



## Is Globalization Good for Women?

Alison M. Jaggar

*Comparative Literature*, Vol. 53, No. 4. (Autumn, 2001), pp. 298-314.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0010-4124%28200123%2953%3A4%3C298%3AIGGFW%3E2.0.CO%3B2-O>

*Comparative Literature* is currently published by University of Oregon.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/uoregon.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

ALISON M. JAGGAR

# Is Globalization Good for Women?

**I**S GLOBALIZATION GOOD for women? The answer to this question obviously depends on what one means by “globalization” and by “good” and which “women” one has in mind. After explaining briefly what I mean by “globalization” and “good” and indicating which women I have in mind, I intend to argue that globalization, as we currently know it, is not good for most women. However, I’ll suggest that the badness of the present situation is not due to globalization as such, but rather to its specific neoliberal mode of organization. I’ll identify some of the questions that globalization urgently raises for political philosophy and end by sketching one vision of an alternative form of globalization that could be very good for women—as well as for children and men.

## **I. Terms of discussion**

### **What is globalization?**

The term “globalization” is currently used to refer to the rapidly accelerating integration of many local and national economies into a single global market, regulated by the World Trade Organization, and to the political and cultural corollaries of this process. These developments, taken together, raise profound new questions for the humanities in general and for political philosophy in particular.

Globalization in the broadest sense is nothing new. Intercontinental travel and trade, and the mixing of cultures and populations are as old as humankind; after all, the foremothers and forefathers of everyone of us walked originally out of Africa. The contemporary form of globalization did not appear *de novo* in 1989, with the collapse of so-called communism. It did not even originate in 1945 at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, where the major institutions to administer the global economy were established, including the International Monetary Fund (the IMF), the World Bank, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which was the precursor to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Rather than being an unprecedented phenomenon, contemporary globalization may be seen as the culmination of long-term developments that have shaped the modern world. Specifically, for the last half millennium intercontinental trade and population migrations have mostly been connected with the pursuit of new resources and markets for the emerging capitalist economies of Western Europe and North America.

European colonization and expansion may be taken as beginning with the onslaught on the Americas in 1492 and as continuing with the colonization of India, Africa, Australasia, Oceania and much of Asia. History tells of the rise and fall of many great empires, but the greatest empires of all came to exist only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1815, Britain and France together controlled over one third of the Earth's surface, and by 1878 they controlled over two thirds. By 1914, Britain, France and the United States together controlled 85% of the Earth's surface. It was primarily in consequence of European and U.S. expansion that the world became—and remains—a single interconnected system. European and U.S. colonialism profoundly shaped the world we inhabit today. It produced the neoliberal philosophy that provides the rules for the war game currently known as “globalization,” and it landscaped the highly uneven terrain on which that game is played.

Neoliberalism is the name given to the version of liberal political theory that currently dominates the discourse of globalization. Neoliberalism assumes that material acquisition is the normal aim of human life, and it holds that the primary function of government is to make the world safe and predictable for the participants in a market economy. Although its name suggests that it is a new variety of liberalism, neoliberalism in fact marks a retreat from the liberal social democracy of the years following World War II back toward the non-redistributive *laissez-faire* liberalism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is characterized by the following features.

1. Under the mantra of “free trade,” neoliberalism promotes the unobstructed flow of traded goods through eliminating import and export quotas and tariffs. It also abandons restrictions on the flow of capital. However, not only does it not require the free flow of labor, the third crucial factor of production, but it also actively seeks to control that flow. Although immigration from poorer to wealthier countries is currently at record levels, much of it is achieved in the teeth of draconian border controls that often cost would-be immigrants their lives. This lopsided interpretation of “free trade” enables business owners to move production to areas of the world where costs are lowest, perhaps due to lower wages, fewer occupational safety and health requirements, or fewer environmental restrictions, while simultaneously regulating the movement of workers wishing to pursue higher wages.

2. Global neoliberalism attempts to bring all economically exploitable resources into private ownership. Public services are turned into profit-making enterprises, and natural resources such as minerals, forests, water and land are opened up for commercial exploitation in the global market.

3. Neoliberalism is hostile to the regulation of such aspects of social life as wages, working conditions and environmental protections. Indeed, legislation intended to protect workers, consumers, or the environment may be challenged as an unfair barrier to trade. In the neoliberal global market, weak labor, consumer, or environmental standards may well become part of a country's “competitive advantage.”

4. Finally, neoliberalism presses governments to abandon the social welfare responsibilities they have assumed over the twentieth century, such as providing allowances for housing, health care, education, disability and unemployment. Social

programs, such as the Canadian health-care system, may even be challenged as de facto government subsidies to industry. "Defense and security" are among the very few government expenditures excluded from being judged "subsidies."

Many people have come to equate "globalization" with its current neoliberal incarnation, and they regard the costs of this system as inevitable consequences of modernization and progress. This perception discourages attempts to question the justice of neoliberal globalization or to envision alternatives to it. However, I believe that the most urgent task currently confronting political philosophy is to assess the justice of neoliberal globalization and to stimulate debate on possible alternatives.

### **What is "good"?**

The term "globalization" evokes one venerable answer to an ancient philosophical question, the nature of the good life. This answer is the culminating vision of European Enlightenment philosophy—which in turn reflects an ancient Christian dream. It is the dream of the entire human species governed by universal law within a world order characterized by unity of purpose, shared concern, mutual responsibility, and common security. Its advocates promise that global neoliberalism will fulfill this dream by promoting the following goods:

1. *Peace.* Economic interdependence will make war unthinkable and so usher in an unprecedented era of world peace.

2. *Prosperity and social justice.* Expanded trade and economic competition will ensure the optimal allocation of scarce resources and increased economic efficiency, to the mutual benefit of all. Each region will produce what it is best suited for, according to its so-called "comparative advantage," and the rewards of individuals and countries will be proportionate to their contribution to the global market.

3. *Democracy.* Because trade liberalization requires expanded communications and freedom of movement, it will be accompanied by increased democracy.

4. *Environmental protection.* Increased world competition will encourage the elimination of waste and the efficient use of resources. Environmental resources will be conserved, and coordinated action will be undertaken to deal with transnational environmental problems such as acid rain and global warming.

5. *The end of racism and ethnocentrism.* Increased global interdependence and the consequent mixing of populations and cultures will undermine racism and ethnocentrism, thus realizing the ideal of a universal humanity.

6. *Women.* Neoliberal globalization will undermine local forms of patriarchal power, enabling women to become full participants in politics and the economy.

### **Who are women?**

The deceptively simple question "Who are women?" has provoked many heated debates in recent feminist theory. In an effort to counter earlier generalizations about "women" that were false and exclusionary, contemporary feminists have been particularly concerned to argue that women have no essence. By this, they mean that no necessary and sufficient conditions exist for being a woman; no significant characteristics can be found that are attributable to all and only women.

Feminists now insist that it is necessary to be constantly mindful of divisions among women, such as those of nationality, age, class, ethnicity, marital status, sexuality, religion—divisions that typically demarcate a status that is privileged from one that is stigmatized. Since no essential or typical or generic woman exists, broad generalizations about “women” must always be scrutinized because of the danger that they will exclude or marginalize some women. My interest is especially in women who are on the less privileged side of the various divides, in both the global North and the global South.<sup>1</sup>

I intend to argue that neoliberal globalization, despite its glowing promises, is helping to create a reality that is precisely the opposite of its promoters’ rhetoric. Rather than experiencing an era of universal peace, the neoliberal world is ravaged by innumerable wars, many undeclared, and by high levels of militarism; many societies also face civil unrest and forms of institutional violence that are serious enough to be described as ethnic or class war. Not accidentally, the same world is characterized by a rapidly widening gulf between rich and poor, both within and among nations. Thus, rather than bringing universal prosperity, neoliberal globalization is creating unprecedented wealth for a relative few and poverty and destitution for millions, even billions, of people. Increasing numbers of countries have adopted the outer forms of democracy as a cover for political authoritarianism and corruption, and the environment is being destroyed at an ever-accelerating rate. Finally, the neoliberal world is marked by the violent eruption of ethnic and racial hatreds and even genocide.

Peace, prosperity, democracy, environmental conservation and the elimination of racism and ethnocentrism are all overtly gender-neutral ideals, but each of them is also a distinctively women’s issue. Because all known societies are structured by gendered value systems, which assign unequal status and privilege to men and women, as well as to whatever is culturally considered masculine and feminine, most—if not all—social issues carry meanings and consequences for women that are somewhat different from those they carry for men. To the extent that global neoliberalism undermines women’s special interests in peace, prosperity, democracy, environmental health, and the abolition of racism and ethnocentrism, it is a system hostile or antagonistic to women.

Although neoliberal globalization is making the lives of many women better, it is making the lives of even more women worse. The lives of many of the world’s poorest and most marginalized women in both the global South and the global North are deteriorating relative to the lives of better-off women and of men, and

---

<sup>1</sup> The collapse of the Soviet bloc has made the older terminology of First, Second and Third Worlds inapplicable, and it is now often replaced by talk about the global North and the global South. Roughly, the “global North” refers to the world’s highly industrialized and wealthy states, most of which are located in the northern hemisphere—though Australia and New Zealand are exceptions. The “global South” refers to poorer states that depend mostly on agriculture and extractive industries and whose manufacturing industry, if it exists, is likely to be foreign owned. Many (though far from all) of these states are located in the southern hemisphere, and their populations tend to be dark-skinned, whereas the indigenous populations of Northern states are mostly (though not exclusively) light-skinned. Northern states often have a history as colonizing nations, and Southern states often have been colonized. The binary opposition between global North and South is a useful shorthand, but, like all binaries (and like the older terminology of three Worlds), it is problematic if taken too seriously. Many states, such as Japan and Russia, do not fit neatly into it.

even deteriorating absolutely. In the next section I sketch some distinct ways in which the lives of many women have been affected by war, economic inequality and political authoritarianism; for reasons of space, I omit discussion of the distinct ways in which women are harmed by environmental destruction and by racism, ethnocentrism and xenophobia.

## **II. Neoliberal globalization in practice**

### **War**

Although the United States is sometimes said to have enjoyed more than half a century of peace, this statement ignores the numerous limited, undeclared, and proxy wars in which it has been involved during the last half of the twentieth century. These military activities did not diminish with the end of the cold war; recent highly visible examples include the Persian Gulf War at the beginning of the 1990s and the bombing of Kosovo in former Yugoslavia at the end of the same decade. In 1992, there were thirty-four wars worldwide, a new peak in the annual number of wars for the twentieth century. If "war" is defined to include civil war, then wars have occurred on every continent in the 1990s. Many of these have been associated with the advent of global neoliberalism, as indigenous people have resisted the exploitation of their land and resources by multinational corporations.

Despite the end of the cold war, military spending remains at high levels around the world, with the exception of a more than fifty per cent decline in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics. The United States continues to be the largest military spender in the world, accounting for almost half of global defense outlays, and continues to produce nuclear weapons. Since the Persian Gulf War in 1991, it has also become the world's top arms exporter; U.S. arms exports well exceed the total arms exports of all other arms exporting countries combined. In most countries, the hoped-for "peace dividend" from the end of the cold war has not materialized. In the United States, a far larger proportion of income tax revenues are spent on the military than are spent on education, housing, job training and the environment combined. Worldwide, over half the nations of the world still provide higher budgets for their militaries than for their countries' health needs, and some devote more funds to military programs than to education and health combined.

With the advent of neoliberal globalization, military production has been used less for national defense and increasingly for the domestic repression of popular movements, many of which protest the activities of multinational corporations. Military training is increasingly devoted toward the subjugation of civilian populations, including the suppression of trade union protests and strikes. Human rights, as well as environmental and indigenous groups, are often labelled subversive and suppressed by the military or by paramilitaries and death squads, with the reformers who survive being forced into exile.

Women, especially poor women, bear a disproportionately heavy share of the burdens imposed by war and militarism. This is partly because an ever-increasing proportion of the casualties of war is comprised of civilians rather than soldiers.

In World War I, twenty percent of the casualties were civilians; in World War II, that percentage more than doubled (to fifty percent). Seventy percent of the casualties in the Vietnam War were civilians, and about ninety percent of the casualties of today's wars are estimated to be civilians. The combatants in war are predominantly male, but the vulnerable civilians are predominantly, though not exclusively, women (and children). They are also Southern women, since most casualties of recent wars have occurred in the global South. In fact, women (and children) constitute eighty percent of the millions of refugees dislocated by war.

Military production is highly profitable for wealthy Northern investors, who certainly include some women. It also creates jobs both for the Northern middle class, who work in research and development, and for relatively uneducated people, who enlist in the military or work producing weapons. However women, especially poor women, receive far fewer benefits than men from the job opportunities created in the North by military production, both because they are largely excluded from the fields of scientific and technical research and because many of the U.S. military's clerical and administrative tasks, mostly done by women, have been shifted to private contractors. More significantly, poor women in both the global North and South suffer disproportionately when tax revenues are allocated to the military rather than to social services, because women's primary childcare responsibilities often force them to rely more heavily than men on social services such as housing, health care, and education. High military spending diverts resources from more productive uses and leads to low total output and personal consumption in most regions of the world. Poor women in the global South have paid an especially high price for militarism, which has starved health, sanitation, education, and sustainable food cultivation and created a continuing dependence of the South on the North for maintaining and operating sophisticated weaponry. Militarism has been a major cause of Southern debt, making Southern countries vulnerable to onerous loan conditions that have imposed especially heavy burdens on women.

Militarism is also the world's major polluter of the environment, from which women suffer disproportionately, and it promotes cultural values that instrumentalize or degrade women. For instance, militarist governments often endorse masculinist ideologies that define men as warriors, promoting a culture of violence that spills over into violence against women on the streets and in the home. Meanwhile, women are defined as mothers of the nation; high birthrates are promoted and women's paid employment is discouraged. Women's sexuality is regarded as a national resource, their sexual autonomy is controlled, and they are expected to provide sexual services for warrior heroes. Simultaneously, women's sexuality is seen as a weak link in the national armor, and the mass media may promote an image of women as weak, corrupting and corruptible. In the 1990s, these ideas have combined to rationalize the use of rape as a systematic weapon of war, most notably in former Yugoslavia.

### **Prosperity**

Viewed in one light, the world has indeed experienced unprecedented prosperity over the last fifty years, and especially over the last decade. The U.S. stock

market has reached record highs, despite financial collapses in Asia and Latin America; GNPs are high in many nations; tourism is one of the world's largest industries; young people drive around in sport utility vehicles talking on mobile phones. But although many people are better off than ever before, prosperity is limited to certain regions of the world and to certain groups within those regions. At the same time, poverty is increasing relatively and often absolutely as a result of massive and growing economic inequalities. These are occurring within most countries, especially among economic classes and regions, and they are also increasing among countries, as the East/West political system has given way to the North/South economic system, in which the North is vastly more wealthy than the South. Because of these inter- and intra-national inequalities, abundance for the (relatively) few is matched by poverty and even destitution for the many in the global economy. Neoliberal globalization has created many enormous winners but many more huge losers, and women are disproportionately represented among the losers.

The United Nations Annual Development Report for 1999 asserted that the gap between the world's rich and poor had reached "grotesque" proportions. In 1960, the countries with the wealthiest fifth of the world's population had per capita incomes 30 times that of the poorest fifth; by 1990, the ratio had doubled to 60 to one; by 1997, it stood at 74 to one. By 1997, the richest 20 percent had captured 86 percent of the world's income, while the poorest 20 percent had a mere one percent. For many—perhaps most—poor people in the world, neoliberal globalization has resulted in their material conditions of life deteriorating not only relative to the more affluent but also absolutely. In more than eighty countries, per capita incomes are lower than they were a decade ago; in sub-Saharan Africa and some other least developed countries, per capita incomes are lower than they were in 1970. In developing countries, nearly 1.3 billion people do not have access to clean water, 1 in 7 primary age schoolchildren are not in school, 840 million people are malnourished, and an estimated 1.3 billion people live on incomes of less than \$1 per day. Meanwhile, the assets of the 200 richest people in 1998 were more than the total income of 41 percent of all the world's people.

Economic inequality is increasing not only between the global North and South but also within them. In June 2000, for instance, the U.S. Federal Reserve reported that the net worth of the richest one percent of U.S. households rose from 30 percent of the nation's wealth in 1992 to 34 percent in 1998. Meanwhile, the share of the national wealth held by the bottom 90 percent of U.S. households fell from 33 percent in 1992 to 31 percent in 1998. The median inflation-adjusted earnings of the average U.S. worker were 3.1 percent lower in 1997 than in 1989, and the poorest 20 percent of U.S. citizens were making less in real terms at the end of the nineties than in 1977. One in 100 Americans was homeless at least temporarily in the year 2000.

Women in the global North, especially women of color, are disproportionately impoverished by the economic inequality resulting from "free" trade, which has resulted in many hitherto well-paid jobs being moved from the global North to low-wage areas in the global South. These jobs have been replaced in the North



by so-called “McJobs”—“casual,” contingency or part-time positions (often in the service sector), which are typically low-paid and lack health or retirement benefits. Although the reduction in the real hourly wage since the 1970s affects all low-paid workers in the United States, it especially affects women and, among women, especially women of color, because they disproportionately hold low-paid jobs. The U.S. Census Bureau recently reported that the earnings gap between men and women widened for the second consecutive year in 1999.

In the erstwhile Second World, elites are benefiting from the privatization and exploitation of hitherto publicly owned resources, but the dismantling of welfare states and consequent cuts in health services, education, and childcare has undermined the quality of life for most people. In 7 out of 18 East European countries, life expectancy was lower in 1995 than in 1989 (falling as much as five years since 1987), and enrollment in kindergarten had declined dramatically. Women have suffered disproportionately from the massive unemployment following the collapse of the socialist economies and the decline of social services. They have been pushed out of high-income and comparatively high-status positions in areas such as public management or universities, and many highly educated women have been forced to turn to prostitution, street-vending, or begging.

Comparable inequalities exist within what used to be called the Third World, even though some countries, especially those on the Pacific Rim, have prospered so much from the transfer of many industries that they are now thought of as societies in transition, newly industrializing countries or NICs. Gross domestic products have grown in other parts of the global South as a result of the mechanization of agriculture and the development of cash crop export economies, and some women are definitely among the beneficiaries of these changes, especially women in the families of Southern elites. Overall, however, women are disproportionately represented among the Southern losers from global neoliberalism. Pre-existing patriarchal social structures tend to limit women’s direct access to any new wealth entering Southern economies as a result of economic globalization; women may access wealth through marriage, but often they are not in positions from which they can profit directly from the economic changes. For instance, women’s responsibility for children makes it harder for women than for men to move to where the new paid jobs are located.

Greater efforts recently have been made to include Southern women in development, which is generally assumed to be a benevolent process of economic growth. Helping women participate in this process has been generally interpreted as helping them to gain a money income, and such efforts have increased Southern women’s participation in the cash economy. However, the results of these efforts have not been unambiguously “good” for women; at best, they have been mixed.

To gain a money income, women have to produce something to sell in the market, and what most women have to sell is their labor. Women have become the new industrial proletariat in export-based industries, especially in much of Asia, where governments tempt multinational corporate investment with gendered stereotypes of Asian women workers as tractable, hard-working, dexterous—and sexy. Within these industries, wages and working conditions are often very poor, and harassment by bosses and managers is endemic. Again, the result is contra-

dictory: the power of the women's fathers is reduced, but the women are super-exploited by foreign corporations with the collusion of their own governments. As employees, they often experience a type of labor control that is almost feudal in its requirements of subservience and dependence. Thus, the global assembly line could be seen as allowing some Southern women to exchange one master for another.

Many women in the global South work not in the formal economy but in the informal economy, a kind of shadow economy not reflected in official records. Its workers typically do not pay taxes, and their jobs are unregulated by health and safety standards. It is characterized by low wages or incomes, uncertain employment, and poor working conditions. Women predominate in the informal economy, which covers a wide range of income generating activities, including declining handicrafts, small-scale retail trade, petty food production, street vending, domestic work, and prostitution. It also includes home-based putting-out systems and contract work. Women are often forced into the informal economy because they are driven off the land by the expansion of export agriculture, especially in South America and South East Asia. Those who remain in the countryside rather than migrating to the shanty towns that encircle most major Third-World cities are often forced into casual, contingent labor. Landless women from the poorest households are more likely to predominate as seasonal, casual, and temporary laborers at lower wages than their male counterparts.

Neoliberal globalization has increased the sexualization of all women, partly via a multibillion dollar pornography industry, and many women have been drawn into some aspect of sex work. In some parts of Asia and the Caribbean, sex tourism is a mainstay of local economies. Sex work includes, but is not limited to, servicing the workers in large plantations, servicing representatives of transnational corporations, servicing troops around military bases, and servicing UN troops and workers. Prostitution is certainly not a new phenomenon, but global neoliberalism has encouraged it in several ways. Most obviously, it has disrupted traditional communities and displaced and impoverished many women, who see few other options for a livelihood. In addition, nineteenth-century colonialism created images of the "exotic" "native" women, whose sexuality was defined as highly attractive and fascinating, yet related to the supposed natural primitiveness of the "other" cultural group. Today, media in Europe and North America still portray brown or black women as tantalizing erotic subjects, while in non-European countries white women are exoticized and eroticized. In consequence, a vastly expanded global sex trade results in millions of women being employed as sex workers outside their countries of origin.

The most obviously gendered feature of neoliberalism is its worldwide cutbacks in social programs. These cutbacks have affected women's economic status even more adversely than men's, because women's responsibility for caring for children and other family members makes them more reliant on such programs. In the global South, cuts in public health services have contributed to a rise in maternal mortality; in the global North, making hospitals more "efficient" has involved discharging patients earlier—to be cared for at home by female family members. Reductions in social services have forced women to create survival

strategies for their families by absorbing these reductions with their own unpaid labor. The effect of these strategies has been felt especially in the global South, where more work for women has resulted in higher school dropout rates for girls. In addition, the introduction of school fees in many Southern countries has made education unavailable to poorer children and especially to girls. Less education and longer hours of domestic work obviously contribute to women's impoverishment by making it harder for them to attain well-paying jobs.

The feminization of poverty was a term coined originally to describe the situation of women in the United States, but the phenomenon has now become global, and its scale is increasing. The United Nations reports that women now comprise 70 percent of the world's 1.3 billion poor. Women's poverty in both North and South is linked with disturbing statistics on children's nutritional status, mortality and health. In many Southern countries, including Zimbabwe, Zambia, Nicaragua, Chile and Jamaica, the number of children who die before the age of one or five has risen sharply after decades of falling numbers.

### **Democracy**

The spread of global neoliberalism has been accompanied by the establishment of formal democracy in many countries, especially in the erstwhile Third World, where a number of dictatorships have been ended, and in Eastern Europe, where so-called communist forms of government have been overthrown. Democracy has been encouraged in these regions by formal guarantees for freedom of thought, speech, press and association, and by the establishment of multiple political parties. However, the institutionalization of formal democracy has not resulted in increased political influence for women, especially for poor women and especially at the levels of designing global structures and policies. In the world of neoliberal globalization, democracy has a white man's face.

Although women's representation among heads of government and in national legislatures has always been lower than men's, the spread of neoliberal globalization in the early 1990s was accompanied in many places by a dramatic fall in women's governmental participation. Most dramatic was the decrease in women's representation in the national legislatures of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, which was as high as 29 percent in the 1980s, but dropped to 7 percent in 1994. Women's participation in national legislatures is now rising again in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, but at the same time the importance of national legislatures is decreasing. Neoliberal globalization has undermined the sovereignty of many nations, especially the poorer ones, and is increasingly concentrating political power in the hands of a few wealthy nations, powerful investors, and global financial institutions. At this level, the influence of women, especially poor women, is minimal.

The neoliberal abandonment of fixed currency exchange rates and of controls on currency transfer *de facto* undermines the sovereignty of all countries because it enables powerful investors to cause a financial crisis by withdrawing billions of dollars into and out of national financial markets literally in a nanosecond. Thus, such investors can veto the democratically determined policies of supposedly sovereign nations simply by withdrawing their money.

More formal limits on the sovereignty of many nations occurred in the 1980s, when international lending institutions imposed neoliberal policies of structural adjustment on debtor nations in the then Third World as conditions of borrowing money or of rescheduling existing debts. Although the governments of the debtor nations formally agreed to these conditions, their agreement was often coerced by their history. Their countries had often been impoverished by centuries of colonization, which had drained them of massive resources and wealth, destroyed their economic self-sufficiency, and left them dependent on the metropolis for manufactured goods and for training indigenous professional and skilled workers. In order to end their economically disadvantageous position as suppliers of raw materials, such countries were virtually forced to borrow. In addition, many debts were assumed by autocratic rulers, who were supported by wealthy First-World countries as a bulwark against popular insurgencies regarded as "communist," and they often used borrowed funds to subvert local democracy through the military repression of their own populations.

The birth of the World Trade Organization in 1995 created a supranational organization whose rules supersede the national laws of its signatory nations on issues of trade. The WTO, which establishes the rules for global trade and functions as a sort of international court for adjudicating trade disputes, construes trade matters so broadly that they include not only tariff barriers but also many matters of ethics and public policy. For instance, the rules of the WTO challenge the European Union's bans on bovine growth hormone, on furs from countries that still use leghold traps, and on cosmetics tested on animals. Because the WTO regards ethical and health standards only as barriers to trade, it prevents countries from making their own decisions on ethics and food safety. The WTO is formally democratic in that each of its 142 plus member countries has one representative or delegate, who participates in negotiations over trade rules, but democracy within the WTO is limited in practice in many ways. Wealthy countries have far more influence than poor ones, and numerous meetings are restricted to the G-7 group, the most powerful member countries, excluding the less powerful even when decisions directly affect them.

Despite the fact that sovereign states are the only official members of the institutions administering the global economy, critics also charge that the current system of neoliberal globalization is dominated unofficially by transnational or multinational corporations, who "rent" governments to bring cases before the WTO. Because the budgets of many multinational corporations are far larger than those of many nominally sovereign states, it is easy for these corporations to influence the definitions and interpretations of the rules of the global economy by lobbying, bribing, and threatening governments or government officials. In addition, the WTO's dispute resolution system allows challenges to the standards and regulations adopted by federal, state, provincial and local governments to protect human, animal or plant life. If the standard in one country is higher than that in another, the higher standard can be challenged as a "technical" or "non-tariff" barrier to trade. Cases are heard before a tribunal of "trade experts," generally lawyers, who are required to make their ruling with a presumption in favor of free trade, and the burden is on governments to justify any restrictions

on this. The dispute resolution system permits no amicus briefs, no observers, no public record of the deliberations, and no appeals. Thus, whether or not health, safety and environmental standards are “science-based” and so acceptable is determined by panels of experts, unelected and unaccountable, who have the power to overturn legislation and regulation adopted by elected bodies.

The present organization of the global economy undermines democracy by rendering the sovereignty of poor nations increasingly meaningless and further excluding the poorest and most vulnerable people across the world. Many women, who are disproportionately represented among the poorest and most vulnerable of all, are effectively disenfranchised. The virtual absence even of privileged women from the decision-making processes of such bodies as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization reflects the minimal influence exercised by women at the highest levels of global politics.

Poor women’s lack of influence at the global level is not compensated by increased influence at the lower levels of politics, despite the new neoliberal emphasis on civil society and despite the fact that poor women have often been leaders in community activism. With the advent of global neoliberalism, an increasing proportion of so-called development assistance from richer to poorer countries has become channeled through nongovernmental organizations rather than through the governments of the recipient countries. Whereas neoliberals justify this change as avoiding official bureaucracy and corruption and as empowering grassroots women, critics argue that addressing social problems through private rather than public channels undermines democracy by depoliticizing the poor. Involvement in “self-help” micro-projects encourages poor women to exhaust their scarce energies in developing ad hoc services or products for the informal economy, rather than mobilizing as citizens to demand that the state utilize their tax monies for the provision of public services. Some critics argue that foreign-funded NGOs are a new form of colonialism because they create dependence on nonelected overseas funders and their locally appointed officials, undermining the development of social programs administered by elected officials accountable to local people. Thus, even though NGOs create programs that involve and serve women, their mission of providing services privately tacitly acquiesces in the state’s shedding of its public responsibilities. Even though they use the language of inclusion, empowerment and grass-roots democracy, NGOs often undermine the social citizenship entitlements of poor women.

### **III. Envisioning alternatives to neoliberal globalization**

Contemporary neoliberal globalization is characterized by the massive consolidation of wealth in a relatively few hands, by radically unequal access to and control over material resources, information and communications, by the centralization of political power and absence of democratic accountability, by environmental destruction, and by virulent racism and ethnocentrism. Its rhetoric of equality and participation masks a reality of domination and marginalization for most of the world’s women. However, just as we once distinguished perfect markets from existing markets and socialist ideals from various so-called socialisms,

so we must now distinguish the existing neoliberal incarnation of globalization from its possible alternative forms. The questions raised by globalization are simultaneously deeply philosophical and of immediate public concern. They include, though certainly are not limited to, the following.

### **1. What are peace and security?**

Is peace simply an absence of conflict between sovereign states that have formally declared war on each other or the absence of sectors of local populations armed to seize state power? How should we think about economic embargoes, especially when nations differ so enormously in their ability to impose such embargoes and in their vulnerability to them? How should we think about judicial institutions that rationalize incarcerating large sections of local populations for nonviolent crimes motivated by poverty? Is a country secure when it is “protected” by a “missile defense shield” built at the expense of social infrastructure? Is the world at peace when it is policed by one or a few powerful nations that arrogate to themselves the right to determine when international law has been violated and what “punishment” is appropriate for alleged violations? Is the world at peace when a hundred million women are “missing” and when those girls and women who remain are subjected to infanticide, the systematic withholding of food, medical care and education, and gender-based battery, rape, mutilation, and even murder? What are real peace and security and what are their preconditions?

### **2. What is prosperity?**

How can we redefine goods to include more than commodities, and wealth to mean more than material consumption? How can we measure prosperity in a way that is sensitive both to the quality of life and to inequalities in access to material resources? Is trade “free” in any meaningful sense when poor nations have no alternative to participating in an economic system in which they become ever poorer? When is trade “fair,” and what is equality of opportunity among states? Can any sense be made of the notion of “natural” resources, when things like fossil fuels, sunny climates, coral beaches or strategic locations become resources only within larger systems of production and meaning? How can we determine what a country’s “own” resources are, when every country is what it has been made over the course of human history? If countries’ resources are unequal, what might justify global redistribution? Do racialized groups or nations that have expropriated or exploited others in the past now owe reparations, and, if so, how should these be determined? How should the notion of economic “efficiency” be understood? How does the ideal of fair trade mesh with other values such as democracy, autonomy, empowerment, community, responsibility and environmental quality? How can we rethink the concept of economic restructuring?

### **3. What is democracy?**

Which groups are entitled to self-determination, and what does self-determination mean? How can democracy be institutionalized at global, regional, national and local levels? How can nations that are radically unequal economically share

equally in the governance of a global economy? How can ideals of global democracy be related to older ideals of national self-determination and sovereignty? In a global democracy, how should we rethink the notions of membership, belonging, and citizenship? What function do borders have in a global democracy, and what entitles people to a right of abode? What claims do global citizens have to control the allocation of local resources, and what claims do local citizens have on global resources? How can we create institutions responsive to the needs of the dispossessed, the excluded and the stigmatized? How can democracy be established in households and families?

#### **4. What is a healthy environment?**

What ideals or principles should guide human interaction with the nonhuman environment, given that this environment is always changing and that every change benefits some individuals, groups or species at the expense of others? How can we ensure that human impacts on the nonhuman environment do not benefit human groups that are already wealthy and powerful at the expense of those who are already poor and weak? How can we ensure that present appropriations of environmental resources meet Locke's condition of leaving "as much and as good" for generations yet to come?

#### **5. Racial/ethnic diversity**

Are groups that have suffered past injury entitled to compensation? Is the existence of universal norms compatible with respect for the integrity of cultures and traditions? Can human equality be combined with appreciation for cultural difference?

#### **6. What is good for women?**

Although none of the above questions mentions women explicitly, their formulation owes much to feminist thinking, which has shown that women cannot thrive in the absence of genuine peace, prosperity, democracy, a healthy environment, and respect for cultural tradition. Women have begun to reconceptualize these ideals in grassroots discussions all over the world, but the issues are too complex to be pursued here. Instead, I conclude with a single example of transnational feminist organizing that provides one alternative to the dominant neoliberal model of globalization.

### **IV. "Women's rights are human rights:" an example of globalization from below**

The concept of rights emerged from European Enlightenment, and it has always been somewhat controversial. Nineteenth-century utilitarians worried that rights talk lacked solid grounding, and Jeremy Bentham famously called rights "nonsense on stilts." Marxists have often charged that rights talk tends to rationalize class privilege because of its historical connection with private property and because rights advocates have often focused on establishing formal rights while ignoring the availability of real opportunities to exercise them. Third-World anti-colonialists have challenged rights as a form of Western cultural imperial-

ism, used against non-Western communities and destructive of cultural traditions. Even though the concept of rights has been extremely useful historically to Western feminism, some recent Western feminists have contended that rights reflect a masculine morality of “justice,” as opposed to a supposedly more feminine morality of care. Finally, some Third-World feminists have complained that rights are a legalistic concept hardly useful to those without the means to seek legal redress for violations of their rights. For these and other reasons, many critics have contended that “rights talk” is so infected by its bourgeois, masculine, and Western origins that it is incapable of articulating a viable challenge to local manifestations of male dominance, let alone to a world order that is deeply antagonistic to women.

Despite these criticisms of the concept of rights, however, a worldwide grassroots activist movement has taken up the slogan “women’s rights are human rights.” This movement has used the concept of rights to challenge many abuses of women previously unrecognized as rights violations, including direct assaults on women’s bodily integrity.<sup>2</sup> So far, the women’s human rights movement has been most successful in addressing women’s “first generation” civil and political rights. These protect such rights as liberty, freedom of thought, opinion, conscience and religion, and political participation, and are often construed as protecting individuals primarily from their governments. However, a new focus on women’s “second generation” rights, which include entitlements to education, to work, and to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of self and family, is increasingly being used to challenge many aspects of neoliberal globalization. Indeed, by showing that the more blatant abuses of women often spring directly from their economic vulnerability, feminists have tacitly if not explicitly implicated neoliberal globalization in many violations of women’s “first generation” rights. For instance, they have observed that the worldwide preference for boys over girls, and the consequent neglect, abuse and even infanticide of girls, is rooted in economic structures rather than laws. The 1993 Vienna Declaration and Program of Action highlighted the connections between women’s economic vulnerability and their murder, torture, sexual coercion and abuse.

In revealing how abuses of women’s human rights have often been neglected, excused or denied, the women’s human rights movement has demonstrated that previous understandings of human rights have taken the paradigmatic human to be male. Sometimes abuses of women’s rights have been seen as “normal,” “natu-

---

<sup>2</sup> Domestic battery is the leading cause of injury for women in many nations of the world, but systemic violence against women has not been recognized internationally as genocide or a crime against humanity. Similarly, the customary rape of women in war has not been recognized as a war crime—it is simply something normal that soldiers do—just as the sexual abuse and torture of women in custody is something done normally by men in authority, including male guards in prisons in the U.S. The sale of women in marriage is often not recognized as slavery, and forced genital surgery on girls and women without their consent has not been seen as torture—even though the equivalent on boys would be holding them down and cutting off their penises. Women around the world are, as Charlotte Bunch writes, “routinely subject to torture, starvation, terrorism, humiliation, mutilation, and even murder simply because they are female. Crimes such as these against any group other than women would be recognized as a civil and political emergency as well as a gross violation of the victims’ humanity” (“Women’s Rights are Human Rights: Toward a Re-Vision of Human Rights,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 12 [1990]: 496).



ral," or "inevitable" because women have been viewed as "other," inherently different from men. At other times, substantive equality for women has been equated with formal equality, because women have been seen as just the same as men, and their distinct histories and situations have been denied. Either way, human rights have been interpreted on an implicitly masculine model. Women's human rights activists are now moving from trying to include women in "men's" rights to challenging the covert masculine norm concealed in traditional understandings of so-called human rights. For instance, they are pointing out that violations of women's human rights are typically carried out by non-state as well as state actors—often by male family members—and that they occur in the private as well as the public sphere. Thus, they argue that the definition of state sanctioned repression should be expanded to include acceptance of family forms in which brides are sold and in which fathers and husbands exert strict control over women's sexuality, dress, speech, and movement. Similarly, slavery should be redefined to include forced domestic labor and prostitution. The definitions of war crimes should be expanded to include systematic rape and sexual torture. Conceptions of genocide should be expanded to include female infanticide, the systematic withholding of food, medical care and education from girls, and the battery, starvation, mutilation, and even murder of women.

The movement for women's human rights provides one indication of how globalization could work to benefit women. This human rights movement is, after all, a transnational movement, inconceivable outside a wider context of globalization. International conferences (such as in Mexico City in 1975) brought together local activists and made it possible for them to create mailing lists and eventually global networks. In preparation for the UN conference in Beijing in 1995, many regional meetings were held that produced deeper understanding of local conditions—partly by setting them in a global context. The global context helped local activists to see a variety of phenomena—rape and domestic battery in the U.S. and Europe, genital cutting in Africa, sexual slavery in Europe and Asia, dowry death in India, and the torture and rape of political prisoners in Latin America—as examples of violence against women. Rather than being an idea imposed from above, the idea that women's rights are human rights emerged from grassroots activism and illustrates how feminist reconceptualizations of "universal" rights are compatible with wide local diversity in interpretation and action. The idea of women's rights as human rights allowed women across the world to forge common bonds and provides an example of "globalization from below."

Feminist transformations of pre-existing understandings of rights have implications that go beyond the lives of women "only." For instance, by revealing the link between violations of women's first generation rights and the denial of their second generation rights, feminists have shown that human rights are indivisible rather than separable from each other, and this recognition of the indivisibility of rights certainly has applications to other economically vulnerable groups. More broadly, the movement for women's human rights reveals how women's equality is inseparable from other aspects of social progress. When inequalities are increasing among classes, regions, racialized and ethnic groups, and among nations, it is impossible to obtain sustainable improvements in women's economic

and social position because women are represented in all these groups, and when inequality exists women always suffer disproportionately. Conversely, however, it is impossible to alleviate these superficially ungendered inequalities without greater equity for and participation by women and therefore without addressing specifically gendered forms of inequality.

In challenging the false, male-biased humanism of older conceptions of human rights, the women's human rights movement implicitly suggests that the normative human be imagined as female rather than male. Such a re-imagining has far-reaching consequences, because women are vastly over-represented among the poor and illiterate of the world, and they are certainly those most vulnerable to oppressive systems of power. A concern for guaranteeing women's human rights could inspire alternatives to the neoliberal model of globalization and go far toward promoting a world of prosperity, peace, environmental protection, democracy, and respect for racial/ethnic diversity, that is, a world in which all women could flourish.

*University of Colorado, Boulder*