social/economic justice.

At the political level, the varying pace and direction of different dimensions of the current global environment, and changes since the 1960s, certainly mean there is no automatic linkage between gender and other changes. Alliances have become more complex. The progressive (in gender terms) sections of most social movements are not the strongest. Too many social movements find it convenient to "use" women for their ends without addressing gender relations. For women, the biggest challenge is one of political identity: which identity should they choose as their primary one? And how is the choice linked to a feminist social project?¹⁰

10 Antrobus and Sen (2005) has a longer discussion of the feminist social project.

III.

women's multiple identities: the struggle for self-definition

Reference is often made to 'three waves' of the international women's movement: the first wave in the late 19th to early 20th century, the second covering the mid-20th century, and the third the late 20th century and on. Although these three waves are often depicted as distinct, we believe it is instructive to look at the connections between them.

The first wave had three distinct sources. One source was in the colonised countries with the emergence of social reform movements that had

as their primary focus the transformation of cultural practices affecting civil laws, marriage, and family life. While these reform attempts mobilised possibly as many or more men as women, they were an important early strand in the transformation of social discourse and practice affecting gender relations. A second source was the major debate within the social democratic and communist organisations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which then carried forward into the debates in the Soviet Union on the 'woman question'. This strand of debate was the most explicit about the connections between the institutions of private property, the control over material assets, and women–men relations within families and society. A third source was the liberal strand that combined the struggle for the vote with the struggle to legalise contraception; this strand existed mainly though by no means exclusively in Europe and North America.

It is worth recognising the presence of these different strands in the very first wave of the women's movement because they delineate in an early form potential strengths as well as tensions that characterise the international women's movement right until today. The presence of multiple strands from early on has made for a movement that is broad and capable of addressing a wide range of issues. But the potential tensions between prioritising economic issues (such as control over resources and property) or women's personal autonomy or bodily integrity existed then and continue to exist now.

(Antrobus and Sen 2005)

The UN conference in Nairobi in 1984 marked the end of the Decade for Women. It also marked a major turning point in women's understanding of their relationship to the twin issues of equality and development. Clearly represented by the basic proposition of the Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) group that "women do not need a larger share of a poisoned pie" (Sen and Grown 1987),¹¹ the view took hold that *gender equality without social/economic justice* would not address women's concerns. Integrating women into an unjust economic order or struggling for gender equality by itself began to be seen as partial. The global climate of growing economic inequality among and within nations, and Washington Consensus-based structural adjustment, created the environment for these views to grow.

11 This proposition and the analysis on which it was based caught the imagination of many feminists because it was a succinct representation of what they were already thinking and experiencing.

The pendulum swung in the other direction through the UN conferences of the 1990s, especially Vienna, Cairo and Beijing. Growing recognition of the enormous global deficit on women's human rights brought to the fore issues such as violence against women, and reproductive and sexual rights. Gender justice in reproduction and production became central to the debates of the 1990s; struggling for *social/economic justice without gender justice* seemed as limited as its converse. By the time of the Beijing conference in 1995, there was a growing consensus in the global women's movement that social/economic justice and gender justice need to go hand in hand.

Not everyone shares equally in this understanding, but it would be fair to say that it is now the dominant view within the movement. Despite this, how to convert this understanding into practical politics remains a major challenge for the women's movement. It is also the case that women's movements are light years ahead of many other political actors—states and social movements included—in this understanding. The next section illustrates these tensions through an examination of gender justice (in the form of the struggles for sexual and reproductive rights) and economic justice (as represented by a more just global economic order).

TABLE 1
WORLD CONFERENCES AND SUMMITS

Year	Conference title	Location
2005	Beijing plus 10: Review and Appraisal, 49th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women	New York, USA
2005	World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS II)	Tunis, Tunisia
2003	World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS I)	Geneva, Switzerland
2002	International Conference on Financing for Development	Monterrey, Mexico
2002	World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD)	Johannesburg, South Africa
2001	World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR)	Durban, South Africa
2000	Millennium Summit	New York, USA
2000	Beijing plus five, Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the 21st Century, 23rd Special Session of the General Assembly	New York, USA
1999	Cairo plus five: General Assembly Special Session on the Review and Appraisal of the Implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action	New York, USA
1996	Habitat II Conference: UN Conference on Human Settlements	Istanbul, Turkey
1995	Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace	Beijing, China
1995	World Summit for Social Development	Copenhagen, Denmark
1994	International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD)	Cairo, Egypt
1993	World Conference on Human Rights	Vienna, Austria
1992	UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED)	Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
1985	Third World Conference on Women	Nairobi, Kenya
1980	Second World Conference on Women	Copenhagen, Denmark
1975	First World Conference on Women	Mexico City, Mexico

IV.

globalization and anti-women fundamentalism: women's challenges in the 1990s¹²

The challenges facing feminist attempts in the 1990s to link gender justice with economic justice in particular, at the global, national and local levels, came from two directions. On the one hand, complex and poorly regulated processes of globalization appeared as the new form of a free market juggernaut creating deep and growing inequalities of wealth and income, and in which rising numbers of impoverished people, especially women, were being marginalized from access to secure livelihoods. On the other hand, one set of reactions to globalization was the strengthening of national, religion-based, ethnic or other identities in which the assertion of “traditional”¹³ gender roles and systems of authority and control was central.

These contradictions meant that women's struggles for greater personal autonomy did not mesh easily with their concerns and demands for a more just and equal economic order. The challenge for women, therefore, was how to assert the need for both economic justice and gender justice in an increasingly globalized and fundamentalist world. This core challenge conditioned the potential and actual roles of civil society organizations and social movements as much as of agencies and governments.

The conferences of the 1990s were a key forum where these challenges were addressed and where new possibilities for bridging gender justice and economic justice began to take shape. They were also the first significant occasions when “women's issues” came forward from the margins of women-only conferences to the mainstream global agenda. The Cairo consensus of 1994 represented a major paradigm shift in this regard. But agreements reached in Cairo with respect to gender and reproductive rights were built upon agreements regarding women's human rights that had already been reached the previous year at the human rights conference in Vienna. The Beijing Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women expanded on the Vienna agreements on women's human rights, the Cairo recommendations on reproductive and sexual health and reproductive rights, and the macroeconomic agenda of the World Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995.

These agreements were fraught with controversy, although no more so than many other global issues, and probably less than some, such as world trade. What was striking was the extent to which a small minority of religious conservatives and their allies could hold the negotiations to ransom. Their opposition continued through their attempts to reverse the Cairo and Beijing agreements during the “plus five” reviews. What accounted for the conservatives' ability to have so much “voice” in global negotiations despite being a relatively small minority?

In the 1970s and 1980s, political factors conditioning UN negotiations were characterized by the harsh tensions of a bipolar global order. These tensions had to be negotiated carefully by feminists because in terms of gender the socialist bloc of the time had made a number of key advances. Cuba, for instance, had been one of the earliest

¹² This section draws extensively from Correa and Sen (2001) and Sen and Madunagu (2001).

¹³ “Traditional” customs and beliefs are often not traditional at all, but are customs of recent vintage newly created for the specific purpose of controlling women.

countries to enact a law regarding domestic work, even though its attitude to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues was less than exemplary. In 1985, just before the Nairobi women's conference, a group of Latin-American feminists visited Havana to convince Fidel Castro of the relevance of gender equality and its correlation with macroeconomic issues. Subsequently, Cuba took progressive positions regarding women's rights at the United Nations.

But the climate of the unipolar 1990s was different. First World versus Second World conflicts were replaced by South versus North tensions in many arenas. While some protagonists maintained their old positions, others began to change. In the Beijing plus five negotiations, the positions of the Cuban delegation were not predominantly motivated by its historical commitment to gender equality, but governed by South–North economic tensions as exemplified particularly by the US economic blockade. While the principal text of these negotiations appeared to be women's rights, the critical subtext was the continuing South–North divide.

This subtext needs to be read with some care. There is sometimes a tendency among anti-globalization forces to cast Southern governments as the champions of a more just global order. While the clout of Northern governments in global negotiations clearly became greater in the 1990s than it was in the 1970s, this is due at least in part to growing disparities among South countries themselves. These disparities appear to have eroded the capacity and political will of the South to negotiate effectively together against the North on economic issues. Sharply increasing inequality within many countries has also created powerful supporters of globalization within Southern countries. Nor are these economic struggles simply over national sovereignty; they are also a mixed bag of battles over exclusion from globalization, or over its spoils.

In this climate, religious conservatives have systematically attempted to emerge as the champions of the South. The hard-line positions taken by Northern negotiators on every economic issue—the right to development, debt, trade, financing—provided fertile soil for a growing closeness between the Vatican and at least some Southern negotiators. By the early 1990s, the Vatican had all but silenced Catholic liberals and liberation theologians by branding them as proto-Marxists, and filled the Church's hierarchy with prelates who were extremely conservative on both gender and grassroots empowerment of the poor. Nevertheless, the hierarchy appeared to recognize the strategic importance of making common cause with Southern countries on economic inequality issues so as to win friends for its crusade against the feminist agenda.

The 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio witnessed one of the earliest major interventions by the Vatican through a speech against global poverty and inequality. From then on the Vatican began to use its growing clout to argue against global economic inequality while opposing women's rights and gender equality in every possible international forum. By the time of the Vienna Conference on Human Rights in 1993, the Vatican had begun to mobilize its forces against the recognition of women's rights as human rights. In Cairo, the Vatican allied itself with Islamic conservatives to resist the adoption of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action. This opposition continued through Copenhagen, Beijing and the succeeding conferences.

While the conservatives were certainly most vehement in their opposition to abortion and sexual orientation, this was only symptomatic of their core objection to gender equality itself. They fought tooth and nail against all notions of reproductive and sexual health and rights, were adamant in their refusal to recognize the brutality of domestic violence against women in all societies (preferring instead to sanctify the myth of “the” happy nuclear family), and vehement in their assertion of “cultural” and “religious” practices and beliefs, however harmful to women. Very early in the Cairo plus five and Beijing plus five processes, it became evident that the main strategy of forces opposing gender equality and women’s human rights was to block the adoption of a final document. Conservative forces were not interested in reviewing the implementation of agreements (the main objective of the plus-five review processes); they were bent on undoing the consensus reached in Vienna, Cairo and Beijing.

To some extent these difficulties were because the global economic environment was even more unequal in the late 1990s than in 1993, 1994 and 1995, when the agenda for gender justice and women’s human rights was legitimized. Among other issues, the non-level playing field faced by Southern countries in global trade and finance negotiations was far from conducive for giving gender justice a fair hearing.

Despite these unfavourable conditions, both the Cairo plus five and Beijing plus five reviews ended with the gains of Cairo and Beijing intact, and with further progress on some key fronts. It also became clear through the negotiations that, although South–North economic struggles provide fertile ground for the surfacing of other tensions, many of the hard-core governments opposing women’s human rights would have done so regardless of economics. In this light, the political progress observed in the 1990s conferences must be credited to the strategic capacity of global feminist networks to navigate between the Scylla of religious conservatism and the Charybdis of the Northern economic agenda.

To do this, women’s organizations and networks had to overcome their own internal disagreements and build strong coalitions across global divides. In the 1970s and 1980s, tensions were at play among feminists, particularly on the differences between Northern and Southern women’s agendas. In the 1990s, these tensions were gradually resolved through sustained efforts at building alliances, and the agenda for gender justice was articulated and legitimized at the global policy level. This global feminist consensus was anchored in the indivisibility, integral character and universality of human rights as agreed at Vienna, and the notion that an enabling political and economic environment (economic justice, in short) is a prerequisite for fulfilling women’s rights.

Women’s organizations continued to play multiple strategic and tactical roles during Cairo plus five and Beijing plus five. The extremely important role played by women’s organizations and activists within and outside government delegations during the original conferences of the 1990s had given them considerable experience and credibility. However, women had to work strategically to analyse the political direction of the negotiations during the “plus five” reviews, and to support the building of key coalitions among governments. One such crucial coalition that emerged was Some Latin American and Caribbean Countries (SLACC), a negotiating group that began to distinguish itself from more conservative positions within the Group of 77. Although SLACC itself may have been a short-term tactical phenomenon, its emergence was a signal of major importance. For the first time, a significant bloc of Southern countries was willing to stand as a bloc for more progressive positions on both global economic justice and gender justice.

It is important to note that during this entire period, the Clinton administration was in power in the United States, and provided strong support along with the European Union for gender justice in global negotiations. However, its espousal of a neoliberal economic agenda created the space for many of the tensions discussed above. The coming of the Bush Jr. government presaged a significant change in US government official stances towards gender justice and economic justice. While the previous regime had supported the former while opposing the latter (at the global level), the new regime opposed both. This has led to an entirely new and different dynamic in global negotiations.

V.

the neoconservative era: a clash of civilizations?

The rise to power in the US government of protagonists of “a new American century” has drastically altered the global geopolitical environment, the ground on which economic justice and gender justice are negotiated. Mainstream discussions have described this as the rise of a new era where long-held norms of Westphalian national sovereignty are as much at risk as recently negotiated agreements around global warming. The gender blindness of some of this analysis can lead to serious errors in political understanding, as I shall argue.

The evolving geopolitics of a unipolar world has made possible the rise of a new imperial ambition,¹⁴ using the “war against terror” as an excuse, and intent on strategically reshaping the global polity to suit its interests. The following elements appear to be central to this agenda.

Externally

- Military force will be used to counteract US economic weakness, and reshape the US relationship to traditional economic allies (“old” Europe) and the new emerging economic challenger (China).
- A small set of regional satrapies will be strengthened to create and maintain a new global order under the US imperial umbrella. Britain and Israel appear to be in this set, but the identity of other key vassals is still unclear.¹⁵
- The role of the United Nations will be further downgraded so that it does not become a barrier to imperial ambition; at best the United Nations will play a “janitorial” role of cleaning up the messes created by the imperial power or its regional satraps.
- The “war against terror” supplemented by a fearsome modern armoury of Empire—depleted uranium bunker-buster and daisycutter bombs, tactical nuclear and chemical/biological weapons¹⁶—will be used to terrorize and keep the mass of countries in line with US economic and strategic interests.
- All this will ensure free rein to US corporations to access materials and markets, and flout painstakingly negotiated environmental, labour and social agreements.

Internally

- There will be further dismantling of welfare and workers’ rights and environmental standards in the name of improving US competitiveness.
- There will be free rein for US corporations.
- The public debate will shift from livelihoods, employment, social security and rising poverty and inequality to “terror” threats, zygotes and stem cells, and sexuality.
- There will be continued support for desecularizing the political space, support for the anti-women storm-troopers, and shifting the blame for social ills to feminists and LGBT people.

¹⁴ As opposed to the “softer” imperialism of the previous era.

¹⁵ Which Asian, Latin American or African countries will be picked to play this role is not obvious.

¹⁶ In short, weapons of mass destruction and devastation.

Ideologically

- There will be suppression of internal dissent and movement towards a more closed society in the name of the “war on terror”.
- Externally and internally the ideological oppositions are posited not so much in the traditional terms of democracy versus dictatorship, or secular versus theocratic, as in the primal language of good versus evil.
- Gender equality and liberal freedoms have been replaced by the norms of the patriarchal family and heterosexuality.

The “neocon” agenda is certainly not without challenge, or without its own internal tensions. Major world powers such as “old” Europe and Russia are not falling easily into the grasp of the new imperium, nor is China. Despite all its internal fissures, the economic South (through its dominant countries such as Brazil, India and South Africa leading the G20) has been able to have some impact on global trade negotiations. And at the ideological level, American popular culture itself is considerably at variance with the preferred neocon ideology of patriarchal family and heterosexuality.¹⁷ American television, movies and print cannot easily return to the mores of the simpering 1950s; too much has changed culturally. Popular culture is full of sexuality, varieties of families, and LGBT relationships; the genie is out of the bottle! And furthermore it has been globalized to distant corners of the world.¹⁸ Motivating young US men to join the imperial legions through the promise of subservient wives and domestic domination will no longer be as easy as it may have been in an earlier era.

But the neocon agenda also has some factors in its favour. First, despite differences, there is still very little tension among different factions of the North on economic issues. Where US corporations lead, European and Japanese corporations still happily follow (or lead!). Second, in relation to the creation of regional satrapies, internal US opinion is not widely divided. Nowhere is this more evident than in relation to Israel, Palestine and the current war in Iraq. The Democratic Party has traditionally been the strongest supporter of Zionism, and this still shows in its refusal to seriously oppose the neocon agenda being implemented by the Sharon regime. In relation to Iraq as well, opposition to the Bush administration has been muted, and challengers in an election year preferred to focus on the tried and tested call to “bring the boys home” rather than take on the core of the neocon agenda. Nonetheless, there are two important places where there are clear and sharp differences between neocons and Democrats: protectionism in trade, and gender.

The gender blindness of mainstream discussions of neoconservatism results in an overweening focus on one aspect, the attempt to move beyond the Westphalian institutions of national sovereignty. The other and equally critical aspect is the attack on gender equality, women’s human rights and LGBT sexuality. This second aspect is essential to the neocons because it provides both the organizational basis and the ideological content of their agenda.

17 The religiosity of Bush and Blair may be genuine, but this is hardly true of the neocons generally.

18 The real transformations in family relationships and popular practices regarding personal life, sexuality and gender in the North and in growing parts of the South have been one of the strongest bases of support for reproductive and sexual rights in the global norm-setting arena.

VI.

global institutions and negotiations on reproductive and sexual rights

There is no “clash of civilizations” on reproductive and sexual rights and gender equality between the neocons and religious conservatives. This has become very clear during the three years of the Bush Jr. administration.¹⁹ It has also become clear that the payoff to the religious right wing within the United States for its loyal electoral support to the Republican right is given through strong and direct support and pressure from the White House itself on domestic issues and in global negotiations. These years have seen the US administration promote abstinence as a major method to handle the HIV/AIDS pandemic, sup-

port parental control over the rights of adolescents even at the cost of the health of young people, and take over the Vatican’s role as mobilizer and strategist against gender equality, and reproductive and sexual health and rights in global negotiations.²⁰ Currently, a major move is afoot to gain legitimacy for the patriarchal, nuclear family in the United Nations, and thereby to broaden the base of support within Southern governments.

What this has meant is that supporters of women’s human rights now face a formidable combination of religious conservatives (Christian and Muslim) and the US government. However, other governments have not simply caved in to the pressure in the current discussions around ICPD plus 10 and Beijing plus 10. This first became evident in the Asian regional Conference on Population and Development hosted by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) in late 2002. With initiative and strategic and tactical support from women’s organizations, Asian governments (with strong leadership from large countries) together with key European donors, Japan, Australia and New Zealand turned back a major conservative assault on the ICPD Programme of Action. This was followed by similar actions in regional meetings in Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America. However limited or partial the implementation of ICPD may have been, many governments (or at least their health ministries) appear to have at least partially internalized the paradigm shift of Cairo.

It cannot be forgotten that, for a small country, contradicting the Vatican is one thing and standing against the United States is entirely another thing. UN agencies and their capacity to withstand pressure are uneven; the conservative attempt to isolate and weaken the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) continues with renewed force. And while ICPD plus 10 activity at least has the capacity of a large organization like UNFPA behind it, Beijing plus 10 has only the limited resources of the UN Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) to backstop it. All the difficulties faced by women’s organizations during the “plus five” reviews are present in heightened form thanks to the takeover of the US administration by the neocons.

19 Nowhere is this clearer than in Iraq. Before the world’s bemused gaze, the former secular state of Iraq is being transformed into a theocratic one. In the 1970s, in neighbouring Iran a revolution led by the religious hierarchies and supported by progressive forces overthrew a US-supported government, and proceeded to sharply control women. In Iraq, to the contrary, a theocratic state that will proceed to bring in stricter adherence to sharia and subordinate women will very likely replace the government that has been overthrown by the United States.

20 Key negotiators for the Vatican in the UN conferences and reviews of the 1990s have simply moved over to official positions on US delegations.

A key question here is whether, in light of the ESCAP and regional experiences, the previous pitting of South against North along the lines of economic justice versus gender justice has changed. At one level, there is some movement in this direction. Liberal Southern governments and the North (minus the United States) made common cause in favour of gender justice in ESCAP. On the other hand, in recent and ongoing meetings of the Commission on Population and Development, the Commission on the Status of Women, and the Commission on Human Rights, the US government, the Vatican and Islamic conservative governments have worked closely together, regardless of the ongoing bloodshed in Iraq and Palestine. These moves appear to indicate a more straightforward opposition of gender liberals versus gender conservatives, independent of economic or geopolitical issues.

However, there are also fissures and tensions within the liberal camp. The attempt to create a strong bloc out of the G20 to confront the economic North in trade negotiations may weaken support for reproductive and sexual rights within some progressive Southern governments. Women's organizations will need to mobilize strongly to prevent gender justice from being sold down the river yet again. In doing this, they will have to strategize consciously and build on the opposition to the neocon agenda.

And they cannot do it alone.

A final word to other development [non-governmental organizations] NGOs and networks. Unfortunately, there are still far too many global and other levels whose commitment to gender equality is weak, and whose beliefs and political practice are fraught with patriarchy. But for too long, the tendency among even the more progressive development NGOs is to leave gender equality to be struggled over by women's organizations alone. It is high time they recognised that women's struggles for gender justice, economic justice, and participatory democracy are central and may be key to the energy, strategic thinking, and innovative wisdom this era of globalization and fundamentalism demands.

(Sen and Madunagu 2001)

VII.

conclusion

This is a paper without a satisfactory ending. It tells a story whose end is as yet unknown and unpredictable. The paper has attempted to document, based on the experiences of feminists advocates in the global arena, the complex terrain for gender and social/economic justice in a rapidly changing environment. We have argued that women's oppression has multiple sites, and the struggle for gender

justice is often cross-cut in complex ways by the struggles for social or economic justice. We have illustrated this by referring to the struggles for sexual and reproductive rights in a neoliberal economic environment, and how the terrain has altered in the neoconservative-dominated era after 2000.

The women's movement has had many allies through these different struggles. But alliances, whether with social movements or governments, have been partial and shifting. Nonetheless, progress on women's human rights has been made and consolidated. For this the space provided by the United Nations, for all its limitations and weaknesses, has been invaluable, and must be protected and strengthened.

But even as feminists have worked to insert concerns for gender justice in a globalized and fundamentalist world, their opponents have made common cause across traditional religious and other divides. In some ways, this points to the rising power of women's movements and feminist agency. Without a doubt feminist voice has altered the global discourse in the last two decades. As we move forward to protect the gains made and to promote progressive change, the lessons of the 1990s and of this decade need to be interrogated, assimilated and consolidated. This paper has been a contribution in that direction.

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