



Inglis Plant, Toronto, March 1989.

Photo: David Smiley

The Global Capitalist Economic Agenda

Impact on Women's Human Rights

by Joan Grant-Cummings

L'auteure ce rend compte que comment l'économie capitaliste et mondialisante s'en remet de plus en plus au travail non-rémunéré et sous-payé des femmes, elle en démontre les implications et suggère des modèles de résistance.

While human rights are our birthright and it is the responsibility of our governments to ensure they are not violated, feminists know they are violated daily: male violence against women and other forms of sexism are ways the rights of women are impacted upon daily.

The globalization of the capitalist economic system through structural adjustment programs in the South (Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean) as well as economic restructuring in the North has wreaked havoc in the lives of most women and devastated our communities. Its proponents—largely the business and corporate elite, supportive governments, and right-wing followers—have in the last two and a half decades sought to eradicate all other economic systems and devastate the social economy.

As a consequence the human rights of women and workers—including migrant workers and the unemployed, people living in poverty, indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, and people of colour—have been violated in some way, shape, or form. In every category women's rights and conditions have been the most adversely impacted. This globalized capitalism, more so than ever before, relies increasingly on the exploitation of women's unpaid work for its survival.

This is the most important indicator of the inherent anti-woman, anti-feminist, discriminatory principles along which capitalism is constructed. For women, in particular feminist women, feminism is, therefore, an important antidote to eradicate this global capitalist beast.

Feminism is a woman-led revolutionary imperative to make changes from an equality-seeking framework; changes that will reframe the "global family" from a human rights perspective, ensuring that women, men, and children are equal in all societies. Of course, women as a group are not homogeneous. Some groups of women who clearly identify themselves as part of the feminist movement, have to consider not only the context of their own lived experiences within their communities and globally, within movements of liberation such as feminism, but also the fact of their oppression within other arenas. Specifically, the lives of Aboriginal women, Black women,

women of colour, lesbians, women with disabilities, women living in poverty, immigrant women, refugee women, and women who work at the bottom of the corporate heap differ greatly from the "average" Canadian woman, whoever she may be.

This leads many to frame feminism within the context of their complete identities and the different revolutionary struggles they simultaneously engage in and experience. Their knowledge-base and full experiences challenge feminism to incorporate an integrated analysis of equality.

It is important to enunciate our definition of feminism as it will inform the actions we will or must take to ensure our society is a place where human rights and equality rights are guaranteed and protected. While human rights are our birthright and it is the responsibility of our governments to ensure that they are not violated, feminists know that they are violated daily: male violence against women and other forms of sexism; racism; lesbophobia and homophobia; ableism; ageism; lack of access to health care; bias in the justice system; xenophobia; bias in the education system; poverty; forced migration; inequity in our workplaces and our homes; sexist media portrayals; etc., are ways that the rights of women are impacted upon daily. On top of this, the new economic world order has rapidly created the greatest economic apartheid we have ever seen.

The globalization of the capitalist economic system is not an accidental phenomenon or a natural course of events. This is a well thought-out and orchestrated plan by the corporate capitalist business elite. In 1976, the Business Council on National Issues (BCNI) was formed in Canada, with a membership of 150 corporate giants. They developed a long-range plan of how Canada (along with its G-7 partners) could actively support the plan of corporations largely from the G-7 nations, with the aim of fully integrating them nationally, and to thus internationalize capitalism. In other words, destroy or discredit any other economic systems, control all markets, and control the agenda.

One major component was to silence, isolate, and discredit the voices of the social justice movements that they saw as "too influential" on government. Of course, this included the feminist movement. The other "culprits" in their books are the labour movement, environmentalists, human rights activists, anti-racist groups, and other anti-discriminatory movements.

Some feminist history

To adequately deal with this issue, some global feminist history is necessary. The '60s and the '70s were different

years for feminists in the South from those of feminists in the North. The restructuring of the capitalist economy had already been implemented in the South by the time feminists in the North caught up in the '80s and '90s. The analyses of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) by feminists in the South has thus been instructive for many

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feminists in the North and furthered our understanding of the latest make-over of the capitalist beast (DAWN).

Simply put, G-7 countries like Canada, thinking about how to maximize profits with little cost, saw the South as a haven for cheap labour. They influenced governments by offering them major loans and dollars to "develop." This development included the building of factories, aggressive mining, logging, agribusinesses, etc. Using the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank (WB), countries in the South were convinced to "develop" and liberalize their economies.

Let us look at the results through southern women's eyes: the destruction of women's own markets; the destruction of women's own economic systems; reduced or no land ownership; loss of indigenous lands without compensation or restitution; destruction of traditional farming practices and their subsequent replacement with cash crops; the underdevelopment of health, education, and social service systems; disappearance of traditional social and cultural ways of community development; disappearance of traditional diets and eating patterns; increase in women's poverty, under- and unemployment; trafficking in women and girls; the phenomenon of the feminization of migration of our communities for economic reasons; increased civil rights violations and a loss of democratic structures within societies; widespread abuses and inequities in workplaces; the phenomenon of the urban poor and the homeless who were displaced peoples from indigenous lands; the feminization of poverty (DAWN).

I grew up in Kingston, Jamaica when all of this was occurring. The profits made by the higgler-women and street sellers within their own markets literally paid off Jamaica's IMF loans when the elite and the business barons siphoned *their* profits from the suffering of the poor—largely women—into U.S., Canadian, and other foreign

banks. There are always those who reap benefits from the suffering of the people, especially under the IMF and the WB. You see, the IMF and the WB loans demanded that none of the money borrowed be put towards indigenous farming practices. All food production from these loans must be put towards export markets (see Witter). Still today, in many countries of the South, two-thirds of the goods in the marketplaces hail from the North, and are not indigenous to the land.

In the face of this, how then can governments in the South truly develop health, education, and social development systems? It is a testament to the tenacity, resistance, and abilities of the people of the South that there still remains today any traditional cultural practices, foods, social systems, identities, etc. and that resistance to global capitalism is actually growing.

In the North, in the '70s and '80s, feminists, armed with recommendations from the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, were pushing and pressuring governments to make changes for employment rights; state-funded daycare; anti-violence programs; changes to the justice system; a women's equality fund; changes in the economic policies; changes to the Immigration Act; etc. Word had started to spread about the structural adjustment programs and their impact on the political, economic, and social life of countries in the South. Yet northern feminists for the most part did not see or understand the threat to the North. It was not until end of the '80s and the beginning of the '90s that northern feminists realized we needed to look at what was transpiring in our own backyard.

Simultaneously, within the feminist movement the work to deal with racism was also beginning to take root. Women of colour and Aboriginal women had started to openly and publicly challenge white sisters in the movement, and within the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) the challenge and struggle was public, vocal, and instructive in terms of organizational change. NAC's ultimate adoption of anti-racist feminism had a major impact on NAC's international work and understanding of the capitalist economic restructuring process. A feminist analysis, in the North, of the capitalist economic restructuring process, in fact, eventually included an anti-racist analysis of globalization, exposing the racism implicit in globalization.

Additionally, work with women from the South changed from a patronizing instructive feminism to one from an anti-racist, equality-seeking perspective, where the analysis of women from the South was valued and fully integrated in any economic analysis for women in the North. In developing our analysis of the federal government's

policies and programs from an anti-racist feminist perspective, NAC broadened, not narrowed, its ability to communicate with women nationally and globally and to have an understanding of the government's and the corporate elites' agenda that was more inclusive of a broader-based population of women.

The alphabetization of oppression

The marker most activists use for Canada's active involvement with the makeover of the capitalist beast is the negotiation and signing of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA). The FTA was ratified despite the major public outcry and foretold what could be expected from subsequent governments—despite public opposition, the corporate agenda will prevail.

The new economic world order involved a re-regulation (some say de-regulation) that favoured the business elite, the right-wing, and political elites. In order to actualize this new economic world order some things had to happen: money had to be found to fuel it; it had to be sold to the public; and opposition had to be dimmed or squelched.

The government for its part came up with the deficit dragon. Trade agreements and international investments along the lines that capitalists dreamed of meant the lowering of corporate taxes and tariffs to "allow the free flow of capital and goods" (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Business Committee). What our government and corporations neglected to tell us is that by lowering corporate taxes and tariffs (taxes on goods for export and import), the government loses revenues. What Canada really had was a revenue-generating problem, not have a deficit problem!

The creation of the deficit dragon and the making of the deficit slayer had begun. The federal finance minister would prove to be the noble knight designated for this adventure. He would take us into the black.

But how did he choose to take us into the black? Well,



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we cut social spending, destroyed the social economy, cut health care, welfare, education, public and social services. "The women will pick up the slack" seemed to be the refrain of our governments and the capitalist giants. After all, women love volunteering in our communities. "Welfare bums; power-hungry feminists; greedy union bosses; irresponsible students; single mothers; those pesky immigrants and refugees; gays and lesbians—family destroyers; and 'lying' environmentalists" became the scapegoats for the revenue shortfall.

Public and private sector downsizing—massive layoffs that disproportionately affected women, people of colour, indigenous peoples, and people with disabilities became the order of the day to maximize profits and to pay for the new global economy. The 80 or so right-wing think-tanks employed by the business elite and the corporate media were used to sell the message that globalization is here to stay and that it is good for us.

For women specifically, the cost of globalization has been great. Through the eyes of Canadian women this is a snapshot of the price we are still paying:

- increased poverty for women of all ages—the feminization of poverty;
- increased migration of women: from the South to the North; within the South; within the North—(as migrant workers, temp workers, domestic workers, refugees, immigrants);
- an increase in the wage gap

between men and women;

- backward steps regarding pay and employment equity;
- reduced access to postsecondary institutions due to rising tuition costs;
- increase in labour-intensive and part-time jobs;
- destruction of social services, public services, health and education systems;
- loss of employment and under-employment;
- increased trafficking in women and girls;
- a whopping increase in women's unpaid work—in the

home, community, and paid workforce;

- an attack on public pensions that women rely on more than men;

- an increase in racism, lesbophobia, xenophobia, and the ever-present feminist backlash;

- the de-funding and increased under-funding to equality-seeking women's groups and women's service organizations.

The extent of the feminist backlash is broad and far-reaching, as is the erosion of some of the gains made. The de-funding and under-funding of feminist organizations has resulted in the silencing of women's voices in many places, and affects our ability to do feminist research, advocacy, lobbying, and to have an impact on government policies and programs.

In 1995, Canadian women annually earned an average \$29,700 as compared to \$40,610 for men (Statistics Canada 1996b). This "wage gap" is growing for women of colour, women with disabilities, and Aboriginal women. Health care, education, and public and social service sectors have received government cuts which have had a disproportionate and adverse impact on women compared to men. One in three women work in these sectors where some of the "better-paying" jobs with benefits were located. These jobs no longer exist.

Women, now more than ever, work in temporary jobs, low-paid labour intensive jobs, and part-time work. Forty per cent of women's jobs are "non-standard" (part-time, temporary, self-employment, or multiple jobs). On average, women earn 65.1 per cent of what men earn. Young women are worse off than they were ten years ago as 71.2 per cent of women aged 18-24 earn less than \$24,000 per year (Canadian Labour Congress; Canadian Auto Workers).

Canada in 1996 played second fiddle only to Japan as the OECD country with the second highest incidence of low-paid employment for women (OECD qtd. in Canadian Auto Workers). By December 1996, women in Canada made up 70.4 per cent of part-timers (CLC). This makes it



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even more difficult for women to access the new Employment Insurance (CAW).

Many women report that sexual and racial harassment are prevalent in their workplaces and 18 per cent report being told that they could lose their job if they did not have a sexual relationship with their male employer. Ninety per cent of women reported being sexually harassed on the job (CAW).

The last United Nations Human Index Report reported that women performed eleven trillion dollars worth of unpaid household work within the global economy. This does not include many areas of unpaid work. Globally and within Canada, women perform two-thirds of unpaid work. In Canada this is worth between \$133 billion and \$218 billion per year (Statistics Canada 1994).

This situation is even worse for Aboriginal women, women of colour, women with disabilities, and women who are students. Women with disabilities earn 17 per cent less than other women workers and face an unemployment rate of over 50 per cent for those who can work (DAWN qtd. in CLC).

Women of colour have an unemployment rate of 13.4 per cent and earn 16 per cent less than other women workers. Additionally, they are forced into making up the bulk of the cheap labour force (factories, domestic work, hotels, restaurants, clerical). Migrant workers who are women of colour work with-

out the protection of labour laws as Canada refuses to sign the UN Convention on the Rights of all Migrant Workers and their Families. Even though they pay taxes, CPP, and EI contributions, they are not guaranteed basic employment standards (Toronto Organization for Domestic Workers' Rights).

Aboriginal women have unemployment rates of between 20 to 30 per cent depending whether they live on or off reserves. They earn 15 per cent less than the average for other women workers.

Over 54 per cent of Canada student-loan borrowers are women and female students drop out at a higher rate than males due to economic barriers (Canadian Federation of Students).

Older single women are twice as poor as their male counterparts and in general, older women have a poverty rate of 22.1 per cent. With the proposed changes to the CPP and the Old Age Pensions this will increase (Older Women's Network).

For women's groups in particular, the fact that the federal government spends only \$8.1 million on the Women's Program is very telling. This works out to \$0.53 per woman and girl child in Canada—less than a cup of coffee! Yet, the big banks that made a profit of \$7.4 billion in 1997 get over \$130 million to develop programs and new technologies for liabilities!

What kind of society are we building?

Capitalism is not a sustainable economic policy or development policy. It exploits rather than protects the guaranteed human rights of the population. It only guarantees the wealth of 20 per cent of the population. It is rooted in racism, white supremacy, sexism, and other oppressions. Why do we continue to support a system that is biased towards and exploitative of at least 80 per cent of the world's population?

Challenging the capitalist beast

Globally, most of us form the opposition. This is why building a globalized resistance and creating alternatives has taken root in the international feminist movement.

Women around the world are challenging trade agreements, trading blocs, and the "alphabets": the World Trade Organization (WTO); the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trades (GATT); the Multilateral Agreement on Investments (MAI); the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC); the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN); the Free Trade Agreements of the Americas (FTAA), etc. These acronyms stand for trading and economic systems that are biased against women, and are definitely not gender neutral, especially when considering that women control only ten per cent of the world economy, own only one per cent of the world's land, yet perform over 66 per cent of the world's work (United Nations)! Women are only 52 per cent of the world's population.

It is important for us to challenge our governments to divest from these trade agreements and blocs in as many public fora as we can and put forward alternatives rooted in a people-first before-economics framework. We must form our own think-tanks and reclaim our own markets. Women's groups, by teaming up with labour movements, environmentalists, human rights activists, anti-poverty groups, peasant-farmers, health-care workers, educators, gay and lesbian organizations, and grassroots anti-violence movements, can challenge this new corporate, global beast. A more international activist movement is taking

root. The women's movement in Canada has to increasingly solidify its own activism at a global level.

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