

Making a Lot Out of a Little

by Nancy Pearson Arcellana

Globalization, like the term “economics,” can be very intimidating. We shy away from examining the implications on our lives because the scope feels so vast. In order to get a handle on what globalization might mean for women, Isis International-Manila, along with the People’s Centered Development Forum, Via Campesina and the Women’s Food and Agriculture Working Group, co-sponsored and organized the International Rural Women’s Workshop in Rome prior to the World Food Summit in November 1996. Women farmers and producers from 29 countries around the world discussed globalization in relation to food security, trade liberalization, environmental degradation and the effects on women, their families and communities.

Globalization—whether positive or negative—was a BIG topic of discussion. As the women shared their experiences, they discovered common issues and concerns, many of which were rooted in similar government and trade policies around the world. One of

the most surprising revelations for the women from developing and transitional-economy countries was the fact that women in North America and Europe shared many of the same problems and concerns. One commonly held view is that no matter how much leaders of nations talk about a “level playing field,” the field is **not** level and *women are ALWAYS left out of the game.*

From the discussions, the women concluded that globalization has inevitably benefited the *already* wealthy in their respective countries and intensified the poverty of borderline and already poor people, especially those in the countryside. Even the IMF and World Bank are sounding the alarms regarding the growing gap between the rich and poor. The ever elusive middle class is entranced by the influx and variety of goods available for purchase but becoming increasingly indebted in the process of joining the global consumer marketplace.

Two women farmers—Shannon Storey and Denise O’Brien who provided background papers for the International Rural

Women’s Workshop on their respective countries: Canada and the United States—offer a good look at the ripple effects of trade policies within North America. There are many disparities among the countries lumped together under “North America” which includes Mexico, Canada and the United States—but 14 key issues were raised that cross *all three borders*, especially related to rural women:

- ◆ There are fewer farms and land holdings are more concentrated.
- ◆ Women lack recognition as producers and farmers.
- ◆ People, particularly young people, are out-migrating to urban areas.
- ◆ Rural poverty is high in all three countries, in some cases higher than in inner cities.
- ◆ Mexico is highly dependent on imported food. In the United States, the amount of food imported from states such as California and Florida as well as from abroad has escalated considerably.
- ◆ Hunger is epidemic.
- ◆ Women’s access to land in Canada and the United States is



A homeless woman stops a moment in Central Park, New York.

(NFU-Canada) states that this crisis “was in fact largely a result of globalization trends influenced more by corporate and neoliberal political agendas than by the actual needs of the world’s peoples and the economies within which they live.”¹ In addition, she notes that high interest rates in the “boom” times of the 1970s and early 1980s were followed not only by environmental problems, namely drought across the Canadian plains, but also the trade wars which wreaked havoc on farm families and their communities.

In the United States, Denise O’Brien of the National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC) cited the disastrous “trickle-down economics” of the Reagan era which gave tax cuts to the wealthy and deregulated government protections in order to stimulate the economy. These policies resulted in high interest rates on the huge debts incurred by farmers who had expanded their land holdings and invested in equipment in the 1970s and early 1980s.² In addition, the financial frauds, bank mergers and bank mismanagement (i.e., the Savings & Loan Bank fiasco) also contributed to the devastation of farm families and communities in the United States.

According to Storey, “simultaneously, many of the large agribusinesses, food processors, banks and other national and international corporate entities that had created the ‘boom’ continued to post substantial profits...[while] many of the family farms which survived the so-called crisis did so because of the women’s contribution of farm labor and off-farm income.”

O’Brien confirms that this is also true in the United States “where more than 40 percent of

very limited; in Mexico, access is almost nonexistent.

- ◆ Women’s unremunerated work (unwaged work) is not recognized in national economic statistics nor is it respected by the society as a whole.
- ◆ The burden of housework and caring for children and the elderly are seldom, if ever, shared by spouses.
- ◆ Women and children are victims of emotional as well as physical abuse, brought on by economic stress.
- ◆ Ecological degradation is prevalent in all three countries as a result of the emphasis on maximum production—the increased use of chemicals in farming is putting the land, air and water at risk.
- ◆ Structural adjustment programs (SAPs) or economic restructuring have had detrimental effects on women and children.

◆ Liberalization of trade has been pushing women to raise crops for export instead of for local or regional consumption.

◆ On a positive note, in all three countries, women are banding together to help find solutions to problems they face and networks are emerging to address economic, social and political realities.

Each of the 14 issues listed above deserves more extensive study. It’s important to note that many of them relate to the social costs of globalization policies especially on women and children. There has been surprisingly little said about the connection between the “farm crisis” in the United States and Canada in the late 1980s and early 1990s and the introduction of globalization policies related to agriculture.

Shannon Storey, from the National Farmers Union of Canada

"Will Work for Food"

by Nancy Pearson Arcellana

Perhaps I'm a globalization by-product—I'm an American who's been living in the Philippines for six and a half years. Filipinos are often surprised to hear how long I've been living in their country and always tell me about their relatives living in mine. But as capital finds easy access and nonexistent borders to nations, workers face stricter rules, regulations and greater barriers to finding life-sustaining employment.

I recently had the opportunity to return to my country of birth—reconnecting with family, friends and catching up on current events and social topics. I was thrilled to eat home-grown tomatoes, sweet corn and raspberries sold at the local farmers' market. But I was shocked and saddened to hear accounts and read newspaper articles of hate, fear and regressive social policies toward workers, the poor and recent immigrants to the United States.

While I was in the U.S., the United Parcel Service (UPS) workers went on strike. UPS has a unique history and has generally treated its workers very well, with the help of a strong union. Initially, it was committed to hiring only part-time workers who could prove they were active students and in need of part-time jobs to further their studies. Over the years, however, this policy "lapsed" and the composition of employees changed from a majority of full-time regular employees to a majority of part-time workers. Today, 60 percent of UPS workers are part-time employees. Apparently, the union felt the time was "now or never" to confront management and make demands not only to retain but expand full-time jobs and regain benefits for both full-time and part-time workers. As the union flexed its muscle, President Clinton was getting a lot of pressure from the business sector to intervene in the matter. As the strike continued, even the striking workers were getting nervous, union benefits being far from adequate for their families. My sister's neighbor—her husband a UPS employee—found another part-time job, in addition to the one he had, in order to help the family make ends meet. In the end, UPS workers did attain most of their demands. As the business sector uses the excuse of "global competition" to cut full-time jobs, reduce wages and eliminate benefits of their workers, the struggle for work that pays living wages even in the United States is far from over.

Friends and newspapers were brimming with stories of people unable to find full-time employment anymore. I was surprised to realize that the phenomenon of part-time, subcontracting and casualization of labor is not confined to developing countries—it's another by-product of globalization. The national and state governments, under the guise of welfare reform, are also privatizing services to the poor. Churches, however, are overwhelmed with the number of people needing services from "meals on wheels" (a program that feeds elderly people confined to their homes) to soup kitchens and shelters for the homeless.

Too often I saw a "sign" of the times—"WILL WORK FOR FOOD"—held by people standing or sitting on corners of busy intersections. This by-product of globalization in what is regarded as the wealthiest country in the world should make us all beware!

farm operator households lose money on their farm on a cash basis in a typical year, but earn adequate income from off-farm employment (most likely earned by the woman of the household) to offset the losses."

Both Storey and O'Brien claim that the ongoing problems of farm debt and rural poverty have had alarming implications for rural communities especially for women and children: heightened rates of domestic violence (physical and emotional abuse); increased rates of accidental deaths met by over-worked family members; and increased number of suicides (this was especially true during the "farm crisis" but appears to have continued) which leave mostly women widows to support their families and farms.

Storey makes a strong case regarding the detrimental effects of the existing trade agreements on Canadian producers but on the society as a whole: "Despite denials by provincial and national governments, many socially progressive analysts believe that the acquiescence of those governments to the global trade agenda expressed in international agreements such as the Canadian-U.S. Trade Agreement (CUSTA), North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) have resulted in current reduction in public access to agriculture-related price and transportation supports, rural health and education services and other key aspects of Canada's long-established social safety nets. At the same time, as supports are being reduced, both levels of government [provincial and national] are providing no means of protection from rising costs for inputs and services." She goes on to note that "women in particular have suffered from cuts in the areas of health and education. [Com-

pounding the problem] in many cases, the workers cut from schools and health care facilities are farm women whose incomes were necessary to the continuation of the farm. Closure of hospitals and nursing homes have increased women's family work as responsibility for elder and other care tends to go to the family's young and middle-aged women."

The globalization by-products attested to so far do not enhance the life and well-being of either individuals or societies with women and children most adversely affected. If the trade agreements among developed countries such as Canada and the United States have resulted in such disturbing "by-products," the implications are definitely bleak for women and children in developing countries with fewer mechanisms of support and social safety nets.

Even though women are excluded from the official playing field, they are not sitting on the sidelines waiting to play in this game. Women don't have the time, the luxury nor the inclination to wait for an invitation they know won't be forthcoming. Instead, they are organizing and voicing their common concerns, needs and demands through various organizations and coalitions.

O'Brien cites Women Involved in Farm Economics (WIFE) which "meets the needs of women wanting to be involved in policy-making" in the United States. Storey provides a good example from the grassroots community level: "gradually, women are acquiring more seats on rural municipal councils...women's representation on rural school boards and school councils is much better established, and women are actually in the majority on many boards dealing with health-related issues." In addition, she notes that there are a number of national and regional

organizations which attempt to address a variety of issues for farm and rural women in Canada: the Canadian Farm Women's Network (CFWN); the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada (FWIC), representing farm and rural women's needs for 70 years; and the National Farmers Union (NFU), "a family farm organization which constitutionally guarantees women members their own voice and place."

Nettie Wiebe, president of the National Farmers Union of Canada, is helping women worldwide to have their own voice and place. She is a strong advocate and member of Via Campesina—an autonomous, farmer-led, pluralist global movement including peasants, small and medium-sized farmers, farm workers and indigenous communities. The primary goal of Via Campesina is to develop solidarity and unity within the diversity of rural organizations in order to promote economic relationships that are equal and socially just, effective and genuine agrarian reform, food sovereignty, and sustainable and equitable agricultural production based on small and medium-sized producers. At present, Wiebe is the only female member of the Via Campesina Coordinating Committee. She is also the coordinator of the Via Campesina Women's Working Group.

During the International Rural Women's Workshop in Rome, she shared her thoughts about Via Campesina and the role of the Women's Working Group in the movement: "You all know in your own countries, and those of you who work in mixed organizations, that peasant and farm organizations are mostly led by men. That is, I think, the case everywhere. But we women are there and we have a very important contribution and part in this discussion. What

we need to do is insert ourselves there and take our rightful place around that table. I think in Via Campesina there is an open space for us. What we need to do is occupy that space and enlarge it. We women need to collectively create that space in the movement and to support each other."

For women, it is a big challenge to maximize the positive and minimize the negative by-products of globalization. The needs raised by Storey for "better access to rural child care services, farm women's training and education needs, legal rights issues, the constant challenge of family violence, and the development of solidarity with farm and rural women in other parts of the world" were affirmed by women from every region of the world.

It is important to remember that where there are women, there is still hope. As Wiebe pointed out to the International Rural Women's Workshop participants, "women are beginning to take their places and make their voices heard. This is not something that's happening 'out there' in an elite way, but is being propelled forward by us. We are part of something that's moving forward...As women, we know how to make a lot out of a little." ↷

Nancy Pearson Arcellana, M.S.W. is an American who has lived and worked in the Philippines for the past six years—five years under the Mennonite Central Committee working with streetchildren and the National Council of Churches in the Philippines—and in the past months, as the Research Manager for Isis International-Manila.

References:

- ¹ Storey, Shannon, "Role of Women in Food Security in Canada", *International Rural Women's Workshop on Food Security: A Workshop Report*, pp. 52-56.
- ² O'Brien, Denise, "Role of Women in Food Security in Canada", *International Rural Women's Workshop on Food Security: A Workshop Report*, pp. 50-500002.