

PART III. FROM VISION TO POLICIES

III.7 EMPOWERING WOMEN

- Crowning a century of struggle
- Reinforcing the visibility of women
- The meaning and implications of empowerment

from

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Crowning a century of struggle

A major civilization transformation has occurred throughout the twentieth century: the evolving empowerment of women and the recognition of women's rights as human rights. This silent transformation has been achieved through a dogged and incessant struggle. Its consequences are bound to change the gender relations and conditions in each society and its impact on national and international political, economic, political and social life will be fundamental in nature.

Often the spotlight has been on women as innocent prime victims of conflicts among nations and of violence within societies and families. Less visible, they have borne the brunt of innumerable economic and social inequalities within countries and societies. The real extent of the women's revolution will manifest itself in a higher visibility of women as actors and participants, ~~not~~ leaders in all walks of societal life and the international arena. This will crown the long and often frustrating transition from subordinated status to full human dignity, from statistically invisible element to a recognized and often pivotal pillar of development.

The stirrings of women's consciousness during the French and American revolutions did not achieve many results. Women's struggles really gathered momentum with the social problems caused by the industrial revolution and the slow growth of women's education in Europe and North America in the last quarter of the 19th century. In the wake of the first World War and the Russian Revolution women gained political equality, largely in the form of voting rights, in many countries affected by the war. Though it is only a century since they first gained the vote in any country, they now have the right to vote in all but five countries. Many nation states incorporated the stipulation of social and economic equality in their constitutions. This began the process of women becoming more "visible" - in the educated professions, the service sector and the industrial work force, but left the "subordinate status" of the majority unchanged. With a few exceptions, the first wave of the women's movement was basically carried by the middle class and focussed on education. The second wave, beginning in the 1960's, has been due to a much larger number of women in higher education, the 'sexual revolution', a revolt against 'double standards' in social morality and against women's subordination in family and society. Two factors gave strength to its evolution. Women were questioning so much the conventional organisation of society, particularly in economy and politics, that, while feeling excluded from those fields, many women asked themselves if the needed change could be brought only by their co-optation into the system. The women's movement in the North became fragmented: many women conducted their struggle on the basis of rights while others sought to bring about societal change in key areas.

The experience of the South reinforced some dimensions of the struggle. The impact of industrialization, urbanization and population growth on women was similar to that experienced in the industrialized countries of the 19th century. The level of consciousness, the emergence of successive generations of women at the forefront of knowledge, and the growing numbers of women with enough education to investigate the conditions, aspirations and perspectives among the poor gave an impulse to the need for a change in societal patterns that had a great influence

on the agenda of the women's global movement.

The adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1980 precipitated the gathering of data on the status of women in many countries of the North and South alike.

The emergence of new perspectives from women's organizations and groups on the national as well as the global levels was driven by a changing consciousness and a struggle for solidarity across class, race, religion and nationality. Other factors contributed to this process: the growth of women studies in many universities throughout the world and burgeoning networks allowing a cross-fertilisation of ideas, tactics, approaches and strategies; the active role played by women in struggles for democracy and against oppressive regimes in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

The United Nations conferences on women and other developmental and socio-economic issues held over the last twenty years have helped to heighten the visibility and role, plight and potential of women on the international scene. They exposed a hitherto unknown dimension of development, namely the marginalization and systemic discrimination against women and their deprivation all over the world, and created a momentum for change.

While the election of women to political office - first realised in New Zealand in 1893 - broke a stubborn taboo prevailing in democratic systems, their access has nevertheless remained limited and is only recently growing, albeit limited to a few countries. In cultural life, women have acquired prominent places.

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The "role" of women as a separate issue - and not only a token reference - entered the international debate at the first United Nations Conference on Population and Development, held in 1974 in Bucharest, Romania. In the two decades since then the dimensions of the problem have become ever more complex. Other conferences followed suit, e.g. the contribution of rural women to agrarian economies was acknowledged by the World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (1979). The African famines raised the question whether they were also caused by a neglect of women's roles as primary food producers.

The events at the Planet Femina tent during the 1991 Rio Summit influenced the results of this important meeting. The Vienna Conference on Human Rights in 1994 stipulated that "women's rights are human rights." In 1994 at the UN Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo, thousands of women gave visible support and strength to the now widely accepted concept of women's reproductive rights. The documents adopted at the Social Summit in Copenhagen, in 1995, made women's empowerment a part of the basic commitment of some 120 heads of government and state. The Copenhagen Social Summit explicitly merged women's rights as human rights and the central role of women in social development into the concept of women's empowerment.

In the parallel NGO fora at each of these global conferences, new alliances were forged. By the 1980's, a "politically and ideologically less specific form of women's consciousness spreading

among the masses of the sex, far beyond anything achieved by the first wave of feminism. Women, as a group had become a major political force as they had not done before.

The International Year of Women 1975, the Decade of Women 1975-1985 and the strategies adopted at three women's world conferences stimulated the establishment of national machineries for strengthening the role and empowerment of women and bringing about a higher degree of awareness of the overt and covert bias against women in all fields.

Reinforcing the visibility of women

Women's existence in socio-political terms depends on how visible they are. Most cultures tend to make women invisible. The male-dominated society tends to veil women - they are not present in the news or in the socio-economic or political analysis or projections.

The hard won, spreading visibility of women should not be allowed to be veiled again. The global "trickle-down effect" of women's rights, their visibility and participation must be accelerated and reinforced at all levels to ensure success in their struggle for a better life for themselves and for others.

Visibility of women has to lead to a situation that goes far beyond equality of opportunities. As other equalities are widening, gender equality for all remains a mirage: a few climb the ladder of success but the majority remains excluded. Such a situation of passively accepted subordination is unacceptable in terms of rights and quality of life.

The recognition of the dignity of all human beings has led to the acknowledgement of their equality. Such universal equality constitutes the central institution of basic human rights. Inequality, on the other hand, is the negation of human rights. In matters affecting women "inequality" has often been replaced by the softer word "discrimination" which disguises the denial of women's rights. At the very least, the wider acceptance and enforcement of the provisions of the International Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women becomes therefore critical.

The increased visibility of women notwithstanding, an appalling gap between agreed principles and rights of women on the one hand and the reality and practice on the other hand persists. Principles agreed upon internationally and even those codified in national legislations often remain dead letter - or the international instruments have become meaningless in the face of numerous reservations entered upon ratification.

Taking advantage of the visibility momentum, the drive for empowerment must set in, initially by aiming at a realisation of well-defined "plateaus", such as "equal pay for equal work" (already codified for many years in ILO Convention No. 100).

Equal pay legislation should be adopted and expanded in all countries to incorporate the



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principle of 'equal pay for work of equal value'. This would allow for a re-evaluation of women's professional and 'pink-collar' occupations, and an increase in both pay and status. In the short term, however, minimum wage legislation may provide a more effective way of improving incomes for large numbers of poorly-paid women. Affirmative action should be adopted as a policy until the persistent inequalities in women's pay and status have been eliminated. Goals and time-tables should be developed, implemented and monitored. Affirmative action measures might include provision of creches; flexible working hours; women's quotas in recruitment, promotion, training and retraining; and measures to outlaw and prosecute sexual harassment at work.

Labour laws should also be expanded to provide better conditions, benefits and job security for domestic and agricultural workers, part-time, temporary and home-workers, and workers in export-processing zones. Women often predominate among such workers and are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and poor working conditions.

Women's productive activities often disappear when national censuses are being compiled. This invisibility has serious consequences for development. A 1989 Food and Agriculture Organization study found that African women made up 80 per cent of the food producers in some countries, but received less than 10 per cent of visits from agricultural advisers.¹

Decades of struggle by the women's movement has brought a final recognition from the United Nations that the value of their unpaid and invisible work - a global contribution to the quality of life can be computed at \$1 billion a year. Of the total burden of work - paid and unpaid - women carry 53% in developing countries, and 51% in industrialised countries. Men's share is thus less in both. Computing unpaid activities as market transactions at prevailing wages, UNDP's 1995 Human Development Report arrived at a figure of US\$16 billion annually - i.e. 70% more than the officially estimated US\$23 billion. Women's contribution accounts thus for nearly three quarters.

The distribution between paid and unpaid work give much wider variations. In the industrialised countries - men spend two thirds of their time in paid work and one third in unpaid. For women, the situation is just the reverse. In developing countries, more than three quarters of men's work is in market activities, with the lion's share of the income and recognition, though much of these market activities are the result of "joint production" - for which women get neither recognition nor a just share of the income.

Therefore research should be conducted into the contribution of women's unpaid work to family and national economies - including their work in subsistence agriculture, livestock husbandry, domestic work, child-care, and care for the elderly, sick and disabled. This research, which should incorporate time-use data, should be used in the design of all future policies. All new development initiatives, and economic and social policies should be subject to a gender audit to assess the effects on women's quality of life and on inequalities between men and women.

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Poverty and illiteracy continue to have female faces, differences continue in wages, formal labour force participation (with consequent protections of maternity, child care and social security); in access to credit and other economic resources and opportunities; and in political and administrative bodies.

The Commission concurs with the conclusion of the 1995 Human Development Report 1995 that "the free workings of the economic, and political processes are unlikely to deliver equality of opportunity," either for women, the poor or the powerless. Concrete strategies, affirmative action, investment in capacity building are all needed to improve quality of life - but to bring about the requisite political will requires the continued pressure of women's struggles.

The majority of women are poor citizens of the poorer countries, classified as deprived, backward. About 40% of women worldwide and especially in the developing world are children - below 15. The 1995 World Health Report highlighted the grim prospects that face a baby girl born in one of the least developed countries, where one sixth of total global births occur each year. A baby girl born in 1993 in an LDC will not share the global upward trend in life expectancy. She can expect to live at most until age 44, if she clears earlier hurdles - a 1 in 3 chance of being underweight and malnourished throughout her life - a 1 in 10 prospect of dying before age 1, and a 1 in 5 chance of death before 5 years. In some African countries her chance of being vaccinated and protected, e.g. from cholera and tuberculosis, will be less than 1 in 2. Her chances of schooling, - enough to read and write - are 1 in 3. She will be chronically anaemic, and overworked. Puberty will only add to her problems. Equity demands that the situation of these deprived infants be improved without delay.

The vulnerability of the girl child is a global and not only a poverty issue any longer. Canada, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway and the United States report sexual abuse during childhood and adolescence. An estimated one million are forced into prostitution annually (with the largest share possibly in Asia).⁴

girl
The Commission believes that the formulation of a comprehensive global action plan for children and adolescents - with a special focus on girls - will be one critical component to redress many prevailing injustices face by women. Constituent parts for such an action plan exist already but are scattered in many international documents. They have to be pulled together within an overarching conceptual framework to articulate the political urgency of action. The various policies must recognise the needs of the various age sub-categories.

Such an action plan will set the stage for the changes that are really needed. Many later programme initiatives for women are nothing more than salvage measures - and salvage is not always possible. The evidence of missed investments and lost opportunity is abundant. Low birth weight babies, illiteracy and lack of primary education, low skills and low self reliance, self denial in the family and community, low social confidence and powerlessness - they are all both cause and effect.

The meaning and implications of empowerment

Women have been proclaimed free and responsible in the very field from which, through centuries and millennia, patriarchy derived its domination - the reproductive sector. This in itself is a colossal revolution. It is a turning point in the understanding of women, in their dignity, as full human beings, not defined anymore by their capacity to procreate.

But free and responsible decisions are not made in a vacuum - they need a context of social, economic and cultural conditions in which freedom and responsibility acquire concrete meaning. Reproductive rights are not alien to social rights, they demand them and cannot be respected without them. The central role of women's rights must be acknowledged and fostered not only in the reproductive sphere but also in all societal processes. The process of empowerment supposes that not only rights are proclaimed but also that social rights are put in the forefront of the political agenda.

"Women's empowerment" as a means to strengthen women's participation in all aspects of economic, social and political life is based on the linkages between personal liberties (where no interference or coercion to affect the individual conscience is permissible) with social entitlements (which requires affirmative action and guarantees by public authorities and law).⁶

Liberties and entitlements have to be reciprocal and responsible, to avoid destruction of the social base of such qualities. In essence, rights/entitlements are relational, reflecting their social context. Uncharted, unlimited, individual liberty results in alienation and isolation of the individual from society. From specific rights, particularly concerning reproduction, women strive to have all their rights acknowledged to give a frame to all efforts and to contribute to the shaping of life at all levels and in all situations. Visibility then will operate at the level of new thinking, new actions, new policies.

Empowerment is a process by which women gain from their experience the knowledge of the denial of their rights, develop a sense of solidarity and dynamism at all levels of life and undertake action in order to change their situation.

In the first stage women are comparing their lives with their rights. Poor women, across cultures, are not familiar with the language of rights, but of responsibilities to which they are socialized. Exposure to the concept of rights, and their legitimacy in a given context galvanizes them into articulating, slowly and gradually, their suppressed feelings of injustice and unfairness of a social order that does not enable them to "put things to right".

Through such a process, women assume their own identity, value themselves, increase self-esteem and self-confidence and cross the threshold of fear and feeling of powerlessness. It does not transform them into individuals because the needs of the collectives still remain their prior responsibilities. Starting from children, and the family, the responsibility embraces easily the local groups, workplaces, with which they can identify and which seems to require some good management.

At the second stage of the empowerment process, the analysis of women's situation and of their practical needs gradually uncover the structural questions of power by which the discriminated status is maintained. If this stage is missed, women may benefit from different social aspects in their lives (e.g. better reproductive health services) without, in fact, moving forward in their empowerment.⁶

If, however, the process is followed, women discover the deep roots of their discrimination and marginalization. They are able to see that part of what happens to them is, in fact, the outcome of structural domination and of ideological biases. They can then see that empowerment is incompatible with the downgrading of women expressed in so many different ways. This sets the stage for joint action.

Once rights are proclaimed, the process of empowerment cannot stop. They have to be placed in the forefront of the political agenda. This, in itself, is a radical change. The women's movement is not likely to withdraw from the challenge it is facing.

There is obviously a danger that "empowerment" may be sloganized without being realized, as it has happened with many other international accepted concepts like "women's integration", "women's participation" etc. There is even a danger that it may become completely devoid of its meaning.

Why are then so many national and international authorities ready to agree that women's empowerment should be placed at the center of the development process? The only plausible reason is a dawning recognition that women are becoming a political force at both the international and national levels. Even the institutions and strategies often criticized by women groups are trying to initiate "genderisation" strategies, which generally translate into some "women-specific" projects for economic empowerment of poor women in developing countries - as a response to the mounting evidence of "feminization of poverty" that women's increasing visibility has brought about.

When we speak about empowerment we are not targeting some specific groups of poor women in very difficult situations. Of course, if an effort has to be made such groups will receive absolute priority. But they have to go hand in hand with efforts made at and by other groups in society. Women working in administration, women in liberal professions, the academia and other groups in different jobs and activities -all have to be mobilized for the processes of empowerment.

In society everybody is part of a structure, relates and depends upon other people. Even if small fractions in the whole of society are 'empowered' and gain a sense of action but remain isolated, empowerment cannot happen. The empowerment process can be considered as the access to collective identity and purpose of women in our time. Visible and empowered, women will have in their hands the fundamental tools to shape a civilizational change.

The Commission feels the need to build a sense of solidarity among women that is

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historically new. For centuries women have helped each other. In this one century, women have shown a tremendous capacity to work together. In order to meet the challenges of the decades ahead solidarity has to be built across the outcome of all empowerment processes.

Women will no longer accept mere concessions from global or national power structures. Women's organizations which used to view themselves as "non-political" are now involved in analyzing the global political economy, and prepared to identify, assess and contribute to the strategies geared to a sustainable improvement of the quality of life. Hence, in the spectrum of political power, women must also gain a different status and influence in decision-making positions. "More of the same won't do". The very process of empowerment of women is going to change the way women themselves exercise power. For women, power is everywhere - from home to workplace to the Cabinet or Summit meetings. Power based on competition, on either/or, on domination over others produces the type of relationships and social conditions women reject. Women's empowerment to become real must also intervene actively to promote global justice, the resolution of conflicts by negotiations and women's "economic and political activism".

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Governments and international agencies must give meaning to women's empowerment through a radical shift in economic and financial policies - credit to women's collective initiatives, change of international lending conditions, shift in priorities for national budgets.

If states and international agencies are consistent with the recurring stress on women's rights, then their priorities have to shift from one-sided, technocratic economic balance to policies capable of enhancing the social opportunities for all women to exercise such rights.

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Finally, empowerment of women means, as we have advocated throughout this report, a totally new approach to the problem of population dynamics, a new view of population policies and necessary changes in the national structures and in the international agencies and institutions.

Handwritten: The women's movement has moved out of its earlier concerns for specific women issues. It is now involved in a transition from the politics of recommendation to the politics of participation and partnership - in the management of human society, the quality of life and the fate of future generations.

Change will only take place if women, at all levels, fully aware of their rights and responsibilities, will express their own convictions collectively. It will be a different voice, a voice that seeks to integrate not to exclude, that provokes convergence not separation, that goes beyond abstract rights towards "lived capacities", that places "justice" in the hands of "care".

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Given the progress achieved as well as the perspectives opened, the Commission feels that we may be at the edge of a new wave which will bring forward the right and duty of women to bring into the organisation of society and economics the experience they bring along with their

own culture. Therefore, all means should be deployed to support and to utilise the 'view of the world' the women's movement brings with it. *Ham*

Women, by the diversified roles they perform, are at the root of sustainable improvement of quality of life and between the needed balance between humanity's and nature's needs. Because their rights and responsibilities are, at this juncture of time, deeply intertwined with the survival of humankind, women bring forward new values. This is one of the main revolutions of our time.

Summary of conclusions and recommendations:

A major civilization transformation has occurred throughout the twentieth century: the evolving empowerment of women and the recognition of women's rights as human rights. Its consequences are bound to change the gender relations and conditions in each society and its impact on national and international political, economic, political and social life will be fundamental in nature.

The real extent of the women's revolution will manifest itself in a higher visibility of women as actors and participants, if not leaders in all walks of societal life and the international arena.

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The hard won, spreading visibility of women should not be allowed to be veiled again. The global "trickle-down effect" of women's rights, their visibility and participation must be accelerated and reinforced at all levels to ensure success in their struggle for a better life for themselves and for others.

Visibility of women has to lead to a situation that goes far beyond equality of opportunities. As other equalities are widening, gender equality for all remains a mirage: a few climb the ladder of success, but the majority remains excluded. Such a situation of passively accepted subordination is unacceptable in terms of rights and quality of life.

Taking advantage of the visibility momentum, the drive for empowerment must set in, initially by aiming at a realisation of well-defined "plateaus".

Equal pay legislation should be adopted and expanded in all countries to incorporate the principle of 'equal pay for work of equal value'. Affirmative action should be adopted as a policy until the persistent inequalities in women's pay and status have been eliminated. Goals and time-tables should be developed, implemented and monitored. Affirmative action measures might include provision of creches; flexible working hours; women's quotas in recruitment, promotion, training and retraining; and measures to outlaw and prosecute



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Labour laws should also be expanded to provide better conditions, benefits and job security for domestic and agricultural workers, part-time, temporary and home-workers, and workers in export-processing zones.

Research should be conducted into the contribution of women's unpaid work to family and national economies - including their work in subsistence agriculture, livestock husbandry, domestic work, child-care, and care for the elderly, sick and disabled. This research, which should incorporate time-use data, should be used in the design of all future policies. All new development initiatives, and economic and social policies should be subject to a gender audit to assess the effects on women's quality of life and on inequalities between men and women.

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The empowerment process can be considered as the access to collective identity and purpose of women in our time. Visible and empowered, women will have in their hands the fundamental tools to shape a civilizational change.

The Commission feels the need to build a sense of solidarity among women that is historically new.

In the spectrum of political power, women must also gain a different status and influence in decision-making positions.

Women's empowerment to become real must also intervene actively to promote global

