Session: GLOBALISATION, GENDER JUSTICE AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Impact of Globalisation and Social Movements on Gender Justice

Campaign picture (above) of the water rights movement launched in Maharashtra, India in the 1970-80’s by the peasant group Shramik Mukti Dal (SMD) with the participation of its women’s wing Stree Mukti Sangathan which mobilised rural tribal women.
The session “Globalisation, Gender Justice and Social Movements” held during the 2nd MenEngage Global Symposium 2014 - Men and Boys for Gender Justice, organised in New Delhi from November 10-13, critically assessed the impact of globalisation and social movements on gender justice. It did this in order to create a framework for sound social movements that engage with men and set up women as forerunners in economic and social progress.

How to Catalyse for Movement Building

A few practical suggestions from Cornelius on what gender justice advocates should consider in movement building on the ground:

• Social movements as well as politically organised activist organisations or their hybrids use the model of community mobilisers who are volunteers versus formalised organisations that use the model of paid employees. They must invest in building capacities and capabilities of individual volunteers involved in the social mobilisation; invest in opportunities that catalyse employment creation; and respect each person’s role — it is important to guard against notions of arrogance in mobilising — every volunteer or ‘worker’ must be considered as political, strategic and valued as the leaders or so-called ‘ideologues’ of the movement.

• Facilitate self-care as those in activism need to regulate their emotions, and stay grounded after working under stressful situations. There is need to learn how to balance movement building with allowing us to celebrate ourselves, spend time with family, friends. Activism and contributions to a better world takes many forms - not just the formal or the work activism. So caring for oneself is deeply political, in spite of what others say. It’s not a luxury, it is a necessity. And it shouldn’t be viewed differently for women than it is for men.

• For sustaining a gender just movement the things to be kept in mind are: maintaining the spirit of the movement over a period of time, by keeping the convictions and flow of funds, alive. And by advocating for better governance. Thus, ensure shared care work. For instance, insist on engaged parenting and lead by example. Then, at Sonke we’re advocating with the South African government for a full national strategic plan for gender based violence (we’re getting people to sign petitions for it here too at the symposium) — we’re doing for gender-based violence what we were able to do for HIV as a global movement.

Rukia Cornelius, National Community Education and Mobilisation Manager, Sonke Gender Justice, South Africa, looked at how social movements should be engaging issues of gender justice more broadly. She argued that interventions around rights and equality can be successful only if they include gender equality as part of their core vision and methodology for change.

She was of the opinion that a social movement for gender justice must engage with and acknowledge both individual and collective responsibility. It is only when the process of personal reflection and sustained action at the individual level is accomplished that individuals can reach out to others, and act on a sufficient scale to start a social movement.

Women’s Fight to Realise Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

Bharat Patankar, Co-Founder and President, Shramik Mukti Dal (SMD), a peasant movement in Maharashtra that has in the last 40 years co-opted people from other social movements, spoke of how globalisation has exacerbated gender inequalities. The unequal distribution of its benefits has resulted in the marginalisation of women despite new avenues of growth.

Described by Shah as an icon of the labour movement in India, Patankar narrated the history of the women’s movement and men’s engagement in some parts of it. Contextualising the women’s rights movement against the historic strike in 1982 by textile mill workers in Mumbai, he said “When the
textile workers returned from their historic undefeated strike, their women in the rural areas had already started their own movement for women’s liberation." The SMD supported its women’s wing Stree Mukt Sangarsh which led to the rapid formation in the 1980s of rural tribal women’s groups under it.

The slogan with which Stree Mukt Sangarsh started was:

STSREE SHAKTI (Women’s Power),
HIRVI DHARTI (Green Earth),
MANAV MUKTI (Human Liberation)

The movement fought against the various inequities women, particularly abandoned wives, faced. It resulted in single women asserting their right as the parent in their children’s school; fighting to regain agricultural lands for livelihoods as they lacked rights over both parental property and husband’s property; and fighting against being hounded for breaking caste barriers in marriage.

Patankar said, “In their struggle men helped but not in a frontline way; young men did street plays and sang songs in which they supported the women’s movement. The women however were active in SMD’s water rights movement, and more recently, they defeated the country’s top capitalists so that their land should not be grabbed for coal-based projects. They are demanding people-controlled windmills, equitable water distribution and they forced the Maharashtra government to have equal rights with their brothers in property.”

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Rethinking Latin American Social Movements

Jose Roberto Luna Mansanero, Specialist - Youth, Education and Masculinities, UNFPA, Guatemala busted the myth of globalisation having opened up forums for the young to articulate their views on sexual freedom, education, and social security. He said reprieve to this situation is possible, if social movements in Latin America speak with one voice, and open up spaces for debate. He raised fundamental questions: "Firstly, what do social movements mean for us, in our countries, in our own lives? Do we feel a part of a social movement or are we just working with an NGO or international organisation? Engaging men and boys is part of a social movement or not?"

The Downside of Globalisation: A Scrutiny

Shereen El Feki, British Author and Promundo Fellow, built momentum to Mansanero’s exposition by pointing to a similar narrowing of tolerance for sexual freedom in the Arab region.

Feki drew attention to the ways that globalisation is playing into the sexual culture of the Arab region. While it has opened up awareness to sexual liberties in the region (through information and communication on the internet), it has also unleashed insidious counter forces:

- women’s sexual rights have been pushed further into the margins as men are becoming increasingly intolerant of their expressions of sexual choice. Ideas on the practice of female genital mutilation is a case in point. Access to pornography is leading men to skewed conclusions. They now believe that women not circumcised (the image of the liberated white woman being predominant in their mind) grow sexually venturesome

- with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism as an opposing force to globalisation, people here are no longer ‘at home in their sexual skin’. Today, even though many more people have sex outside of marriage (despite it being a strict religious taboo; the Wahaabi strain of Islam from Saudi Arabia, in particular, being hugely constraining of men and women’s sexuality), discussions on sex have gone underground. And double standards for men and women rule as men in the region pay dowry in marriage, the
climbing rates of unemployment (30% among the young as the result of globalisation) has led to many men postponing their marriages. In Tunisia, where men earlier married in their '20s, they now marry in their '30s.

A positive development is that though social movements in the region had never earlier dealt directly with sexualities particularly of women – El Feki felt most of the movements had been disconnected from the grassroots being largely spearheaded by governments (the wives of dictator-rulers, for instance) - an interesting fallout of the Arab Spring is a new wave of NGOs tackling sexuality and young men also starting to join the discussion. She said, "Where we see the greatest presence of men in discussing sexual rights in the Arab region is with the LGBT population and what's interesting is that some of the new groups are actually trying to connect with broader social movements because their argument is what is the point of fighting for political, social and economic rights for one group when the vast majority of people do not yet have them? So however tricky, they are working with groups working for ethnic minorities and rural disadvantaged populations."

Practical Routes and Promising Strategies for Social Justice Movements

Srilatha Batliwala, Scholar Associate, Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), continued to explore the hidden and adverse dimensions of globalisation with an intent to arrive at core elements essential for building social movements; movements that challenge unjust gender power relations in all domains.

She argued that while globalisation attempts to integrate the world economy, its effects have been quite the reverse. It has fragmented the world, widening inequalities within and among countries. She also pointed to other recurring dangers within the current globalising world: the increased role of private sector actors, and their setting of development agendas/priorities (that work against the interests of the poor), the criminalisation of dissent (where efforts to nip plurality of opinion is undertaken using a variety of methods), and the rise of the oppressive global 'pleasure-work' industry.

On social movements she said most mixed-gender social movements have not truly embraced the commitment to gender justice and there is actually little understanding or exploration of the connections between the issues they are addressing in the context of gender with globalisation. "What forms does the resistance on gender justice really take in many social movements? One is the numbers game. They are missing the significance of issues of gender justice by saying, 'But you know the majority of our movement members are women' as though that automatically makes it a gender-just movement. This is a lack of intersectional approach. It is felt conscious actions on gender justice are not necessary because the movement is about inclusion. Or they say, we'll address gender after the revolution - don't divide the movement.

AWID's research has found that the movements that have the strongest and most deeply embedded gender justice perspective are those that have really taken an intersectional approach. So as I said before, that is a very fundamental characteristic." Unpacking gender and social movements, AWID's analysis was that there is need to interrogate the deep structure of movements and create formal spaces and mechanisms to address issues of broader inclusion, exclusion, hidden hierarchies etc. Batliwala said these are fundamental areas in which social movements have a great deal of work to do, not only for the sake of gender justice, but for deepening their own democratic and transformative potential.

This synthesis paper is also available in other languages

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