IMPACT OF GLOBALISATION ON GENDER ISSUES

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The era of globalisation is a symbolic landmark in the domain of international arena. The article has brought out a good indication from the United Nations report on women’s conditions indicating the activities of art and challenging attributes in this regard for faith and cultural specifications. The contextuality of globalisation is a tenor of hope and aspiration to the greatest nuances of global peace and tranquility in the cosmic context and contentions.

GLOBALISATION CONTINUES to be a very contested and controversial concept of our times. For the study of gender human rights, it is essential to understand globalisation. Feminist writers have provided various approaches to describe globalisation debate which collectively emphasise gender as central to our understanding of the material, ideological and discursive dimensions of globalisation.¹ Feminist work on globalisation addresses a number of core concerns: the changing role of the state and relationship between the state, the market and the household, particularly in regard to health and social welfare provisions; the impacts of global restructuring, notably changing working practices and new forms and conditions of employment; new and enduring forms of inequality, including inequalities in the distribution of resources both locally and globally; the domain of national, regional and international governance and how ideas are themselves significant in producing and reproducing certain kinds of social relations of inequality.²

  a. Dominelli, L., Women across Continents : Feminist Comparative Social Policy, Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf; Afshar, H. and Berrientos, S. (eds.) (1999), Women, contd...
According to feminist theorists, the neoliberal issues of power and exclusion should be taken seriously in the dominant discourses of globalisation. The ideology of ‘value free’ economic theories and the impersonal structures of states and markets have contributed in demoting women in ‘private sphere’. A transnational women’s movement having normative orientation has developed around the women rights and gender issues since the United Nations (UN) Decade for Women (1976-85). In the process, women’s groups are also ‘challenging and thereby refashioning globalisation’.3

Gender inequality is a global phenomenon, although different societies are different in many respects, but the position of women uncovers many similarities. Women live in a disadvantaged position in almost all the societies, although the nature of specific disadvantage may vary. At various places cultural practices and beliefs give rise to gender inequalities and these beliefs perpetuate the lower status accorded to women in the family, working environment and society. Besides the cultural and specific contexts, globalisation has given rise to new forms of inequalities between nations, regions and social groups, marked by class, gender and ethnicity.4 Therefore, it can be said that globalisation as a complex process, is leading to complex forms of social relations and social inequalities which can be explained by the trade agreements, investment strategies, the changing forms of international division of labour, the uneven nature of economic growth and differential distribution of debt, resources and incomes across countries and social groups and, in part, by political responses at national, regional and international levels.5

Gender inequalities cannot be separated from inequalities of class, race and ethnicity and the specificity of gender relations in particular cultures and societies must be specially considered. Feminist scholarship

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has been particularly attuned to issues of specificity and difference. Feminists have guarded against the privileging of the global at the expense of the local. Gender relations, therefore, should be seen not only in terms of specific cultures but also in the light of dynamic interactions between global and local sites.

Globalisation has contributed in reshaping the identity, role and change in working conditions of women. Before globalisation, the State, market and domestic realm were dominated by males. Whereas during the past two decades women have entered the work force in almost all countries due to the rise of a service sector. However, the number of women in service sector has been varied across the world according to cultural context and according to their age and marital status in specific societies. Nevertheless, there has been an overall increase in the number of women working in the economy because of financial constraints, for becoming self-reliant and for enjoyment of individual autonomy. The idea of increase in number of women in employment has been inspired by improving the status of women in specific societies. Of course, the increase in women’s employment cannot in itself be taken as evidence of a trend towards greater equality. The benefits of costs to women of ‘opportunities’ opened up by globalisation has varied according to range of factors. Women who are highly trained, well-educated and have marketable skills have often benefited from expanding opportunities almost in all societies.

Globalisation has challenged conventional ideas about gender roles. In the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, the traditional roles of male ‘breadwinner’ and female ‘homemaker’ are on the decline due to the decline of heavy and manufacturing industry and subsequent increase in unemployment of males. This has been accompanied by rise of new employment opportunities for women in flexible and part time employment due to the expanding service sectors of economies. Women, despite increase in employment, continue

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8Steans, J. op. cit, p. 125.
to bear the burden of responsibilities of family across the world. Summarising the above discussion, we can say that although globalisation has challenged to an extent the meaning and implications of gender construction in specific societies, but gender determined lifestyles still push women to a certain category of jobs that are comparatively low paid and insecure. As a result of transformations in the global economy in the two decades, the position of such marginal workers has worsened. It is a well-known fact that capitalism generates inequalities in outcomes but it can be pointed out that social inequalities are not a problem if the wider effect of globalisation is to enhance economic activity, generate growth and produce such conditions which reduce poverty and make human welfare possible. On the contrary, globalisation is sometimes also characterised by dichotomy between economic and technological changes and social progress.

The pattern shows that the countries where economic growth has been rapid, it has not been followed by social progress in general and relative improvement of position of women in particular. In fact, women are the most poorly paid and amorphous (no unions found) work force. Due to the above characteristics, women have remained prone to up and downs of market policies in the decade of 1990 when restructuring of economies was the order of the day. In paid employment, women still earn less than men for relatively similar tasks, work for longer hours and do not match men in number of workers in informal sector. Similarly, it is a fallacious argument to make that paid employment means financial emancipation as inadequate education, and training, less access to capital, and burden of family responsibilities skew up the scenario for women. In several developing countries men have been replaced by women in sectors like export production zones as women are regarded as cheaper and passive workforce. In various countries the debt burden and restructured economic policies shaped by international processes have contributed to enhanced gender divisions within societies.

WOMEN RIGHTS AS HUMAN RIGHTS

In the new millennium, human rights activists are looking for a new Age of Rights. Feminists are on the forefront to reconstruct human rights in the light of the slogan ‘women’s rights are human rights’. Feminist theorists have argued for inclusion of women and gender in human rights.

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United Nations has emerged as a forum providing a platform for feminist initiatives. The feminist reformulation of human rights has been facing stiff competition with claims of human rights and gender politics in local forms.

The attempts to expand the human rights project to include women’s rights and issues concerning gender and sexuality are very exciting. The activists and legal theorists tried successfully to change basic tenets, discourse and aims of the International human rights movement and as a result, the power structures of states and International organisations. This was quite evident during the Vienna Human Rights Conference, 1993 and the Beijing Women’s Conference, 1995. The argument was that women experiences were obliterated by human rights law and practice. The critiques refer to the masculine character of thinking about International human rights. Infact, men have remained the only measure for establishing reasonable behaviour. The feminist expansion of human rights project has resulted in reformulation of various women’s movement concerns of last three decades as human rights issues. This has been joined by similar concerns as children’s rights, indigenous rights, land rights, disability rights, lesbian and gay rights.

The main effort for making women rights as an integral part of human rights discourse was made by NGO’s during late 1980s and early 1990s. The enormous rise of the agenda and politics was accentuated by feminist action at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna and the Beijing United Nations Decade for Women Conference.

Emphasising the above fact Richard Wilson says that in the past few decades there has been an exponential rise of the application of International human rights law and also in the parameter of human rights discourse as a result human rights have become the most globalised political values of our time. Scholars like Charles Taylor describe the Internationalisation of human rights as process with a long history. According to him, it began with Western enlightenment and emerged mainly in the 18th and 19th centuries in Great Britain in political conflicts between Great Britain, its American colonies and France. Human Rights in the modern sense are

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directly derived from the US Constitution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.\textsuperscript{20} Some writers have also gone through the parallels to human rights ideas in ‘non-western’ and Islamic traditions.\textsuperscript{21}

Eighteenth Century Europe saw the simultaneous evolution of women rights discourse with that of the human rights both having common origins. The French Revolution especially contributed in presenting the case for women’s rights when \textit{Olympe de Gouge’s Declaration of the Rights of Women and Citizen (1791)} tried to rewrite the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. Women’s rights were on International Agenda at the 1919 \textit{Paris Peace Conference} where the League of Nations was established. In the League various issues were debated and efforts were made like the traffic in women and children. The drafting of \textit{Universal Declaration of Human Rights}, which was adopted in 1948 was influenced by the United Nations. Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) was formed in 1946.\textsuperscript{22}

As Filomena Steady says that International women’s organisations intervened in the international system largely dominated by men. Involvement of women in nationalist independence movements played an important role in both human rights and decolonisation projects in the United Nations. The efforts of women’s organisations and research institutions provided support to the work of Commission on Status of Women (CSW) which resulted in the \textit{Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)} in 1979.\textsuperscript{23}

During the first United Nations Decade for Women declared in 1975, many UN institutions were established for servicing CSW. The United Nations ‘Decade for Women’ Conference-Mexico City in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985 and Beijing in 1995—along with the Vienna Human Rights Conference in 1993, the Cairo and New York Conference on Population and the Associated Non-Governmental Organisational (NGO) forums have all formed critical arenas for the promotion of women’s rights, interests and activism.

Non-governmental organisations like \textit{Human Rights Watch} and \textit{Amnesty International} have done a wonderful job to integrate women’s human rights concerns with the International human rights framework. Friedman points

out that negligible attention was paid to women’s rights in such human rights groups before the late 1980s. It was then only that women took the back-up of various United Nations forums and operated with a new way using human rights framework to advance women’s rights. ‘Instead of claiming rights as women, they claimed human rights of half of humanity’. Immense pressure both outside and inside the human rights organisations made them aware of women’s issues.

The Vienna Conference has contributed significantly in the recognition of women’s rights as important components of human rights. The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action demanded the appointment of special reporter on violence against women and the adoption of the Declaration of the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW), both were implemented in 1995. In 1996, after the Beijing Conference, the UN Secretary General called for making women’s convention a mainstream concern in the human rights programme. People must be made more and more aware of the CEDAW and its works of women’s conventions must be incorporated into that of human rights treaty bodies.

Since the last decade the use of United Nations forums by feminists has enhanced successfully the global awareness about women’s rights. Anne brunet has called it the ‘mainstreaming of feminism’. As Bina Agrawal in her work on Beijing Conference opines that Northern and Southern Women are finding common grounds on economic issues like agitation against transnational corporations. Although the North-South gap has still not died down but importance of forging a strategic alliance or link has been recognised. Agarwal puts it brilliantly that romantic sisterhood is giving way to ‘strategic sisterhood’ for confronting the global crisis of economy and polity.

Radhika Coomarswamy suggests that the inclusion of women’s rights within human rights has given women’s rights discourse a special plank and as a result it has emerged as a major nuance of human rights policy in the international law framework. Similarly, Friedman argues that women’s

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human rights advocates have fully utilised the International human rights framework to put forward their case. The framework has proved beneficial to them, as it provides legitimacy to political demands, it is accepted by most governments and brings with it established protocols.\textsuperscript{27} The global networking has also been enhanced manifold by the growth and development of new forms of global communications like internet. The global appropriation of women’s rights and human rights is sometimes linked to the decline of the left in Europe, to the populist and liberal discourses in US and in other parts of the world to the supplementation of liberation movements and other radical ideologies.

Although, various positive developments, as enumerated above have occurred but relatively speaking women’s rights have weaker implementation procedures, are fragile and suffer from inadequate financial support from the UN.\textsuperscript{28} There are also some reservations on dominance of west in NGOs working for women’s human rights.

**POLITICS, ECONOMY AND GENDER: AN INTERACTION**

Social environment impacts a lot on gender relations as is evident in the relation between the ‘public’ and ‘private’. As accentuated by the feminist scholars, gender is an important factor in social division of labour between public world of work and as commonly called ‘informal economy’ of the household, domestic servicing and reproduction. Besides the changes taking place in the relationship of economy and state the feminist analysis presents the case of the household.

The State not only throws light on social and cultural values \textit{vis-a-vis} gender functions but also reproduces gender relations by various ways, for instance, legislating in the area of marriage, divorce and family law, in the field of policy-making on family planning and sexual health, and also welfare and unemployment entitlements, labour legislation, taxation and rights of citizenship. As it was evident during the post-World War II period, the welfare provisions and consecutive social legislations were based on the model of male as bread winner and female as homemaker in various OECD countries.\textsuperscript{29} Some feminists, therefore, criticised the welfare state model because of its patriarchal orientation.\textsuperscript{30} Still some measures of the welfare state helped to improve the position of women, like child care benefits. As a consequence the impact of globalisation now, on the changing

\textsuperscript{27}Friedman, E. \textit{op. cit}, p. 19, 1995.
\textsuperscript{28}Coomaraswamy, R.P. 32.
\textsuperscript{30}Domineli, L., \textit{op. cit.}, 1991.
role of state, and the impact, therefore, on gender issues is of much significance.

The much hype and churning about globalisation revolves round one basic theme and that is the decision-making power going from the hands of the state to the market. This is popularly known as roll-back of the overload state, triumph of neo-liberal theories, Thatcherism and Reaganism. The neo-liberal model of roll-back was made popular by whose theory was subsequently praised and adopted by Thatcher in Great Britain and by President Reagan in the US. Since then onwards, the capacity of nations to control and decide events within their respective territory and their national economies was limited by the increasing influence of supranational institutions as the IMF, and the regional bodies like the European Union (EU) and the OECD countries. As regards to the developing countries, the autonomy of state was circumscribed greatly, by the developmental and welfare agencies of the UN and more by the multilateral economic institutions as the World Bank and IMF. These multilateral agencies, especially after the disintegration of Soviet Union and end of Cold War are busy in devising economic policies for such developing countries whose economies have “failed”. These new policies popularly known as ‘structural adjustments’ provide financial assistance as debt for relief to countries which is conditioned by the appropriate changes in economic policy on the lines of neo-liberal principles of marketisation and export-led growth. Globalisation, as major approaches for its study tell us, is mediated through political economy of the nation-state. One more trend which has been observed during the last one and half decade of globalisation is that, mainly in the post-Cold War era, the aid that was provided to developing countries by the UN agencies, is now being provided by the multilateral agencies like World Bank, also known as International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), International Development Agency (IDA) and International Finance Corporation (IFC), which lay harsh conditions for providing such assistance. The scholars like Kwameh Nkrumah, Mahathir Muhammad, see this as a conspiracy of G-8 or the Western block to exploit the developing countries by a new weapon of globalisation or free-trade which Nkrumah defines as a new form of colonialism post-colonialism.

These global trends have resulted in a shift away from social democratic model of citizenship in many Western countries in past two decades or so, as states have placed greater stress on the efficacy of the markets over the state in the provision of many welfare goods and services. But one must not exaggerate the situation as to say that the state has cut back all the welfare provisions or backtracked from the social infrastructure. It should be understood that the degree to which the responsibility for such areas of
life is on the states or shifted to private sector or the family depends on a number of factors like the ideological character of governments and their core constituencies of support.31 But globalisation and the structural nature of the welfare state in a closed economy are described as important factors in explaining welfare state retrenchment in many OECD countries.32 The impact on women of all of the shifts of policy as discussed above depends on the class to which particular woman belongs. The impact of these policies on women belonging to the upper and middle class has been slightly cushioned by their ability to obtain service from the market, needless to say due to their better financial condition while the position of lower-class women has significantly worsened.

It has been recognised by all that women play a much greater role in general health welfare of whole societies. This recognition of the role of women can also be seen in programmes of UN agencies, which promote the status of women in health, education, control of reproductive function, access to independent income and credit, or in some cases to support women in their ‘traditional’ roles. As an impact of globalisation and the neo-liberal theories of export-led growth, in many developing countries now-a-days, priority is given to the need to earn hard currency like dollar to service debt over government expenditure on welfare. Consequently, the health and welfare services deteriorate and especially the poor suffer and the burden of unpaid work falls on women. In many developing and underdeveloped countries of the world, girls still receive less food and healthcare than boys. Sustainable development cannot be achieved and will remain just a rhetoric unless the growth of world population is slowed down. Nearly, 300 million women in the world have no access to effective family planning and contraceptive services. More fundamental problems of poverty and inequality affect the decisions on the number and spacing of pregnancies.33

The extent to which women are affected (much more than men) by economic restructuring is not confined only to the developing world. In the so called ‘new emerging economies’ of Central and Eastern Europe, evidence shows that women are losing jobs as the region adjusts to the rigours of the global free trade and the women are also taking burden of care which has appeared due to cuts in public spending. This is not to say that a segment of women have benefited from marketisation but the adverse impact on mainly poorer women has been due to the cuts in government spending in certain welfare benefits like healthcare and housing.

There is a general notion that gender inequality or for that matter any gender-related issue can be best understood in the context of particular cultural values and practices. People conceive of the world as strictly compartmentalised into territorially bounded nation-states and national cultures. This attitude resists the programmes and projects made to elevate the position of women because as it is said they ‘interfere with culture’ or interfere with sovereignty. According to the same argument, feminism is described as a western concept. The ‘second wave’ globalisation works deconstructed the traditional methods of social enquiry that are based on a nation-state framework. Therefore, the deconstruction also questioned the cultural connections of gender and the notion of feminism being a Western concept. Feminist scholar pointed out that identities can both be narrower and wider than nation-state constructions of identity. This has led to the development of a transnational women’s movement for which there exists no barriers of culture of nation-states but the real, normative goal is gender equality and improvement in the status of women across the world.

Feminist scholars have uncovered the political relationship of supremacy of men and subjection of women as a fact of almost all the societies. Feminism can be defined as the belief that sexual inequality or oppression can be abolished and therefore it should be abolished. Feminism has been linked to women’s movement whose aim is to enhance the position and role of women. The movement in various societies has taken different forms and shapes in different times and has pursued diverse goals. It has struggled to end inhuman practices like female circumcision, child infanticide to abolish restrictive dress codes and has fought for equal rights, access to education, career opportunities, equal suffrage rights, representation of women in elite positions in public life and so forth. Although, feminism is commonly associated with women’s movement, to limit it only to the movement is to narrow its scope as it addresses matters of importance of both sexes. Feminist thought seeks to broaden political understanding by exploring the cultural, biological, social, economic facts which are present below gender divisions and so condition each of us whether male or female.

To have a cultural relativist view is criticised on many counts. For one, it is argued that it serves the interest of specific social groups and elites. Secondly, the idea of a unique and specific national culture obliterates and often suppresses internal differences within a nation like gender, class and minority cultural groups. The concept of an imagined homogenous community leaves all diversities based on culture and what is called tradition. It should be recognised that culture is not static but a dynamic concept and so changes with time. Feminism is just like socialism and
nationalism. Analysis of globalisation from the feminist perspective challenges the ‘common-sense’ view that gender discrimination is culture specific, or a domestic issue, and so of concern only for nation-states. But today’s world gives emphasis on Western ideologies, values, technology and commercialism. Spectacular spread in transnational communications networks and world-wide webs have severely affected stereotype cultural boundaries. The process of globalisation is so complex and involves web of relations and interconnectedness that it would be an oversimplification to interpret it as a form of imperialist domination of the West. As it can be seen that the discourse on human rights has been embraced by a wide variety of groups to achieve democratic reform. Beside, communities have always remained open to ideas from other societies and cultures. The knowledge available to people now-a-days is not confined to the boundaries of nations. To some degree today human rights, democracy and indeed, feminism are all ideas that are known ‘inside’ most societies.

An anti-globalisation movement has held ground against the neo-liberal policies of global institutions. Various alliances are forging around issues of inequality, marginalisation and exclusion. ‘Counter-hegemonic project’ necessitate creative thinking about possible alternative models of citizenship, democracy and human rights. Such inequalities of resources and income require the NGOs and other civil society organisations to pressurise the national and global establishments to yield to the necessities of peoples in need. Despite the pressure of NGOs and civil society organisations, decision-making bodies and institutions are still dominated by states. Although, the UN has been eclipsed by the IMF and the World Bank in development aid and welfare but these institutions suffer from weakness like democratic deficits and are dominated by developed and industrialised countries.

Grave concerns are being raised that the conditions of financial austerity, poverty have adversely affected full participation of women. Moreover, places where women have participated, there Western NGOs have played a larger role in debates in the UN in comparison to the women groups from the South. Although the representation of women groups and organisations of the South in international conferences grown over two decades, but they are still seriously underrepresented in these forums. Concludingly, it can be pointed out that women NGOs have had achieved some amount of success in the national and international levels, for instance in fields like in raising funds and awareness for women’s education, for women health issues and for providing banking finance for self-employment, but all these activities have been undermined by neo-liberal policies of market-led and export-led economic growth and trickle down and neo-classical theories of development that have negative impact on social conditions.