

GENDER AND GLOBAL CORPORATIZATION

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WHILE THE POWER wielded by giant corporations and its resulting extremes of wealth and poverty are unprecedented in scale, the world-view that supports it reaches back between five and 10 millennia.

Starhawk, a sponsor of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, as well as Riane Eisler and others, describe the "power-over" model of society, which replaced more egalitarian cultures in the transition to large centers of population, with the accumulation of surplus and its accompanying rule-based structures. As Starhawk puts it in *Dreaming the Dark*:

We like to tell ourselves that there once was a time when we were free, that "power-over" is a human invention, not an imperative of nature. The story of the rise of power-over is the story of the literal dismemberment of the world, the tearing apart of the fabric of living interrelationships that once governed human life.

The power-over model, because it is a human invention, arbitrarily assigns unequal value to human difference, establishing dominant and subordinate categories and the political concept of "other" as the basis for discrimination and exploitation. Though rooted in male dominance, patriarchal behavior applies to all of us when we exercise power over others and the Earth. Global "corporatization" is a logical extension of the "dismemberment" that accompanied the development of "civilization." Far from being natural and inevitable, the transnational corporation, with its vast supporting infrastructure, is the most virulent manifestation of power-over to date.

The standard teaching of U.S. history emphasizes wars, land acquisition and industrial "progress" rather than the ongoing struggle of people of color, women, the working class and poor. As these oppressed groups slowly gained ground, the wealthy changed the nature of corporations, whose operations for the first century were restricted and enforced by state-issued charters. After the Supreme Court in 1886 declared the corporate form equivalent to a natural person under the law (in *Santa Clara v. Southern Pacific Railroad Co.*), people's already limited sovereignty was further subordinated to the large corporation. Thus, a major corporate achievement has been to convert the corporate form from that of a publicly defined institution to one that receives constitutional protection from effective

public control.

The primary defining of markets and investments today is controlled by the international institutions that serve the interests of transnational corporations rather than people and planet. Out of the Uruguay Round of negotiations under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the profoundly anti-democratic World Trade Organization (WTO) was established in 1995. Its authority on behalf of unlimited mobility for capital and production has the legislative, judicial and enforcement power to undermine, in the name of "free trade," national and even local laws passed to protect workers, communities and the environment. What is the impact upon women of so much power vested in a single institution?

Today, what author bell hooks calls the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" dominates not only its own people, but also the less developed nations of the global South. Within all countries, females are the most disadvantaged and exploited, particularly women of color, the poor and lesbians. The Women's Caucus of organizations from the South and North attending the "Third Ministerial Meeting of the WTO" in Seattle made this statement:

[T]he majority of the world's women and girls are adversely affected by the unequal power relations created at the national, regional and international levels by the new trade regime. . . . We believe the WTO undermines major international agreements that women have worked hard to get their governments to commit to.

The corporate form and its national and international institutional protectors are especially damaging to the lives of women, who comprise the majority of the poor in every country. In the United States, many women work in low-wage categories that are particularly vulnerable to downsizing as corporations compete for ideal profit-yielding conditions.

State and local governments, held hostage by corporations seeking tax relief and subsidies, are strapped for funds to meet social program obligations, with much of the resulting slack taken up by already overworked women.

The same phenomena are infinitely more disastrous for women in the debtor nations on which the International Monetary Fund and World Bank have imposed Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) policies. SAPs demand that nations reduce their own economic planning in favor of a commodity-based, export-oriented economy, and a "liberalization" that includes deep cuts in expenditures on social programs, the privatization of state-run industries and services, and increased labor flexibility.

When SAP policies result in recession, the resultant wage and job cuts most drastically affect women, for whom the "informal economy" is their last resort. Alicia Sepulveda, Foreign Secretary of the Mexican Telephone Workers Union, describes the "explosion in the number of street sellers, most of them women," with nearly a quarter of employed women earning less than the daily minimum wage of \$3.50. Women who migrate as domestic workers, caregivers, or farm workers are particularly vulnerable to sexual as well as financial exploitation.

Reduced social services adds to women's responsibility for the functioning of their families and communities. Throughout the world women work more hours than men -- the so-called double burden -- but much of their labor is not reflected in official statistics; according to a

recent United Nations Development Program's Human Index Report, women contribute \$11 trillion annually in unpaid "household work" to the global economy.

Most of the sweatshop workers in developing countries are women, who put in long hours for below minimum or living wages, and receive no overtime pay, sick leave or medical benefits. Susan Tompson of the Colombia Justice and Peace Society says:

You can see it in Mexico, in Honduras, and in a number of other countries where women -- particularly young women -- are working in the maquiladoras, the factories that put together clothes or electronics. Because the country desperately needs export dollars, officials often turn a blind eye to the abuses suffered by the women in the factories.

Author, activist and researcher Vandana Shiva declared that "all domestic issues have been drawn into the global economy, bringing women into direct collision with global patriarchal institutions." Because patriarchal economic institutions are international, so must be people's movements to resist and replace systems that benefit a few at the expense of the majority of the world's populations. The quest for the rights and powers of self-governance requires us to grapple with who we are as human beings. Do we really believe that power over others is so embedded in "human nature" that the best we can do is picket sweatshop owners, one by one, imploring them to respect voluntary codes of conduct? Or can we rise to the challenge of being self-determining, exercising authority over the institutions and policies that affect our lives?

Vandana Shiva points out [in her book, *Stolen Harvest, The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply*] that:

For more than two centuries, patriarchal, eurocentric, and anthropocentric scientific discourse has treated women, other cultures, and other species as objects. Experts have been treated as the only legitimate knowers. For more than two decades, feminist movements, Third World and indigenous people's movements, and ecological and animal-rights movements have questioned this objectification and denial of subjecthood.

The late twentieth century growth of a global feminist movement has brought women together in common cause. A widespread expression and tool of women's organizing is the Beijing Platform for Action, a solid indictment of corporate oppression and a democratic agenda for people and their institutions of governance.

From village centers to U.N. forums, women's ideas, processes and relationships are important models for the world we seek to create. As African-American lesbian poet Audre Lorde put it, "You can't dismantle the master's house using the master's tools."