

FROM THE EFFECTS OF GLOBALIZATION ON WOMEN TO WOMEN'S AGENCY IN GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract: The article reviews current literature about the effects and challenges of globalization on the lives of women worldwide. While, on the one hand, globalization has increased opportunities for women, on the other hand its capacity to significantly reduce gender inequalities remains unmet. Moreover, globalization affects women differently in different parts of the world and some women (poor/marginalized women in affluent nations; women of the Global South) are more vulnerable than others. The paper further reflects on how global feminism is discussing globalization and addressing the challenges associated with its multi-dimensional nature, and on the role of transnational feminist movements in advancing women's rights and gender equality issues beyond the nation-state.

Keywords: women, gender inequality, globalization, transnational feminism, women's agency.

INTRODUCTION

In the following pages, through a review of the extensive international literature on the subject, we will try to understand the effects of globalization on the lives of women (an historically disadvantaged group), and how global feminism is discussing globalization and addressing the challenges associated with its multi-dimensional character. In order to grasp the impacts of the globalization process on women's lives, it is first necessary to define how this complex term is understood. There is no clear-cut definition of the concept of globalization: it has been approached in different ways and by different authors. Even if multiple definitions of

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globalization exist, all seem to converge in the same direction. Globalization expresses the growing economic, political, social, cultural and technological integration between different areas of the world, the continuously growing importance of transnational markets and institutions as well as the increased density and frequency of international social interactions relative to local or nation ones (Walby 2002).

Globalization can be interpreted both synchronously and diachronically. Synchronously, it refers to the interdependence of the world's economies, governments, cultures and populations influencing nation states – they themselves transversally conditioned and connected by transnational actors by their sphere of influence and by their decisions (Giddens 1990). The nation state is no longer the only site for sovereignty: other actors (such as the UN, OECD, WTO, FAO etc.) also play crucial roles in the world economy (Aman 1996). Sassen (1996, 2002) argues that the global economy has the capacity to undo the intersection of sovereignty and territory as it re-locates some of the components of state sovereignty onto supranational authorities. Diachronically, as an open process, largely based on the rapid development of science and technologies, started in the past and that will continue into the future assuming forms that we can currently only intuit. Analogously to other macro-processes, globalization has immediate phases of acceleration and deceleration throughout the course of history. The origins of globalization can be traced back to the XV-XVI centuries, characterized by the birth and subsequent flourishing of the Portuguese and Spanish empires. Travel and geographical exploration forged links between Europe, Africa, Asia and America. Between the end of the XVIII and the beginning of the XX century, the industrial revolution launched international commerce, mobility and migratory flows, thanks to the huge amount of improvements in the transport and communication sector and the use of new sources of energy: the development of railway transport infrastructure, the telegraph system, steam engines (see Robertson 1992; Hirst, Thompson 1996; Cesareo 1997; Treccani



2010). A third and crucial moment of expansion, began in the 1980, was sustained by the rapid expansion of information and communication technologies (ICTs). New economic models soon developed thanks to the diffusion of the Internet: e-commerce, crowdfunding, the IoT – *Internet of Things*, robotics and artificial intelligence (AI). Globalization, in short, is a multi-dimensional process, a system of growing interdependencies between economies, societies and cultures which has produced multiple effects on both the macro level (more commercial flows, more mobility, more communication, more innovation), and on the micro level, redrawing the boundaries between time and space (Giddens 1990), local and global and, thus all forms of collective life, social relations and the living conditions of men and women.

Among the positive aspects, we can cite the opportunity for economic growth of poor, marginal countries (taking advantage of the economies of scale on world markets, they can produce more and with lower costs, specializing in their sectors of excellence); the increased competition that reduces the cost of goods and services for the consumer, generating more efficiency and a better quality-price ratio; the improvement of communication flows; the growing cultural exchanges and scientific cooperation that have stimulated creativity and accelerated innovation (European Commission 2017). Globalization has also been defined (Lenz 2008: 23) as a set of interlinked, often contradictory processes: globalization expresses interdependent inequalities in a hierarchical and unequal postcolonial world system. Its positive effects are not equally distributed between different populations and regions, some of which are less adaptable than others to the entrance into the global market because of different living standards, environment, financial, political and work conditions. The interaction between globalization and technological evolution has increased the demand for a skilled workforce, reducing the number of jobs for less qualified workers. The marginalization of countries and regions with high levels of unemployment and exclusion can, in some cases, even cause radicalization (European Commission

2017). Another controversial aspect is the impact of globalization on self and identity. In the contemporary world, identity construction has become increasingly complicated. The construction of individual identities is situated between global and local flows, between the widening horizons of globalization and the need for local niches for identity construction, between the sense of belonging to the global community and local cultural values, traditions and ideas (Appadurai 1993, 1996; Robertson 1994; Bartoletti 2001). If human beings construct society and cultures in locally situated contexts, they are, simultaneously, deeply challenged by discourses, negotiations, conflicts and threats transmitted instantaneously by global networks (Appadurai 1993, 1996). The specific character of globalization indeed resides in the new individual awareness of living in a planetary dimension, of being a part of a “universal experience” (Robertson 1992). Increasing awareness and knowledge of worldwide emergencies (global warming, climate change, extreme weather events, geopolitical tensions, global terrorism etc.) together with the participation of individuals in planetary events are the fundamental elements providing the basis for the birth of the global community (Giddens 1990). Men and women, today, need to “act locally” but “think globally” (Cole 2003).

ON GLOBALIZATION AND WOMEN

Given the dynamic and complex nature of globalization, one big challenge is to understand how an increasingly globalized world impacts on the rights and circumstances of historically disadvantaged groups, particularly women. As Sassen notes (1996: 15), the dominant narrative of globalization emphasizes hypermobility, global communications and the neutralization of place and distance, but it fails to consider that the global economy depends upon work done in particular places by particular persons. How is globalization affecting women? Does globalization have an overall



positive or negative impact on the lives of women? There are no easy answers to these questions. Generally, it has been submitted that globalization affects women differently in different parts of the world and that some women are more vulnerable than others (poor/marginalized women in affluent nations; women of the Global South). Moreover, a common understanding is that the impact may include both positive and negative aspects (Frostell 2002; Gray, Kittilson, Sandholtz 2006; Sánchez-Apellániz, Núñez, Charlo-Molina 2012) and no scholarship on globalization and women takes a full positive view.

The optimistic school (but with some reserves) argues that the integration of national economies with global economy will improve the situation of all citizens, including women. Globalization is favorable for economic growth on medium and long term due to trade openness, new market opportunities, foreign direct investment and the spread of ICTs (Kahai, Simmons 2005). Trade theory suggests that a growing international trade should benefit women, especially in developing countries (Bussmann 2009). The countries most open to trade also have better economic rights for women and a lower incidence of forced labor (Hallward-Driemeier 2011). Foreign multinationals make better-paying jobs available to women and the increase of investment requirements by multinationals may lead to an expansion of women's education. The greater access to economic opportunities and information among women could also influence existing gender roles and norms (World Bank 2011). The critical school argues that economic globalization will further increase existing inequalities and will lead to new ones. Generally, it has been suggested (Thorin 2001: 13) that globalization cannot have a neutral impact on women and men, i.e. be equally positive or negative, because pre-existing conditions are biased against women, policy-making institutions neglect the gendered outcomes of globalization, and economic growth is dependent upon women's unpaid reproductive work and gender wage inequality. Even if the past 20 years have witnessed some progress for women in the work sphere, in almost



every country men are more likely to participate in labour markets than women, women are more likely than men to be unemployed, and vulnerable employment is more severe for women especially in developing countries (ILO 2018a). There is also evidence of increased gender job segregation globally, with women's share of jobs in the industrial sector declining over the last 20 years (Elson, Seth 2019). Women lose more than men from slow and/or unstable economic growth and financial crises due to the structural and persistent gender inequalities in households and the labour market, which are inextricably linked with their socially assigned responsibility for care and domestic work (Parekh, Wilcox 2014). Across the world, without exception, women perform three-quarters of unpaid care work, or 76.2 per cent of the total of hours provided: in no country in the world do men and women provide an equal share of unpaid care work (ILO 2018b: xxix-xxx).

Feminist scholars see globalization as something that disempowers women at the hands of the patriarchy and authority of male-dominated global capital (Sassen 1996; Klein 2007). Pre-existing patriarchal social structures limit women's direct access to any new wealth, especially in Southern economies (Jaggar 2001) and the logic of the capitalist globalization process reproduces and reinforces the patriarchal domination of the world. Wichterich (2000: 167) argues that the strategic function of the "globalized woman" within the broader project of globalization is the execution of unpaid and underpaid labour: the "globalized women" is the voluntary worker who helps to absorb the shocks of social cutbacks and structural adjustment. As different scholars suggest (Jaggar 2001; Heron 2008) this is not due to globalization as such, but rather to its specific neoliberal mode of organization. Neoliberalism – a policy model that emphasizes free market competition, individual initiative, private ownership and privatization, deregulation of the market, reduced state influence in the economy, reduced welfare state (Fuchs 2015) – is the supporting ideology of globalization. It operates in rigid binaries (North/South; black-white, man/woman; developed/underdeveloped) and works through



specific institutions and regimes that significantly control the way in which globalization is directed (Heron 2008). Neoliberal policies have given rise to a deterioration of working conditions – flexibilization, violation of international labour standards and low wages (Moghadam 2005) – and have accentuated asymmetries and social inequalities between nations and among women, men and children. This is generally consistent with many of the views expressed by postcolonial feminism that analyzes globalization within the context of the history of western colonialism and imperialism. Postcolonial feminists observe that the global economic institutions are privileging western culture and political norms, while ignoring and marginalizing women’s indigenous movements in the Global South. Many of the conditions created by colonialism – economic inequality and exploitation, racism, cultural marginalization, and the domination of the Global South by the Global North – have been sustained and intensified by neoliberalism (Neumayer, de Soysa 2011; Parekh, Wilcox 2014). Ecofeminism shares the feminist critique of the capitalism-patriarchy nexus: its distinctiveness lies in the inclusion of nature in the category of the exploited. One of the central postulates of ecofeminism is that the exploitation of nature is intimately linked to western attitude and male domination toward women and other vulnerable groups (Pandey 2013), such as older persons, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities, tribal cultures. Neoliberalism is built on the colonization of women, nature and nations (Mies 1986; Warren 1990; Birkeland 1993). Ecofeminists discovered the connections between patriarchal domination and violence against women: for example, Shiva (2005) argues that neoliberal globalization has made women more vulnerable to sexual violence.

WOMEN’S AGENCY AND GLOBALIZATION

Several scholars (see for example Young 2001; Davids, Van Driel 2005; Lenz, Ullrich, Fersch 2007) have underlined that

globalization cannot be viewed only as a “nightmare scenario”. Women are not only passively hit by globalization but also active agents that can challenge existing gender injustices. One of the implications of globalization is both the proliferation of women’s movements at the local level, and the emergence of transnational feminist networks (TFNs) working at the global level (Moghadan 2000, 2005; Walby 2002). If, on the one hand, contemporary feminist groups and women’s organizations remain rooted in local issues, on the other hand they also engage in information exchange, mutual support, and a combination of action towards the realization of their goals of equality and empowerment for women on an increasingly supra-national level (Moghadan 2000; Baksh, Harcourt 2015). Transnational feminist movements are made up of multiple actors working across local and global contexts to advance women’s rights and gender equality issues beyond the nation-state (Baksh, Harcourt 2015: 4). Interaction among feminist groups has been facilitated, particularly from the 1990s, by the new communications and information technologies: the Internet has promoted the creation of transnational, multicultural and multi-religious networks. Transnational events also played a key role in facilitating interaction and communication among feminist organizations: the World Conferences on Women convened by the United Nations in the last quarter of the twentieth century gave opening spaces for different feminists from over the world. Five UN World Conferences on Women took place between 1975 and 2000 (as well as numerous regional pre-preparatory meetings): in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985) and Beijing (1995). This latter conference marked a significant turning point for women’s empowerment: representatives of 189 governments and more than 2,100 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) convened to set forth a new agenda for the advancement of women and the achievement of gender equality. In 2000, the UN General Assembly decided to hold a special session to conduct a five-year review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. The Conference “Women 2000:

Gender Equality, Development, and Peace for the Twenty-First Century” took place in New York and resulted in a political declaration and further actions to implement the Beijing commitments.

A well known example of a network of feminist scholars, researchers and activists from the Global South is “DAWN-Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era”, founded in 1984 during the preparations for the UN’s Third World Conference (Antrobus 2015). It is the first South-based, international network of feminist scholar-activists, emerging at the end of the UN Decade for Women (1976-1985). Among the North-based transnational feminist we can mention the “AWID-Association for Women’s Rights and Development”, whose mission is to support feminist, women’s rights and gender justice movements to be a driving force in challenging systems of oppression, and to co-create feminist realities (Moghadan 2015). A further example is the call for a Women’s Global Strike on 8 March 2020, initiated by the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD), a network of feminist organisations and grassroots activists from 27 countries in Asia Pacific. The strike has been called, after 25 years since the commitments made for women’s rights at the 1995 Fourth World Conference for Women (Beijing Platform for Action), because “the promises made by our governments to advance equality, development and peace for all women 25 years ago were not kept, and women and girls continue to suffer discrimination and violence in every part of the world” (Women’s Global Strike 2019).

Transnational feminism is a composite reality but there are still challenges and criticisms about this notion. For example, if global media has become the privileged space to develop strategies, then, as Tohidi (2005: 6) explains, the struggles and priorities of those women who do not have access to the Internet or transnational networks are neglected or get overshadowed by the mostly English speaking, better educated and more privileged women who can travel, who can go to conferences, who have access to cyberspace. Another challenge has to do with the notion of uni-

versality: universal concerns that all women share should not hide particular conditions, inequalities, struggles and activisms of different women at the local and national levels (Herr 2013). According to Mohanty (2003), the particular is often universally significant as it allows for a more concrete and expansive vision of universal justice; moreover, falsely universalizing methodologies have served the narrow self-interest of western feminism (Mohanty 2003: 501). A further problem involves the role played by NGOs within TFNs: for some scholars (for example Lang 1997; Bernal, Grewal 2014), the proliferation of NGOs has fragmented and depoliticized women's political actions, particularly in the Global South. An additional challenge for transnational feminist movements has to do with the role of men, still underexplored (Serrano-Amaya, Vidal-Ortiz 2015), and the issue of gender identities and heteronormative politics that continue to be one of the more complex issues to be tackled in the future (Butler 1999; Baksh, Harcourt 2015).

CONCLUSIONS

Globalization seems to be an irreversible, ineluctable process which, at the same time, has not weakened inequalities (Appadurai 1996; Beck 1997; Bauman 1998). Globalization has its winners and losers, and these two groups are not necessarily entirely separable. The global nature of the women's movement is both a cultural and a political aspect of globalization: feminism is increasingly transnational. Women are active agents and globalization can offer them new opportunities for challenging existing gender injustices and to express their multiple gender identities. However, some challenges still need to be tackled, for example the need to find a balance between global and local, universality and subjectivity; that is, to consolidate transnational feminist solidarity without losing sight of local and national women's activisms and everyday local resistance and struggles. As Mohanty (2003: 501)

argued “cross-cultural feminist work must be attentive to the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as to the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes”. Another big challenge the TFNs face today has to do with the need to guarantee universal access to the Internet – and thus to online feminist actions: online petitions, social media campaigns, blogs, podcasts, etc. – and with the inclusion of all genders.

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