WEDO and the Public Advocacy Agenda in Creating Sustainable Human Development

Susan M. Davis
Many have discussed how difficult it is to integrate women throughout society. The difficulty stems from the fact that such integration involves a process of social change. In looking at the great social change movements throughout the world, certainly the women's movement and our struggle for equality and equity on the planet is one of the more significant movements to occur in the twentieth century. It is the hope of women
that, as we enter the twenty-first century, the social advancements of the previous century will continue to flourish. A major obstacle facing the women's movement, however, is that, in order for these changes to continue, the nature and the exercise of power must also undergo change. The fact also remains that those who possess power do not relinquish it easily. Among Americans, there is no major public consensus on how to analyze and remedy the fundamental flaws in society.²

Considering the long litany of problems facing women, a huge global agenda is before us. Certainly the stories of horrible human rights abuses that litter the pages of our newspapers and television screens assault our senses and make us almost immune to the violence in our lives.³ This

² In response to the rationale that the public is unwilling to recognize the fundamental problems in our society, Bella Abzug, co-founder and Chair of WEDO, has said “Let’s face it, the world is having a nervous breakdown.”

³ Intense media coverage of violent crimes and blatant abuses of human rights has served to dull the impact of these atrocities on the viewing public. In assessing the disparate media treatment of the strife in the Middle East and in Northern Ireland, The Jerusalem Post addressed the numbing affect that excessive media coverage can have upon the public. David Mahovsky, Media Impact, THE JERUSALEM POST, Aug. 25, 1989, at Fl. Mahovsky further stated that the violence in Northern Ireland, even though it had been going on for 20 years at the time the article was written, “does not register. Staccato coverage, like bang-bang violence, hardly enters our consciousness: it is background music which we barely hear, let alone understand.” Id. Mahovsky’s article further discussed the capability of the media, due to technological advances, to cover violent activity occurring anywhere in the world at a moment’s notice. Consequently, television coverage has the capacity to focus national attention on a certain international crisis. Id. Thus, the public becomes exposed to certain world atrocities to such a great extent that the reality of the event is governed by the exposure provided by the coverage. Id.

See Julie Irwin & Susan Kuczka, State tells Grisly Tale of Torture: Uncle Charged in Abuse of Boy, 3 CHI. TRIB., Oct. 29, 1994, at 1. “Acts of terrible violence against children seemingly have become so commonplace that they almost have lost their power to shock. Children have been hanged, shot, scalded, starved and beaten with alarming frequency in the Chicago area.” Id. The intention of the authors in writing this article was to show that in order to shock the sensitivities of the police force and society in general, abuse of an individual must be of such a degree as to overcome the tolerance of violence fostered by the media. Id. According to prosecutor Veryl Gambino, the child in question was subjected to “an ongoing course of torture.” Id. The victim’s uncle “[h]ung [him] from a hook on a wall[,] [c]rammed [him] in a dresser drawer[,] [b]ound hand and foot with duct tape and [s]tuffed [his] mouth . . . with tissues to stifle [his] cries[,] [b]urned [him] with cigarettes[,] [a]nd [b]it[ ] [him].” Id. This list is only a partial accounting of the horrors inflicted upon this young boy. However, violence and abuse of human rights have become so commonplace in the media that abuse must be of this magnitude to merit a reaction from the public.

See also Thomas G. Weiss, The United Nations and Civil Wars, 17 THE CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES AND THE MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY: THE WASHINGTON QUARTERLY 4, 137 (1994) (“Daily the sobering news from the former Yugoslavia, Somalia, Haiti, Rwanda, and a host of other wars assaults a common sense of humanity.”); Political Dealings Continue as Army Vows to Destroy Armed Islamists, AGENCE
violence is offensive to our sense of humanity. Therefore, we must address this problem and, ultimately, arrive at a solution by utilizing the resources at our disposal. While women often do not think of it as the greatest institution ever created, the United Nations is one resource women cannot ignore.

I learned the story of why women are seeking redress at the United Nations from Ela Bhatt, a trade union organizer and founder of the Self Employed Women's Association ("SEWA"). She said, "Well, we must..."
start locally." After identifying a problem, the next step is to do something about it by organizing and banding together. Here at St. John's University, there are probably several committees established to deal with all the injustices and problems in the school. If you are unable to solve those problems here at the University, then you turn to the leadership of the borough of Queens, and then to the City of New York. And, if you are still unsuccessful, you go to the state level, and then to the national level. When you organize nationally, especially if you are in a country in the Southern Hemisphere you are told, "It's the World Bank and International Monetary Fund ("IMF") dictating to us, we can't do anything about these policies; the terms of trade are set by someone else," as a justification for not providing assistance. Consequently, the women of SEWA decided to move to the international level. Ela Bhatt further stated, "We will keep organizing and going to every level, until there is no place left to go except Heaven—and maybe we will have to go there too."

At this very minute in the United Nations, the Vatican and a small number of allied countries that follow its lead have organized an assault on the fundamental rights of women to use contraceptives or to have an abortion. The countries that support the Vatican in its "crusade" against women's rights are among some of the poorest and most vulnerable countries in Central America and Africa. I would characterize these countries as being "anti-female" in their attempt to circumscribe the right of women to control their bodies. In response to this alliance, we come


5 See Emily MacFarquhar, Population Wars, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP., Sept. 12, 1994, at 54 ("Opposition to abortion is the moving force in a Vatican crusade that began last March with papal rebukes to the head of the U.N. Population Fund, President Clinton and the other world leaders, asserting that contraception, sterilization and abortion are all "an assault on the sacredness of life."); Nafis Sadik & Marjorie Rosen, The Numbers Crunch: Dr. Nafis Sadik is in the Hot Seat at Next Week's U.N. Population Crisis, PEOPLE, Sept. 5, 1994, at 63 (discussing opening of International Conference on Population and Development with protests from Vatican on issues like abortion).

6 In many African countries, women's roles are based upon the societal classification of women as "food providers, family sustainers, and health providers." Catherine Harries, Daughters of Our Peoples: International Feminism Meets Ugandan Law and Custom, 25 COLUM. HUM. RTS. L. REV. 493, 501 (1994). This classification serves to impede women in their attempts to "enhance . . . economic and social status." Id. In Uganda, the legal system presents a great obstacle for women to overcome. Id. at 522. The legal system stems from four sources. Id. The first source is the customary law which is composed of the traditional customs and practices "which governed life for the ethnic groups composing the modern state of Uganda prior to the imposition of British colonial rule in the late eighteenth century." Id. at 523 n.103. The next source is the common law that was brought to the country by the British. Harries, supra,
to the United Nations to organize our collective powers to develop a strategy that will allow us, as women, to define, and ultimately create, the environment in which we live.

In addition to dealing with this assault on women's rights, the conferences and committee meetings underway at the United Nations are grappling with the overwhelming task of defining the major problems faced by countries of the world today. As a result, it is all the more urgent that we join together and proclaim the importance of our rights as women in this global agenda.

We have decided that civil society—the non-governmental society—ought to assume a role in resolving the problems of the world. Many voices are not represented by the governments involved in this international

---

at 523. The third source consists of statutory law which is a codified version of a combination of the customary and common laws. *Id.* The fourth and final source is the Muslim law known as the *Sharia.* *Id.* The dominant legal source of these four is the customary law, which is a significant reason that women have been unable to gain equality in Ugandan society. *Id.*

The customs and traditions surrounding the inheritance of property illustrates the anti-female sentiment of the Ugandan culture. Even though under the Married Womens Property Act of Great Britain, which the Ugandan government incorporated into its own statutory law, a woman has the right to own property, custom and tradition discourage them from doing so. *Id.* at 524. When a woman marries she is expected to move to the husband's property. Harries, supra, at 524. Custom dictated that when the husband died she would have no right to any portion of his property by reason of marriage. *Id.* She was expected to return to the home of her parents, or marry the brother of her deceased husband. *Id.* In 1972, the Ugandan government passed a law guaranteeing the woman dower rights in her husband's property. *Id.* Even though this statutory provision supercedes the customary law of inheritance, women are reluctant to turn to the courts because of a strong reliance and belief in family and custom. *Id.* at 525. In addition, because of this same respect for tradition, the courts are reluctant to enforce these rights. Harries, supra, at 526. Thus, the oppression of women in Ugandan society is continued, a situation that mere legislation cannot remedy.

Women's roles in Ghana stem from long-standing cultural and traditional classifications as well. Gwendolyn Mikell, *Culture, Law and Social Policy: Changing the Economic Status of Ghanaian Women,* 17 YALE J. INT'L L. 225, 225 (1992). "Historically, a woman's traditional position in the home has conflicted with her ability to enter the public arena and to shape public policy. . . . [T]his conflict has been a continual and recurrent problem for African women, both in colonial and in post colonial times." *Id.* Most African economies are based on agriculture, and even though women are the predominant inhabitants of the rural areas and they are the main agricultural producers, they lack influence in the economic development of the county. *Id.* at n.2. In addition, the "persistent pattern of exclusion from development activities and from access to land, labor, and credit continues to harm the economic status of women." *Id.* at 232. Again, exclusionary cultural traditions serve to promote the anti-female characteristics of African countries.

process. Since women are under-represented in, if not excluded from, the process, we must resort to participating through our own, non-governmental organizations. What this movement represents is an attempt to create a common advocacy agenda for women whereby we redefine the fundamental paradigm of how we live on the planet, how we eat, how we move around, where we live, and how we share the collective wealth.

In virtually all countries, women are under-represented in positions of power in government as is true for some social groups, indigenous people and minorities. The countries of Eastern Europe are interesting examples of how societies tend to exclude women from positions of power in government while having equality mandated under the law. See Dianne Otto, Challenging the "New World Order": International Law, Global Democracy and the Possibilities for Woman, 3 TRANSNAT'L L. & CONTEMP. PROBS. 371, 386 (1993). These countries have denied women access to the political forum in a number of ways: (1) by withholding from women the right to vote; (2) by characterizing equality according to a male standard; (3) through a loss of individual liberty; (4) by societal establishment of distinctions between public and private gender roles; and (5) counter-productive nature of women's resistance to movements. Id. at 388-96.

Traditionally, women have been excluded from the political process. By constructing women's nature as equipped only for domestic life and as incapable of developing a sense of justice, liberalism initially barred women from public life altogether. Only after prolonged and bitter struggles was formal voting equality extended to women. Enfranchisement has not, however, led to substantial formal political participation by women because the gendered form of liberal democracy was left intact. Women occupy two to ten per cent of national political positions in Western liberal democracies. The only exception to this pattern is a recent shift in Nordic countries as a result of the introduction of quota systems which ensure women's representation. Id. at 388. (footnotes omitted).

This pattern of lack of involvement is developing in the emerging democratic states of Eastern Europe because of elections. Id. Women have also suffered setbacks in their attempts to advance in the Eastern European countries because of the acceptance of the Western practice of determining their equality according to a male standard. Id. at 389. Consequently, most women are unable to meet this standard and are thus denied access to government. Otto, supra, at 389.

"Denial of liberty" through the "maternalization of women" has been a major cause of women's failure to gain political power. Id. at 392. Governmental restrictions upon a woman's fundamental right to control her reproductive capabilities through heavy restrictions on abortion rights has accompanied democracy. Id. "[T]he denial of liberty to women is achieved through legal and political processes which maternalize women and deny them reproductive rights." Id.

Traditional conceptions of gender relations put forth a distinction between public and private social life. Id. at 393. Men are deemed to occupy the public sector while women, through their maternalization by society, are more readily associated with the private sphere. Otto, supra, at 393. Consequently, it is very difficult for women to shed societal perceptions and enter the public forum. Id. at 394.

"Liberal democracy... creates more opportunities for the organization of women's movements, for critique, and for the promotion of change." Id. at 395. At the same time, participation in these resistance movements is closely regulated and controlled through the use of devices such as maternalization of women. Id. Consequently, although women have gained the right to organize, that right is greatly limited by the male domination of government. Id.

In order to accomplish this goal, we must redefine fundamental concepts like security. For example, the agenda for the World Summit on Social Development taking place in Copenhagen in March 1995 includes relevant issues such as poverty, employment and the lack thereof, and "social exclusion," which encompasses problems resulting from the breakdown of the family and the nation state. The Women's Caucus conducted a gender analysis of all of these issues because, of course, the agenda contained no such analysis. It concluded that there is no democracy in three fundamentally critical areas: the family, the market, and the global institutions that control the nation states and the world economy. The international community has failed to create democratic institutions.

The new World Trade Organization ("WTO"), that was created in the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade ("GATT"), is not a democratic institution; nor is the World Bank or the

---

8 See THE WOMEN'S CAUCUS, PREPARATORY COMMITTEE I, WORLD SUMMIT ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT (Feb. 1994) [hereinafter WOMEN'S CAUCUS].

9 See Otto, supra note 7, at 377 (1993) ("The absence of women from most international decision-making positions and forums . . . reflects the failure of the United Nations system to remedy worldwide patterns of male domination.").

10 For a discussion of the WTO and the fears that it will not provide fair representation of developing countries in the international economic order, see Bartram S. Brown, Developing Countries in the International Trade Order, 14 N. ILL. U. L. REV. 347 (1994). GATT was created to promote and govern international trade to prevent the repetition of the protectionist trade policies which were partly responsible for the depression of the 1930s. Id. at 350-51. The Uruguay Round of the GATT resulted in an agreement to create "a new and more powerful World Trade Organization" to replace what is considered the weaker GATT mechanism. Id. at 351 n.11. The WTO will be charged with implementing and administering international trade rules and regulations promulgated under GATT auspices. Id. at 401; see also Europe and America: Figleaf Hunt, THE ECONOMIST, Nov. 13, 1993, at 62 (discussing opinion of European Community leaders that WTO might be more effective than GATT in dealing with modern world economy).

There is a concern, however, that because the WTO will be dominated by industrialized countries, as GATT was, it will reflect the interests of the industrialized world without proportional representation of the developing economies. See Brown, supra, at 403. This dominance of the industrialized world has been manifested in mounting third world debt and an inability for developing countries to service this debt because of limited access to industrial markets. Id. at 405; see infra note 12. Grassroots groups also are concerned that the WTO is not accessible to citizen-monitors. Participation by non-government organizations ("NGOs") and access to timely information are minimum demands. For example, WEDO has declared that:

The World Bank and the IMF must revisit their original mandate and the spirit of that mandate. The World Bank, IMF and the new World Trade Organization of the GATT must give priority to social and human development. They must become democratic, transparent and accountable. Their staff organization and teams should be multidisciplinary and gender balanced and reflective of the multiple stakeholders.

WOMAN'S CAUCUS, supra note 8, at 19.
The transnational and multinational corporations that control the world’s wealth and labor and define who profits and who does not are not democratic institutions.\(^\text{11}\)

The paradigm of the free market excludes women. It does not account for the unpaid work that women do because none of that work results in a market-based transaction. Such work is considered outside the scope of our economy and it is not accounted for in the gross national product. The feminist critique of this paradigm concludes, therefore, that the market’s definition of productivity is transmogrified to create an overall bias against women.\(^\text{12}\)

While activity concerning women’s rights increased during the United Nations Decade of the Woman, the plight of women in the third world has worsened. Harries, supra note 6, at 495. This phenomenon has been attributed to the structural adjustment requirements of IMF and World Bank funding of developing countries. Id. at 495 n.8. “The IMF was created to promote international monetary cooperation. Its primary tasks were to maintain exchange rate stability, help members to deal with short term balance of payments disequilibria and in general to establish a reliable international payment system.” Brown, supra note 10, at 352. In practice, the IMF allows debtor nations to draw on its financial reserves if they conform to certain structural economic conditions. Id. The World Bank was created after World War II to lend financial support to the reconstruction of Europe and Japan, and to finance other impoverished areas of the world. Id. at 353. Like the IMF, the World Bank advises developing countries regarding economic changes needed to generate long term economic stability. Id.

With the goal of making the products of developing countries more competitive on international markets, thereby fostering economic stability, the World Bank and the IMF typically condition financing to developing countries on currency devaluation, reduction of public spending, privatization of government owned enterprises, and reduction of domestic price controls. See Douglas E. Mathews, Lome IV and ACP/EEC Relations: Surviving the Lost Decade, 22 CAL. W. INT’L L.J. 1, 19-20 (1991-1992). These structural adjustments often cause short term inflation and unemployment which “give[ ] rise to greater social inequities and . . . opposition” from developing countries. Id. at 20; see also International Finance: World Bank, IMF Lending Policies Cost U.S. Exports, Jobs, Study Says, 11 Int’l Trade Rep. (BNA) 36, at d32 (Sept. 14, 1992) (asserting that IMF and World Bank policies adversely affecting developing countries hurt American workers by limiting markets for U.S. exports); John M. Updegraph III, Note. Large-Scale, Capital-Intensive Development Projects in the Third World: Congressional Influence Over Multilateral Development Bank Lending, 13 B.C. THIRD WORLD L.J. 345 (1993) (examining problems of developing countries hosting large-scale development projects funded by World Bank or IMF). These adverse affects on the economies of developing countries seeking IMF or World Bank funding have their strongest impact on women, who are typically the poorest members of society. Harries, supra note 6, at 495; see also Joan C. Williams, Deconstructing Gender, 87 Mich. L. REV. 797, 822-27 (1989) (describing “feminization of poverty” as process whereby women have become statistically more impoverished than men because women must “choose” against performing as ideal workers in order to ensure that their children receive high quality care”).


\(^{13}\) See MARILYN WARING, COUNTING FOR NOTHING: WHAT MEN VALUE AND WHAT WOMEN ARE WORTH (Allen & Unwir New Zealand Ltd. ed., 1988) (providing excellent account of how women’s work is excluded from national accounting and economics).
This should cause us to consider many of the fundamental preconceptions about money and the international distribution of wealth. As the most privileged and powerful nation on the planet, the United States has a responsibility to recognize that it consumes more than its share of the world's wealth. This is a theme echoed by the women of developing countries. A proposed solution for rectifying the under-representation of women in the international economic order is regulation of economists.


The inbound application of U.S. antitrust law also has the effect of preserving American wealth at the expense of developing economies. See Eleanor M. Fox, *Harnessing the Multinational Corporation to Enhance Third World Development — The Rise and Fall and Future of Antitrust as Regulation*, 10 Cardozo L. Rev. 1981, 1986-87 (1989) (recognizing that developing countries may benefit from horizontal combination prohibited under U.S. antitrust law).

For a discussion of the historic development of the wealth imbalance between the North and South, see Brown, *supra* note 11, at 356-59 (acknowledging that many of today's developing countries were still under colonial authority when GATT, IMF and World Bank were created and that developing countries fear free trade will restrict growth of their domestic industry).

While lawyers have to pass the bar and doctors must pass a board examination, there are no promulgated guidelines to which economists must adhere. Economists, however, are free to advise anyone. The result has been the perpetuation of an economic system that is fundamentally unfair.

Certainly, any critique of a rights agenda requires a discussion of fundamental concepts. I learned of one such concept in Bangladesh, where bank credit is arguably a basic human right. The Grameen Bank in Bangladesh has revolutionized the concept of economic rights and entitlements by providing the poor—mainly women without collateral—access to timely and affordable credit. The Grameen Bank, owned and governed by these poor women, provides the means for creating one's own development through self-employment. If we really want to create equitable, sustainable development and to define what that is, we must come to grips with the nature of power and how it is to be exercised on this planet. We must look for very tangible relationships and mechanisms for change, such as the Grameen Bank.

A final strategy for reversing the unsustainable pattern of development is to draw greater public attention to the links between the environment and public health. By recognizing the links between unsustainable patterns of production and consumption and adverse health consequences for people and communities, citizens can be mobilized to change public policies and research priorities. WEDO, along with other environmental and women's health organizations, launched the Action for Cancer Prevention campaign in the United States and is striving to create changes. Through organizing public hearings and briefings, we make public the fact that breast cancer is being caused by environmental effects and that we must act to prevent the cancer epidemic. Unfortunately, cancer in women did not figure high on the health agenda until the recent grassroots actions began to force it into public consideration. Conversely, as soon as the phenomenon of "microphallus" was documented as possibly having environmental causes, it captured the attention of policymakers including Vice President Al Gore. As a result, the Clinton Administration has now changed its position on organochlorides and is considering phasing them out for the

---

16 Economics Professor Mohammed Yunus founded the remarkable Grameen Bank in Bangladesh as an experiment in rural economics in 1976. Formalized as a special-charter bank in 1983, it has cumulatively disbursed over U.S. $1.6 million in loans, averaging U.S. $75 and has maintained a 98 percent repayment record. See Microenterprise Lending: Reshaping Foreign Aid Policy, ARIZ. REPUBLIC, Aug. 23, 1993, at A8.

17 “Microphallus” is defined as an abnormally small penis. STEDMAN'S MEDICAL DICTIONARY 876 (24th ed., 1982).
first time. Perhaps self-interest combined with these attention-getting phenomena are just what we needed to make headway in creating healthier environments for people to realize their own growth and potential.

The “guerilla tactics” of grassroots organizing that we will continue to use at the local and global levels call for people’s participation. So, if people are interested in applying what is in their books and “taking it on the road,” the movement can certainly use you.

18 The Clinton administration has announced the establishment of an EPA mechanism to phase out chlorine based compounds when alternate compounds are available. See Chlorinophobia; Danger of Clinton Administration Plan to Phase out Synthetic Organochlorides in Favor of Chlorine Compound Substitutes; Editorial, NAT’L REV., Aug. 15, 1994, at 19 (arguing that danger of increased disease resulting from elimination of use of organochlorides in medicine outweighs benefits from elimination). But see Steven Swanson, Chlorine: Its Time May Be Up; Some Compounds Are Suspected in Illness, CHI. TRIB., Feb. 27, 1994, at C1 (noting findings that chlorinated compounds increase incidence of breast cancer, prostate cancer and endometriosis); Panel Finds Threat to Great Lakes, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 22, 1994, at C4 (same); Report Assails High Levels of Toxins in Great Lakes, CHI. SUN-TIMES, Feb. 17, 1994, at 52 (same); Robert Leaversuch, Greenpeace Brings Anti-PVC Campaign to North America, MOD. PLASTICS, Mar. 1993, at 43 (discussing Greenpeace International anti-chlorine drives in United States, Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Australia).