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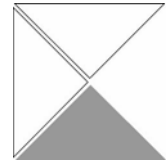
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VIEW: Feminism and the struggle against globalisation —Farish A Noor



Here lies the dilemma of the Southern feminist and labour activist: On the one hand she cannot and must not give up the struggle for emancipation, universal human dignity and equal rights. On the other, its success will be immediately undermined by the global financial market that remains lawless

One of the most stupid, irrational and unfounded accusations thrown at feminists in the developing world is that feminism is a Western construct and that feminists in the developing world are the stooges of the West.

We heard often the cry that Asian feminists are working hand-in-glove with their powerful Western patrons; or that they are undermining the moral fabric of their societies. We heard that by demanding equal rights such women are, in fact, challenging and threatening the theological-ideological basis of their religions and cultures. More often than not these accusations come from defenders of patriarchy and outdated 'Asian values' that legitimise a systematic disempowerment and marginalisation of the subaltern. These people tend to forget that the downside of their blanket accusations is the somewhat bizarre conclusion that Asians and other non-Europeans do not deserve equal rights and that equality is somehow essentially un-Asian! What then were the anti-colonial and anti-imperialism struggles for?

The celebration of International Women's Day this week, however, has once again brought to the fore some disturbing realities, not least of which is the growing power differential between the developed and the developing worlds. While women in North America and Western Europe continue to struggle for equal rights, salaries and working conditions at home and at work; the women of countries like Turkey, Pakistan, Indonesia and the Arab world have much more to complain about: from the rising levels of violence in their societies to the on-going exploitation of women by powerful multinational companies.

It was for this reason that the demands made by feminists in France this week came as a timely reminder of the commonality of struggle that should unite women and men all over the world today. Feminism, they contended, cannot and will not succeed unless and until it links itself to the struggle against globalisation. For it is the process of globalisation — the deliberate and calculated advancement of corporate interests under the control of an oligarchy of (often male) patrons and their clients — that has spawned many of the problems that those in the developing world face today, ranging from the exploitation of human and natural resources to the trafficking of arms, narcotics and slaves.

While feminism's initial struggle was directed against the dehumanising and divisive culture of patriarchy, a shift towards a critique of globalisation does not necessarily imply a departure from its original aims. For the globalisation today is an extension of patriarchal structures of economic, political, cultural and racial dominance. It is not a coincidence, for instance, that some of the most powerful multinationals in the world today are built on the foundations of the old trading-empires of the past. Just compare the conduct of American and European oil and gas companies in Africa or Halliburton in Iraq today with the conduct of the older imperial companies such as the Dutch East Indies Company, the East India Company or the Compagnie des Indes. Then, as now, patriarchy is founded on economic power as well as the possession of the tools of violence and repression.

Bringing together the common struggles against patriarchy and globalisation, however, is bound to complicate matters for activists worldwide. For while both patriarchy and globalisation are structural phenomena and involve patterns, orders and hierarchies of power and violence, both have evolved to be more sophisticated, inclusive and decentralised. The common mistake of many anti-globalisation movements to target the symptoms, rather than the causes and structures, of globalisation (such as the attacks on American fast-food restaurants) comes to mind. It would be wrong likewise to conclude that women's rights have been won simply because a handful of women have been included in the overall

dominant structure of patriarchal power. (The elevation of Condoleeza Rice to the neo-con cabinet of President Bush Jr comes to mind. It is no indicator that women in America have been really emancipated, least of all the women of Iraq.)

For feminists and labour activists in the South the picture is even more complicated: Imagine what would happen if an anti-globalisation movement were to succeed in a small developing country that was previously seen as a source of cheap labour. The inflow of direct foreign investment (FDI) may have been the only thing that kept the economy of the country afloat. If feminists workers and activists in such a country manage to secure their objective of attaining equal rights and pay for women workers employed by foreign multinationals in that country there will be a near-instantaneous outflow of foreign capital to another country where workers' and women's rights are less protected.

Here then lies the dilemma of the Southern feminist and labour activist: On the one hand she cannot and must not give up the struggle for emancipation, universal human dignity and equal rights. On the other, its success will be immediately undermined by the global financial market that remains lawless. What, then, is to be done, given her lack of control over predatory international economic agents and actors?

The call of European feminists for a global struggle against globalisation is laudable. It has to be taken seriously. Today globalisation threatens to undermine the social cohesion of all societies, be they in the developed or the developing world. Furthermore the zero-sum logic of global economics threatens to rob politics of any semblance of ethics or moral responsibility, allowing governments (particularly in the South) to abdicate responsibility for their own populations.

But the struggle against globalisation and patriarchy can only succeed when we all realise that the two problems are inter-connected and have to be addressed together by a global community that is cognisant of the realities of our times. The improvement of conditions for women in the developed world cannot be at the expense of men and women in the South.

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