

Using the Turbulence to the Advantage of the Less Privileged

Devaki Jain, SOUTH BULLETIN, Reflections and Foresights
16 March 2009, Issue 34, Geneva, Switzerland

Enough evidence now exists to show that women are particularly predominant in both tradables and at the margins of the economies, with intermittent entries into the labour market which not only make them the most vulnerable in such situations, but literally assaults their bodies.

This evidence is being followed up by many of us with suggestions that those who are designing the new financial regimes need to reserve and enhance funding for women and further invest in the social sector and not let it be cut down due to fiscal constraints.

First, there is a gridlock taking place at the highest level of policy making. Inward looking economic policy is seen as economic nationalism. Reducing gross consumerism is lowering the engine of demand; concentrating on broad based state-led employment policies such as infrastructure is seen as neglecting the big boys. Political navigation through this impasse for our leaders, especially in democracies such as India and the USA, is a challenge and I fear the big boys will win and will float like corks out of this turbulence.

Second, I believe that we, as the advocates for women, have strapped or trapped ourselves in ideas such as mainstreaming gender, gender equality, and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) achievement. Sometimes it appears that we are fiddling while Roman ruins. Since there is such vicious separation of sections of the poor, our attention should be to the causes of that and how we can correct them. By asking for more funds for women, we must give advice on global ideas and policies drawn from our wisdom and ground reality experiences.

Hence I would argue that it is vital that the women's/feminist movement, especially of the South, should bring its voice to bear as a third voice and reveal the fault lines that lie beneath the current responses to the shock. One of fault lines is the location of the engines of growth, currently in export or trade led growth and a neglect of agriculture. We need to argue for the relocation of the engines of growth in environmentally sound agriculture for food security as well as in the large economic spaces managed by the poor and in small enterprises. These sectors are predominantly occupied by women and would thus have a direct bearing on women and at the same time offer a corrective measure to macroeconomic initiatives.

We also need to reveal the strong differences between the North and the South in situations and responses. Many countries such as India, Brazil and China, while feeling the impact do not despair the same way as we see in the USA and the European Union (EU) countries. Many countries in the South have strong domestic markets or regional arrangements; India for example has only 12 per cent of its GDP from trade. Smaller countries, however, would feel a larger

impact and it is here that regional and South-South arrangements can heal.

In the South often there are two parallel economies. In the 60's this was called the Brazilian model, the underdogs that bought from and sold to each other in a self sustaining economy and the elites that had a similar circular economy.

Thus it would be appropriate to suggest that we move attention from salvaging the stock markets, bailing out industries like the motor industry which is environmentally hazardous to these spaces, fuelling them with credit organised marketing, even if circular, and build up skills and rights to assets. Also, support the traditional market places with land and infrastructure, as we do for the technological parks. The Liberian economy survived for a long time on these markets. During a visit to the National Bank of Liberia in 1999, the chairman said the bank had only one employee and that was himself; the economy and the money were on the streets.

Also, there is no unemployment benefit in the South, so the fall with the loss of a job is to near death. Since there is now recognition that dismantling labour laws and unions, in the name of competition, riding on cheaper labour has led to this crisis for the workers in the South, we need to propose a revival of labour legislation to revive and lead the union movement. Remember that all women in the lower end of the economy are workers, of one kind or another, workers as tillers in agriculture, workers in construction, in handicrafts and so on, causing this move to directly benefit women.

A third suggestion is to introduce the language of security into our proposals, security of my deposit, my home, my livelihood, my land or my fuel source. This can bring in the language of human rights and the right to individual economic security.

To quote from United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Judge Navaneetham Pillai:

- *International responses to the economic downturn should be undertaken in a way that serves the interest of human rights, to this effect regenerating the flow of productive rather than speculative credit is of paramount importance...*
- *Private actors including financial institutions have a responsibility to ensure that their operations do not violate human rights.*
- *Recession might give rise to xenophobic passions discriminatory practices and even attacks against migrant workers and families.*

A fourth suggestion to strengthen the interdependence of supply and demand in lower and lower spaces, areas, regions, similar product consortiums of the South, regional buying and selling, any ways of decongesting the wires of economic power, which through overload sent shocks across the world.

Each of our countries and our regions have inner strength overwhelmed by the over-the-top attachment to the global financial engine, and the play on stocks. It is we women who can recall those strengths and foster the home economy without losing out on growth and also find regional associations to keep the doors open amongst similar countries and similar products.

Therefore, my last submission is that we should demand or set up a women's commission on revitalising the global and local economies. This means that the women's commission will draft our take on the crisis and draw attention to where we are located and what we can do. To follow this consultation and harvest and move forward we need our own think tank. Some of us have started one in partnership with UNDP called the Casablanca Group. (see web site www.casablanca-dream.net)

This can be expanded and hold regional consultations. There is an idea for the women focused agencies here at the UN or for the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) group to mobilise women's intelligence to break through the Gordian knot.

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The author made this submission based on her participation in the fifty-third session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) that was held in the United Nations headquarters in New York from 2 to 13 March 2009.