

## The North-South Debate: Moving Beyond Dichotomies

By Ana Elena Obanda

**R**ecession was knocking at the doors of the world's biggest economy before September 11, 2001. The Japanese government and the governments of the European Union were already in trouble and looking for the political and economic alliances that would bring them back in shape.

The World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR) was just one more stage on which the geopolitical and economic inequalities between the North and the South played out. After September 11, the recipe for the new world disorder has been perfected: the struggle for absolute control of resources and power—in all its forms—within patriarchal systems. Com-

bine with this basic ingredient high levels of insecurity among both the privileged and the non-privileged; a philosophy that pretends to erase inequality by acknowledging “diversity;” the lack of ethical leadership; racist, sexist and classist neoliberal globalisation; the years of impunity of dictatorships and marauding governments; and all kinds of fundamentalism. Mix these all carefully and the result is a planet full of war and a devastated ecosystem.

The adaptations of this recipe to specific settings are more complicated. The global women's movement, and other groups in civil society, cannot fall back on old paradigms to respond to the emerging challenges. We need to develop new ideas, strategies and methodologies to challenge the dominant configurations of power, instead of making it with token alterations of



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these arrangements, as many liberal feminists who don't understand the indivisibility of rights would like to do.

There are signs that this new world juncture is bringing civil society together to exchange ideas and establish the connections between the different issues in new ways. Recognition of the need for internationally accepted standards of justice and the rule of law is growing, as illustrated by the rapid pace of ratification of the International Criminal Court and the work of the International Tribunals for the Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda.

This energy can generate new debates and approaches to political action that cross the conventional boundaries of activism. To bring this about, however, we need to re-examine our roles and responsibilities as political actors. For example, women in the North can make connections between their oppression at home and the oppression perpetrated or supported by their own governments elsewhere, and develop strategies to hold their governments accountable for both. Women in the North, particularly the U.S., can do more to hold their governments accountable for their foreign policy—including military and economic policy—and not to limit their activism to “women-specific” issues like women in peace negotiations in Afghanistan, and to address the interrelationship of women's human rights with military and economic policy.

In rethinking our roles as activists, we have to acknowledge that the North-South division within the global women's movement itself determines women's access to power and resources. Despite their government's determination to undermine the WCAR, for example, it was easier for women from the U.S. to get funding to attend the Conference than the women from the South, including women from Africa. There were more U.S.-based non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Durban than any other group.

Meanwhile, women in the South are still fighting for basic rights (from water to access to information) within countries that often depend economically and politically on the hegemonic states, multinational corporations and financial institutions based in the North including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The women's movement in the South has a specific agenda regarding the condition of women in this part of the world, and it is important that there be spaces for women's organisations in the developing world to analyse and expose the issues that disproportionately affect them, especially after September 11.

The global women's movement should find ways to move beyond the North-South dichotomy, by negotiating over power and resources, by taking responsibility and being accountable for the actions of the various women's formations in this movement, by recognising our distinct and multiple oppressions, and by finding common ground on which to build concrete alliances. Moving forward along these lines will require that we shed our dualistic approaches without losing sight of the bipolar realities of the global order.

### **Finding the Overlaps**

Our negotiations can use the perspective of intersectionality as a tool for identifying our multiple identities in different contexts and how our identities simultaneously interact and become oppressive or empowering. In doing so, we will reaffirm the bases of our exclusions or inclusions, or discover new ones. The realities of a “North in the South” and a “South in North,” for example, could also be examined under a new optic. As more women's identities are represented from all regions, we will come to better understand how we can work together and build collective identities.

While the intersectionality perspective allows us to make all women's realities visible, it can also push us into the trap of identity politics

and suppress the collective or common identities essential to political action. The experience of the WCAR suggests that identity politics could collapse into a competition among victims for the status of the most oppressed. This undermines possibilities for political action and takes the focus off the power relations that structure oppression. But if we begin rethinking how we see our identities, we can avoid this trap.

We should explore how political action can co-exist with the subjective dimension of voicing our victimisations by recognising how privilege and oppression co-exist in each of us. My own reality as a white Costa Rican woman illustrates this co-existence. Our national economy is hostage to the U.S. Costa Rica, like many other Latin American countries, has no power to influence economic or political decision-making at the global level. Control over our resources is increasingly determined by external capital. Although this country is far more developed than others in Central America, we still lack the basic infrastructure that is the norm in the U.S. Within my own society, I have race and class privilege as a white lawyer from a family of professionals. That identity shifts, however, when I am in the U.S. where being Spanish-speaking and Latina become the bases for covert and overt discrimination.

## Pressing Questions

We can begin the process of exploring new approaches by asking questions such as, how do we deal honestly with our diversity and very real power differences? How can we acknowledge power differences without fragmenting the women's movement? Can we make alliances within which we can negotiate North-South power disparities and power differences within our own regional, national and local contexts? Can we agree on a shared basis for political action? Is it important to have an ethical framework within which to develop our political goals? How do we include and recognise more women's voices? How can we use the human rights framework at this juncture to fight our specific oppressions with-

out breaking the principle of indivisibility of rights? These are few of the questions that should be debated collectively. The process will be as important as the answers in opening the space for political action.

More than ever, we need common political action among women of the South and the North to protect all our rights in a world economy of fear and repression. For example, this is an opportunity for the global women's movement to examine the repressive anti-terrorist measures legitimated by Resolution 1373 (2001) of the Security Council. The resolution commits UN member States to prevent and suppress the financing of terrorism, as well as criminalise the provision or collection of funds for such acts. The resolution also empowers a government to freeze the funds, assets and resources of those who commit terrorist acts, whether by their direct participation or by providing assistance to terrorists.

The world economy has specific North-South dimensions that have consequences for our activism. The conditions in the global South are deteriorating on a different scale and with a different intensity than in the North. Our task in the global South is to determine our strategies within the global context and link our struggles on specific issues, like religious fundamentalism, to the struggles of women in other regions.

We need for women in the North, who are in a better position than women in the South to be heard by their governments, to put their efforts into affecting their governments' foreign policies as part of their strategies for dealing with their own oppressions. In order to build our identities as political actors, we need to move beyond one-size-fits-all answers to North-South distinctions. ♪

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