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AFTER BEIJING

The dramatic collapse of the «miracle» economies of Southeast Asia in 1998 has focused global attention on the human and social consequences of unbridled economic growth. The unravelling of the fabled tiger economies of Republic of Korea, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia, long upheld by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank as stellar successes of the Washington consensus has brought into the open the latent imbalances and inequities of market-led economic growth. Even more significant is the public acknowledgement in the mainstream media of the catastrophic impact of the financial crisis on women.² From every country in the Asian region have come reports of women being the first to be fired, growing numbers of girl drop-outs in schools, poor food intake by women and girls, rising domestic violence as a result of financial anxieties, and increasing prostitution. A September 1998 World Bank report described the «human crisis» thus: «Children are being pulled out of school and put to work; food is being rationed—and women and girls are frequently the first to sacrifice their portions; and violence, street children, and prostitution are all on the increase.»³

It took a crisis of such proportions in one of the fastest-growing regions of the world to provide evidence, if it were still needed, of the impact of economic crisis on women. The subsequent diagnosis and analysis of the malaise by financial pundits and economic gurus even faulted macroeconomic policies such as export-led growth and structural adjustment, long prescribed by the Bank and Fund as engines of growth. The Bank report cited noted that «budgets were cut initially in all of the affected countries as part of the macroeconomic adjustment

process. While fiscal targets have since been adjusted in some countries, public services may still suffer cutbacks—of particular concern *are potentially irreversible effects* of cutbacks on investment in human resources» [emphasis added].

These are important and long-overdue statements and go some way in recognising the gender impact of economic crisis. But they still do not go so far as to acknowledge what women activists, economists and researchers have been saying for more than two decades—that structural adjustment and economic globalisation are not gender-neutral. In many instances they are inherently discriminatory against women. The gender impact of such macroeconomic policies may not be uniformly negative across countries, classes and economies. Nor can their impact be allowed to obscure the fact that the record of many developing countries in social sector spending was dismal prior to structural adjustment. But two decades since the introduction of adjustment programmes in a majority of developing countries, it is undeniable that economic restructuring has exacerbated—even legitimised—governments' lack of political will to address women's concerns in policies and budgets. In every region of the world, it is women—as workers, producers, consumers, mothers and caretakers—who have been the shock absorbers of adjustment efforts. They bear a disproportionate burden of the costs of economic transition and economic collapse.

In fact, the debilitating impact of economic globalisation and restructuring programmes on women's lives, as reported by growing numbers of women's activists and NGOs around the world, raises concerns that even while the building blocks of Beijing are going up, the edifice stands on shaky ground. On the one hand, more than two-thirds of the world's 187 governments that adopted the Beijing Platform for Action have reported drawing national plans of action and draft plans to implement the Platform

¹ The author is director of WEDO's Women's rights programme.

² See, for example, Nicholas D. Kristof, «With Asia's Economies Shrinking, Women Are Being Squeezed Out», The New York Times, June 11th 1998.

³ The World Bank, East Asia: The Road to Recovery, cited in Abid Aslam, «World Bank Reasserts Role in Asia», *Terra Viva*, InterPress Service Daily Journal, September 30th 1998.

for Action, according to WEDO's March 1998 survey of countries that attended the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women.⁴ On the other hand, women's right to health, education and equal opportunity, enshrined in a range of global policy documents and internationally binding conventions, are under attack as never before as a result of economic globalisation and market-driven growth policies.

COUNTS COUNT

Resource allocations to implement national action plans for women are generally a good indicator of seriousness of intent or capacity of government to fulfil commitments to human development. WEDO's survey found that budget cuts since 1995 range from an average of 20% (Germany) to a crippling 60% (Guatemala). In Canada, the national budget for women's programmes has been cut from 12 million Canadian dollars before 1990 to 8.1 million today, less than 1 Canadian dollar per woman and girl. In a majority of countries, the budget for women's programmes is a small percentage of the national budget, ranging from 1.7% (Lithuania) to an invisible speck of the whole (Dominican Republic and the Philippines).

While only eight countries reported an actual decrease, some governments, the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand among them, pointed to the difficulties of assessing the budget for women's programmes. They cited the lack of gender-disaggregated data and/or «mainstreaming» policies that call for gender-responsive expenditures by all ministries and departments.

As some watchful NGOs have pointed out, however, sectoral analysis of government spending can be quite revealing of real priorities. In South Africa, budgetary cuts to the department of land have had a negative impact on land reform, affecting women the most. The agriculture budget continues to support commercial farmers at the expense of micro-farmers, who are mostly women. Over half of the energy budget went to the Atomic Energy Corporation rather than electrification of communities.

27 out of a total of 90 reporting countries in the survey said the budget for women's programmes has grown since the Beijing conference. Increases ranged from 6% in India to 25% in New Zealand to 34% in Luxembourg. In an almost equal number of countries (28), the budget remained the same.

TYPES OF VIOLENCE

There is growing evidence that globalisation of the commercial sex industry is an abhorrent aspect of globalising economies that contributes to the phenomenon of violence against women. With the opening of borders and markets, and the accentuation of inter-regional and inter-class disparities, growing numbers of women, and increasingly very young boys and girls, are falling victims to an ever-widening and deeply entrenched flesh trade. After Asian women, the second wave has engulfed women from eastern European and former Soviet Union countries, who are the latest to be bought and sold in a highly organised and lucrative sex business that now spans the world. This criminal exploitation of women fostered by the forces of economic globalisation makes a mockery of their hard-won recognition as equal partners with men in development and peace.

For the most part, laws to curb trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation of women and children, and pornography are marked by timid half-measures and doublespeak, reflecting the capitulation of many governments to the lure of the tourism industry, the grip of powerful mafia interests, and the commodification of women in the popular media. These disturbing trends are especially evident in the Philippines, Thailand, Ukraine and Bulgaria.

Where positive policy change has come about, it is the unflagging efforts of women's and child rights advocates that have led to the criminalisation of sexual trafficking in varying degrees.

In Japan, neither the Criminal Code nor the Child Welfare Law recognises sexual offence as a serious crime. Women parliamentarians from the majority party are leading a project to introduce laws to ban child sexual exploitation. New Zealand's Crimes Amendment Act of 1995 makes the sexual exploitation of children by New Zealanders overseas an extra-territorial offence. In Cuba, reforms to the penal code in 1997 do not penalise prostitutes and impose penalties for all those who profit from prostitution.

There has been little recognition of other forms of economic violence against women. One notable exception is Costa Rica, where women activists scored a significant victory in getting recognition for *violencia patrimonial*, or economic violence, which constitutes taking away women's ability to work and access to housing and economic resources. Costa Rica was one of 28 countries in WEDO's survey that adopted laws and policies against domestic violence, the greatest number in any category. In almost all of them, notably in Latin America, the laws are a direct result of women's intense and sustained campaigns to bring violence

⁴ *Mapping Progress: Assessing Government Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action*, WEDO's fifth report in a series since 1996. See also *Promise Kept, Promise Broken?: A Survey of Governments on National Action Plans to Implement the Beijing Platform* (March and September 1997), *Beyond Promises: Governments in Motion One Year After the Beijing Women's Conference* (September 1996) and *First Steps: What Has Happened Since Beijing?* (March 1996). For all these reports, WEDO sent a survey questionnaire to all governments that adopted the Beijing Platform, as well as to NGOs in these countries for independent assessments of government performance. WEDO approached governments through their permanent missions to the United Nations and also contacted relevant government agencies in country capitals.

against women to the centre of public debate. Women activists have negotiated with governments, made strategic allies of women parliamentarians, helped draft legislation, monitored its enforcement by the police and interpretation by the courts, and lobbied for support centres for victims of violence. In a unique initiative in the Republic of Korea, the Korean Women's Hotline set up an IMF hotline during the economic crisis in 1998 to respond to the needs of women for counselling in the face of growing unemployment and increased violence at home due to financial anxieties.

Women's access to health care as a whole is endangered by government cutbacks of different items as part of debt servicing requirements and/or fiscal austerity measures in developing as well as in industrialised countries. Access to health care is one of the most sensitive indicators of women's well-being because of women's preponderance among the most vulnerable population groups. Women and girls typically tend to use a smaller share of household health expenditures than men and boys, but carry a greater burden of health problems, both their own and those of household members they have to look after. They enjoy less freedom in addressing their health concerns. They are less willing to go to male practitioners and are less able to seek treatment outside because of the household division of labour.

Policies that have an impact on health services, such as the introduction of user fees and changing staffing patterns (with more women being retrenched than men as a result of downsizing in state health sectors) therefore affect women disproportionately. These patterns repeat themselves in adjusting countries in every region, as reports in WEDO's survey show. In Canada and the United States, women are badly affected by the layoffs of health care workers, reduction in hospital stays and privatisation of home care and other health services.

EMPLOYMENT, MAQUILA AND EDUCATION

Cutbacks in public childcare and other support services for women, as part of the transition from a command to a market economy in eastern Europe and central Asia, have especially affected women's ability to compete in the job market. Women are a disproportionate number of the unemployed also because of their preponderance at lower levels, the preference for men at higher and skilled levels of employment, and closures of factories under privatisation. Women's unemployment averages 70% in Armenia, Ukraine, Russia, Bulgaria and Croatia. Further, governments' failure to finance benefits under new laws that seek to provide support for mothers and pregnant women in the workforce, as in Croatia and the Ukraine, have made women too expensive to hire.

Cutbacks in expenditures in the public sector, one of the few areas where women have access to full-time and unionised jobs with decent pay and benefits, are having an impact in industrialised nations, too. Women in public sectors have suffered massive layoffs and/or loss of benefits in Canada and the United States, with women from ethnic and aboriginal minorities hit the hardest.

Women's access to equal opportunity and equal pay in work,

labour and organising rights have been severely eroded in the global economy. Nowhere is this more evident than in the export-processing zones that have mushroomed in adjusting countries and that have a preponderance of female workers. This feminisation of employment, often interpreted as a positive outcome of structural adjustment, is in fact a result of international and local demand for cheap and docile labour that can be used in low-skill, repetitive jobs in unsafe and insecure conditions without minimum guarantees. A recent report from the International Labour Organisation on duty-free zones concluded, after 20 years of research into the phenomenon, that they attract investment and generate jobs, but are also enclaves of low wages and exploitative labour conditions. Women constitute 90% of the 27 million workers working in nearly 850 such areas operating in the world today.

Malaysia, the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, Egypt and Mexico are among those countries where growing numbers of women are exploited by the global market. Sri Lanka's NGOs point out that trade relations with importing countries have a direct impact on the employment opportunities of women, particularly those in the duty-free zones and in industries that produce goods primarily for exports. The increase in taxes for exports to countries such as the United States, for example, makes the situation of these workers very vulnerable.

Entire economies, such as that of the Philippines, profit from the earnings of women migrant workers overseas, who send vitally important remittances home, but who are not recognised as trading in services. As a result, they are forced to work illegally and suffer gross violations of their human rights, ranging from inhuman working conditions to physical violence, and even murder.

As in health and employment, the education sector has suffered drastic cutbacks under structural adjustment, with grave implications for girls. Where primary and secondary school education was previously largely subsidised by the state, the introduction of school fees under cost-recovery programmes has meant that families must now choose between work and school for their children, with girls being the majority of drop-outs. Reports from Ghana, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Armenia attested to this trend. In India, a 14% cut in the government expenditure on primary education has forced many schools to seek private funds. The growing privatisation of schools has made education an expensive proposition for poorer households. At the same time, a 17% budgetary cut for non-formal education has led to the closure of many night schools and adult education programmes which have large numbers of working women.

THE POWER OF WOMEN

Macro-economic policies such as structural adjustment, privatisation, export-oriented growth policies and agricultural «reform» have exacerbated women's inequality in a number of areas, although only a small minority of governments acknowledge the fact and fewer still have programmes to offset such impact.

Despite these discouraging economic conditions, it is a tribute to women's unflagging activism and to some governments' commitment of political will that the news on implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action is in many instances positive, hopeful and responsive to women. 77 of reporting countries in WEDO's survey said they had set up national offices to follow up on commitments they made at Beijing. 64 countries enacted laws and adopted policy measures to address women's rights in the 12 critical areas of concern identified in the Platform for Action.

Many of these measures have come about with the active involvement and watchful criticism of women's NGOs. They have been instrumental in getting equitable laws passed and discriminatory provisions dropped in a majority of countries. Women's advocacy campaigns have had the most visible impact on law-making in domestic violence, trafficking in women and children, reproductive health, political participation and property rights.

Whether invited gladly to the policy arena or allowed no more than a grudging foothold, women's organisations have persisted in seizing every opportunity to shape and critique programmes and policies that affect their lives. Their spirited engagement is all the more remarkable in parts of the world where cultural and political environments have traditionally discouraged such participation, and where civil society is still an evolving concept, and especially in light of the tremendous financial and physical constraints under which NGOs work.

Where national action plans remain more «plans» than «action», the survey showed that among the primary reasons for lack of progress are the exploitative forces of economic globalisation and the internal austerity measures adopted by governments for debt servicing. It is the pressure of intense advocacy by women activists that has moved governments to integrate women's priorities in national policies, especially to combat poverty and meet basic needs in several countries, and to enact laws in the difficult realms of violence, health and inheritance in others.

WEDO's objective in conducting the survey on which this article is based, as in all its efforts to monitor implementation of UN

conference agreements, is to help strengthen women's activists in individual countries to demand accountability from governments and other policy-makers for people-centred and gender-aware policies at all levels that affect women. Providing NGO voices an independent forum to critique government performance ensures that government claims do not go unchallenged and opens the space for political dialogue. A framework for critical assessment helps NGOs build a political perspective and hone their advocacy skills, encouraging vigilance by civil society.

Seeing the world through the eyes of women provides a realistic context for official words and deeds. Assessments of progress by government authorities (still overwhelmingly male) must be read with the close-up, on-the-ground views of women's lives. Government reports that do not have the informed voice of NGOs are the poorer for it. The NGO responses bring a critical voice to monitoring efforts absent from official reports by governments and United Nations bodies. The voices of NGO women not only enliven these progress reports; they enrich them with a vital reality check—thus vindicating monitoring strategies that engage governments and civil society in equal measure.

Finally, this monitoring initiative links international advocacy with national efforts through information, solidarity and effective alliance building. It is therefore a potentially powerful tool to strengthen the capacity of the women's movement to build a political constituency nationally and across borders that is key to creating political will for change.

- Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) is an international advocacy network that works to achieve a healthy and peaceful planet, with social, political, economic and environmental justice for all through the empowerment of women in all their diversity and participating equally with men in decision-making from grassroots to global arenas.