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The changing landscape of feminist organizing since Beijing

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Abstract: Feminist mobilizing since the 1970s culminated during the key UN conferences of the 1990s by significantly advancing the normative framework for gender equality and women’s empowerment, and towards realization of girls’ and women’s human rights. Effective organizing by feminist groups has been rightly lauded despite backlash and growingly fierce opposition. Nonetheless, the larger political economy environment has played no small role both before and after Beijing in these advances and threatened retrogressions. This changing and tumultuous landscape and its implications for sustainable advances towards gender equality and human rights for all is the subject of this discussion.

Introduction: Background

A previous Discussion Paper written for UN Women (Sen 2018; Sen 2019) identified three key drivers shaping the contours and effectiveness of feminist mobilizing in recent years: the socioeconomic and political environment; institutions; and the processes of movement building. All three of these have been shifting and changing in the decades from the 1970s onwards, interacting with and shaping each other. A central point of the previous paper was that:

“...Feminist mobilizing does not happen in a socioeconomic or political vacuum Nor can it be effective simply through the volition or intent of women’s organizations if the environment and institutions are not supportive. This does not mean that advances towards women’s human rights cannot be made in difficult environments. But in such circumstances, they are likely to be limited, require far greater effort and resources, and strategies may have to be defensive and protective. Alliances with other like-minded, even if not congruent, organizations are likely to be especially necessary in difficult times. Conversely, even in good times, if mobilizing is to have lasting impact, it has to be strategic and must aim to make advances more firmly grounded in larger belief systems and norms, and in institutional frameworks. (Sen 2019; p 29)

This paper builds on that framework, focusing particularly on the changing landscape since the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. It looks at this period in light of lessons learned from past and concurrent analysis.

Some key lessons

The connections between shifting political economic landscapes and advances towards gender equality and women’s human rights are not simple. Nonetheless, it is possible to distil three key lessons from a wide reading of experiences in the period since 1970.

Lesson 1:

Gender equality is easier to advocate in an environment of economic growth and rising prosperity provided growth itself is equalizing. That is, economic growth should not be such as to intrinsically generate rapid and large increases in intersectional inequality. The reason is that, whether one considers equality of opportunity or more stringent equality of outcomes, shifting policies and programmes towards greater gender equality (as with any other basis of equality) will inevitably mean some form of redistribution. Robust GDP growth with rising employment and growing incomes (across the income distribution spectrum) will create the possibility of a better distribution favouring those at the lower ends

without absolute stagnation or worsening for others. This is true whether for jobs, education or social services.

However, if economic growth is intrinsically dis-equalizing, it will not have the above potential. Two key types of growth – based on capital-intensive, extractive industries, or based on the financial sector with weak linkages to broader job creation, but with strong requirements of inflation control and squeezing of public expenditure in the name of fiscal discipline – are known to be generators of significant increases in inequality (Piketty 2013; Stiglitz 2012; Seguino 2014). Not only do the benefits of such types of growth accrue to a small minority but they also bias public policies away from re-distribution, and especially in the case of extractive industries fuel large-scale corruption, despoil the environment, sabotage livelihoods and survival (for which women are heavily responsible), and result in violence and conflict. Dis-equalizing growth also tends to break down solidarity as it increases the economic and social distance between the different ends of the income distribution spectrum, and over the whole spectrum.

Recent attempts, in some Latin American countries with progressive governments to mobilize the incomes from taxing extractive industries such as petroleum and timber to finance social spending and public services have had important but, in the end, limited success that has not been politically sustainable.

Lesson 2:

For gender equality to advance, the role of the state and the public sector are crucial. The public sector can function as the standard bearer for gender equitable and just employment practices (hiring practices, wages, working conditions, provision of childcare, prevention and sanctioning against sexual harassment and workplace violence) in ways that the private sector typically will not. In addition to being a direct employer, the state is also responsible for the framework of laws, regulations, gender-transformative financing, policies and programmes. As we know well, the state will not automatically fulfil this role without significant advocacy and social mobilizing. But certainly no one else can or will in a sustainable way.

Recent experiences as in India suggest that as the state comes under fiscal pressure, it begins to employ more contract labour with limited obligations for social security or employment assurance. Women workers (such as the ASHAs who are the lowest level of health workers) tend to be hired in this way, a practice often justified in the name of ensuring labour discipline. Instead of showing the way forward for the private sector, the state begins to learn from and mimic it.

Lesson 3:

It is essential that feminist advocates and activists articulate for and advocate on the links between production and reproduction so that they become embedded in public policies and social norms. In the context of the Beijing conference, DAWN (1995; p 21) had articulated these links as

“A gender perspective means recognising that women stand at the crossroads between production and reproduction, between economic activity and the care of human beings, and therefore between economic growth and human development. They are workers in both spheres – those most responsible and therefore with most at stake, those who suffer most when the two spheres meet at cross-purposes, and those most sensitive to the need for better integration between the two.”

Much work has been done since the 1970s on the importance of reproduction (including both biological reproduction and population policies on the one hand, and the care economy on the other) in shaping women's roles in production. But the fact that unpaid care work was a matter of heated debate as recently as during the negotiations of UN CSW in 2019, and that sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) continued to be contested terrain during the negotiations for the Political Declaration for the UHC HLM (September 2019) points to the need for wider and more consistent recognition in policy circles of the care diamond (Razavi 2012) and of SRHR.

These lessons provide a lens through which to examine the shifts in the political economic landscape after the Beijing conference.

Changing Political Economic Landscapes since Beijing

The previous decades of the 1970s and 1980s were a contrast in terms of the political economic background. Despite looming challenges consequent on oil price shocks and resulting downturns, the 1970s provided a generally positive economic environment for the world conference on women in Mexico City. The potential for redistribution, jobs creation, public policies and changing laws to favour gender equality seemed to be strong. By contrast, the 1980s saw the first wave of so-called structural adjustment policies (SAPs) in both global South and North with diminished growth, drastic cuts in public expenditures and a climate of vilification of the state as rent-seeking and inefficient. This diminished if not destroyed the preconditions for gender equality identified under lessons 1 and 2 above.

There was strong push-back from UN agencies such as UNICEF, and from women's organizations against these 'Washington Consensus' agendas favouring financialized globalization. It took the form of documenting the harmful consequences for health, education and livelihoods, and advocating against them in national and international forums. Partially in consequence, SAPs became more disguised and nuanced after the 1980s, recognizing the need for greater social sector spending but with a larger role for the private sector. The state continued to be the policy *bete noire*. But these nuances did little to regenerate economic growth in developing countries, or indeed to improve the functioning of the health and education sectors without the supporting hand of the state.

Given the first two lessons outlined in the previous section - the need for equalising growth, and the importance of the state - it was not surprising that women's organizations protested heavily against the Washington Consensus during the Beijing conference. By the 1990s, the importance of using human rights as a support for gender equality had come to be recognized and used to considerable effect by skilled feminist advocates and activists not only at Beijing but also at the Vienna and Cairo conferences that preceded it. It was the underpinning for the broad scope of the Beijing Platform for Action, combining and interlinking civil and political rights with economic, social and cultural rights. This approach bore fruit despite rising inequality and diminished state capacity but largely in terms of changing normative frameworks and at the international level. They were less effective and unevenly so at national levels where the harms of neoliberal globalization and degradation of state capacity for governance and service provision were most deeply felt.

Much has changed in the environment since the commitments of the 1990s UN conferences, making these challenges even more acute. These changes can be grouped under the following broad heads.

Challenge 1:

The crisis of jobs, their growing precariousness, and unemployment have become far more severe. For a while, and especially in East and Southeast Asian countries whose healthy and educated young women's 'nimble fingers' attracted the global assembly-line of large MNCs during the 1980s and 1990s, it appeared as though a new model of job creation was emerging that privileged the employment of young women. But despite its success in raising employment and incomes in these countries (and others that could follow suit), this has not become a model that works in all regions of the South. Too many other physical and social infrastructure pre-requisites were missing, especially with the decline in State capacity. Nor did these jobs, even where they took hold, provide long-term sustainable employment, since they prioritised young, single, non-unionized women. Women commonly lose their jobs or are demoted once they get married.

Worse still, in many parts of the world, the decline of public sector jobs has removed the normative standard for female employment, worsening wages and working conditions, while funding cuts have raised costs of transport, energy and water and other necessities including childcare. As a provider of jobs for women, the public sector has increasingly adopted the piece-rate wages and insecure working conditions of the private sector rather than acting as a setter of standards.

New trends in technology through robotics and artificial intelligence hold great risks for potential disappearance of women's jobs, which tend to be at the lower end where there is the greatest apparent threat from new automation.

Challenge 2:

Environmental degradation and threats – climate disaster, land / water /soil pollution and degradation, massive deforestation, the pollution and damage to the oceans, *inter alia* – are threatening women's abilities to feed families and sustain livelihoods in many parts of the world. These trends have become more acute since the Beijing conference. They represent a manifold increase over the food – fuel – water crisis that we were concerned about during the SAPs of the 1980s. Their impact is critical in many countries and may well be the reason why women's work participation rates have been falling drastically in recent years in India.

Challenge 3:

Adding to the degradation of state capacity is the crisis of electoral democracy. The rise of populist authoritarianism through democratic means is allied on the one side with private corporate power capturing the state to lower its tax burdens, get privileged access to public and common resources, and increase subsidies to the private sector in the name of public-private partnerships. And on the other with attacks on SRHR and gender equality, making common cause with right wing political groups and tendencies. These trends are visible in South and North and among some of the hitherto most democratic countries.

If we set these challenges against the three lessons outlined earlier, it is clear that we are very far from the needed conditions for movement towards gender equality and fulfilment of women's human rights. These backlashes and retrogressions call for even stronger alliance building with other groups and movements if we are not to lose hard-won gains.

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