

Chapter 3: Building Constituencies for Change

BUILDING GLOBAL NETWORKS: WOMEN-LED ALTERNATIVES

Peggy Antrobus

In my 35 years of engagement in projects aimed at enhancing the participation of women in the socio-economic and political life of their communities at all levels, I have learned three important things. The first is that effective work at the community or sectoral level is not possible without an understanding of the macro context in which you are operating (today the macro context includes, along with macroeconomic policy, an understanding of the global trends that shape that policy). The second is that women's empowerment is crucial if issues of democracy, security, health, and livelihoods are to be addressed in a sustainable and equitable manner. The third is that, in the context of globalization, the defense of human rights and democratic development today calls for political action at all levels, from the local to the global. We need to think local and act global. In this paper I first discuss aspects of my local experience in networking; then I analyze this experience in four strategic spaces; finally I extend this analysis to future actions with a global perspective.

Local Network Experience

My own training in economics and later in social work in British universities provided the qualifications for involvement in what, in retrospect, I have come to understand as some of the major development strategies from the 1950s onward. Starting in public finance in Jamaica in the late 1950s, at a time when development planning was central to policy making, I moved on in the mid-1960s to establishing community-based programs in St. Vincent within the framework of basic needs and integrated rural development (IRD) strategies.

But it was working on Women in Development (WID) strategies from 1974 onwards, first establishing the Jamaican Women's Bureau, later the Women and Development Unit (WAND) within the regional University of the West Indies, that gave me a new perspective on the processes of development and social change. And, it was a deepening feminist consciousness and analysis that led me finally to activism within the women's movement, a switch from my traditional professional-technical approaches to development. This more political approach blended the professional-technical with elements of women's culture and led me to pursue a path to change that linked the personal to the political, the micro to the macro.¹

In terms of the goals of the United Nations (UN) Decade for Women (1975-1985) which provided the context for this paradigm shift, I can describe the process as one of moving from the goals of Equality and Development to the goal of Peace — a concept that linked gender and economic justice to the realization that harmonious relations between men and women in the household lay the foundation for the political attainment of peace, security, and a more humane world.

The appearance of a global women's movement as part of an emerging global civil society has its origins in the processes generated by the UN Decade for Women. Few of those who designated the year 1975 as International Women's Year, and adopted the resolution which launched the Decade that followed, could have imagined the impact that women's leadership would have at all levels, and in all kinds of institutions.

The Decade opened spaces for women from communities all over the world to meet. These meetings enabled women to gain new knowledge and to learn from each other's experience. They facilitated the organization of joint projects and collaborative efforts. They gave birth to issue-based networks at local, regional, and global levels, which in turn provided the research and analysis that served to empower women's advocacy. They helped women to develop self-confidence and leadership skills. They linked activists with researchers and, more importantly, validated and encouraged the pursuit of research among activists, and activism among researchers. They forged and strengthened links between organizing at local and global levels. They facilitated the growth of a global women's movement of the greatest diversity and decentralization, a movement that expanded its agenda from a narrow definition of "women's issues" to one that embraced a range of concern for human welfare and transformed itself into a major alternative constituency.

The network DAWN was one of those whose work facilitated this transformation and mobilization. DAWN is a network of women from the economic South engaged in feminist research and analysis of global issues related to economic justice, environmental sustainability, reproductive health and rights, political restructuring, and social transformation. It was launched in the context of the UN's Third World Conference on Women, held in Nairobi in 1985 to mark the end of the Decade.

DAWN's analysis was drawn from the experience of poor women living in the economic South. This provided the basis for a platform document, *Development, Crises and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives*, for the NGO Forum and underpinned a series of panel discussions on feminist perspectives on development.

The adoption of the platform document by women around the world was undoubtedly related to the process used to produce it and the way the data was analyzed. DAWN gave women a new way of viewing global processes and development issues by introducing an analysis that related the daily experiences of women to colonial relations between countries and the macroeconomic policy framework. It also revealed the systemic links between economic (colonialism and capitalism), political (patriarchy), social (gender relations), and cultural (religious fundamentalism) factors. This analysis was to change the terms of the debate on WID.

The characteristics of DAWN's analysis are:

- Its focus on the daily experiences of poor women living in the economic South;
- Its acknowledgement of regional diversity;
- Its linking of economic, social, cultural, and political factors;
- Its attempt to link experience at the micro level of women's daily lives to an understanding of the macroeconomic policy framework and global trends;

- Its understanding of the political nature of development;
- Its use of a feminist framework — rejecting dichotomies of personal and political, private and public domains; validating women’s work, experience and knowledge; and working in solidarity with women.

The shift to a more holistic and political analysis of the issues, and DAWN’s call for women’s empowerment through their organizations as the basis for the kind of social change that would place people at the center of the agenda, strengthened women’s advocacy. It also contributed a framework that was to serve women well in their advocacy on the global issues that formed the agenda for the UN conferences of the 1990s: Environment (UNCED, 1992), Human Rights (1993), Population (1994), Social Development (1995), Habitat (1996), and Food Security (1997). By the time the UN’s Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) was held in Beijing in 1995, it was clear the mobilization of women around these issues had turned us into a political constituency of potential power. It was our analysis that offered the most comprehensive explanation of many of the problems confronting society today — from increasing poverty, violence, social alienation, and environmental degradation, to fundamentalism, authoritarianism, and the rise of fascism.

Following the success of the Panels at the Nairobi Forum, DAWN’s founders organized a meeting in Rio de Janeiro for the purpose of launching an ongoing program of research and advocacy. In its first four years (1986-1990), DAWN’s work focused on the themes of *The Debt*, *Food and Energy Crisis*, and *Women’s Visions and Movements*, and a series of case studies were produced. The themes selected in 1990 to form the agenda for the next five years were based on an analysis of emerging global issues — environmental degradation, reproductive rights and population, and alternative economic frameworks. The network’s current themes, rephrased in the post-Beijing period, are the *Political Economy of Globalization*, *Reproductive Rights and Health*, *Political Restructuring and Social Transformation*, and *Sustainable Livelihoods*.

I have dealt with DAWN in some detail. It is not only because it is the network I am most familiar with and to which I can most clearly relate the dynamic relationship between actions at local and global levels (development strategy and methodology, research, analysis, advocacy, and networking), but because the methods and strategies used by DAWN have important implications for the future work to be undertaken in the context of current expressions of local-global links and the emerging mobilization of civil society to counter economic globalization. However, I turn now to other women’s global networks that link to local experience and organizing.

Global Networks

Since 1975 and in the context of the Decade a number of women’s networks have emerged at all levels — local, national, regional, and international. The following are examples of global issue-based networks with links to regional networks. Some are loose alliances; others are more formal (the formal networks can be identified by their acronyms):

- Networks around issues of Women’s Human Rights (WHR)

- Networks around issues of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
- Networks around Environmental Issues
- Women Environment and Development Organization (WEDO)
- International Gender and Trade Network (IGTN)
- Grassroot Women Organizing Together (GROOTS)
- Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice (WICEJ).

Space does not permit a detailed examination of the work of these networks. What would be useful for this paper, however, is to examine some of the strategies used by some of them to link work at the local level to advocacy at the global level. In my own analysis of women's organizing I have identified four "spaces," progressing in terms of the degree of similarity or consistency with the political orientation and goals of those involved. The spaces are: consciousness-raising groups or women's circles, caucuses, coalitions, and campaigns. I will draw on the experience of the above-mentioned networks to examine these spaces.

Consciousness-Raising Groups and Women's Circles

Women's circles are the space in which most organizing starts. The circle is made up of a close group of friends or colleagues who share a common political philosophy and agenda. In the 1960s these were the spaces in which women engaged in feminist consciousness-raising. Many went on to become active in the women's movement.

Although consciousness-raising groups are associated with "white, middle-class housewives" in North America and Europe, the process is essential to organizing. It was the basis of the "speak bitterness" campaigns of China after 1948 that led to the challenging of the subjection of Chinese women to the practices of foot-binding and concubinage. It has links to the process of Freirean "conscientization," with the additional element of the "personal."

Caucuses

Under the leadership of WEDO,² women participating in UN conferences developed caucusing to a fine art, expanding the space for NGOs at the UN.³ Women's caucuses are now a standard part of all international meetings and are spaces in which newcomers and individual women can link their lobbying efforts to those more experienced in these activities. They are also spaces for education and analysis. Throughout the UN Decade and the global conferences of the 1990s they have been unparalleled events for building women's skills and capacities in lobbying, negotiating, and advocacy.

Preparations for the Women's Caucus included detailed analysis of conference documents and the drafting of amendments to the texts. Throughout the 1990s, WEDO circulated these documents to partner networks and to individual women as well. At the same time, other networks such as Women's Rights and DAWN would be involved in their own preparatory analyses of the documents as well as of the political context for the negotiations.

The Women's Caucuses are the public spaces in which the strategies for lobbying governments are negotiated. The analysis of the options that inform those strategies, however, is formulated in informal meetings of feminists (women's circles) who have developed a high degree of trust and work consistently on these issues on an ongoing basis.

Coalition and Alliance Building

As a result of the more holistic analysis of factors that have an impact on women's lives, women's activism has led to the formation of networks on issues of broader interest — environment, human rights, health, debt, trade — and, in the process, to the formation of coalitions and alliances.⁴

Coalitions and alliances may be formed with other women's networks, as well as with NGOs working on common issues. When women's networks link in this way with NGOs, they often bring a different perspective to the NGO (as in the case of the coalitions with NGOs working on debt and structural adjustment). Usually coalitions or alliances of women's networks are made up of networks working on different but related issues. Thus, the women's human rights networks have linked with women's networks on reproductive health, or on economic issues, in order “to underscore the indivisibility of women's human rights and emphasize the interconnectedness of the civil, political, social, economic and cultural dimensions of all human rights” (Bunch, Antrobus, Frost, & Reilly, 2001, p. 217).

As DAWN has found in its work on environmental issues, women's perspectives can often be very different from those of NGOs, even those NGOs in which there are large numbers of women. An analysis that starts from the daily experience of poor women is one that rejects the dualisms of personal and political, private and public, etc. Thus, in DAWN's Caribbean regional consultation on the environment, as one of the participants said, “Our first environment is our bodies and the earth that sustains us”⁵. Reflection on women's bodies and their experience of their environments led participants to focus on women's health and livelihoods, and then on to a consideration of factors affecting health and livelihoods. This led to an analysis of macro-economic factors of structural adjustment and patterns of trade, and links from these to the political economy of industrial-military interests.⁶

The use of women's experiences as a starting point for analysis (the rejection of dualism and dichotomies) is what makes the difference between the work of women in mainstream NGOs (where women's ideas and experiences are often marginalized) and women in their own organizations, especially those that are feminist in orientation.

Campaigns

The campaign is the broadest coalition of people and groups that comes together for a time-bound engagement around a common agenda. Participants in campaigns often have little in common, other than the goal that brings them together. For example, the current well publicized campaigns against neo-liberalism — focused on the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), the World Trade Organization (WTO) and globalization itself — bring together a wide array of people, often with conflicting agendas and purposes. Thus, not surprisingly, it is difficult to

discern a coherent message, quite apart from the fact that any message at all is drowned out by the media's highlighting of the hooliganism and violence of some of the protesters.⁷

One of the problems in the emerging anti-globalization movement is that even those networks that are best organized (for example, those pressing for environmental and labor standards) are not in line with the views of similar networks in the economic South. In the case of environmental issues, little attention is being paid to poor people's access to land and resources. In the case of labor, the underlying motive is clearly to protect jobs in the North. No questions are being raised about the underlying conditions that force children into the labor market, or women to accept jobs that are exploitative.

Campaigns led by women's networks have had greater coherence even as they are mindful of the need to avoid universalizing the category of "women" in a way that ignores differences of power among women. Women's campaigns have also, so far, been marked by less overt violence. A good example of one of these campaigns is the Global Campaign for Women's Human Rights (GCWHR). It was started with a petition launched at the first annual campaign of Sixteen Days of Activism Against Gender Violence. It called on the Vienna Conference to "comprehensively address women's human rights at every level of its proceedings" and to recognize "gender violence, a universal phenomenon which takes many forms across culture, race, and class ... as a violation of human right requiring immediate action." According to one of the campaign's leaders:

The petition provided a global umbrella for local activities that promoted public awareness about gender-based violence as a human rights concern. Groups participating in the campaign select their own objectives and determine their own local activities, within a larger global effort with some common themes. The campaign grew steadily during the 1990s, involving groups in over 100 countries in events including hearings, demonstrations, media campaigns, cultural festivals, and candlelight vigils. Many of its activities also mobilized women to participate in the UN world conferences, and since 1995, some have been directed at implementing the promises made to women in the various conference documents, as well as in UN treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The success of the global campaign was rooted in the activities of national and regional women's groups who defined the issues important in their countries as they focused attention on the world conferences (Bunch et al, 2001, p. 218).

Of special note here, is the way in which the process leading to and supporting the campaign illustrates organizing in other spaces — the circle, the caucus and coalition building as well. For example, as part of the process, the Center for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University held

a strategic planning institute to co-ordinate plans for Vienna with women from around the world who had been active regionally. This meeting worked on lobbying strategies for the conference, including further development of recommendations on women's human rights and built on regional proposals and served as the focus of the final international preparatory meeting in Geneva in April of 1993. Institute attendees also

(planned) for a Global Tribunal on Violations of Women's Human Rights that would give vivid personal expression to the consequences of such violations. Participants would provide graphic demonstration of how being female can be life threatening. (Bunch et al, 2001, p. 218).

The strategic planning institute was in a sense a *women's circle*, which facilitated the formulation of strategies for linking the daily experiences of women at local levels to the global campaign. Participation in the UN meetings provided venues for *caucusing* with other women, and for *coalition building* with other networks such as DAWN, WEDO, and WICEJ.

These examples of women's networks that link the local to the global show that effective mobilization requires consistent research, analysis and strategic thinking. Grassroot mobilization for the sake of mobilization can be useless unless it is informed by research and analysis that links the experience of ordinary people to the broader framework of macro-economic policy and global trends. The recently formed International Gender and Trade Network, created to engender trade negotiations, places emphasis on the links between research, economic literacy, and advocacy.

Future Actions

The following example of a community-based project I am currently engaged in will illustrate how these linkages might work, as well as the links between these activities and different types and levels of organizations and networks. This is my women-led, community-based 'alternative' for building the links between the local and the global.⁸ The focus is on the crisis facing small-scale banana farmers in the Windward Islands — the loss of their preferential access to European markets as a result of a WTO ruling.

In this project DAWN Caribbean will be working with NGOs in two of the islands. The decision to work with NGOs, rather than directly with Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) is due to the fact that CBOs are not normally concerned with policy issues. In addition, some of the activities affect a broader cross-section of the society. However, it was necessary to have clear criteria for the kind of NGOs to be involved. The criteria selected were (i) sensitivity to gender issues and commitment to women's empowerment, (ii) work with CBOs, and (iii) engagement in policy issues.

The project has seven elements:

- Community-based economic projects (aimed at identifying and implementing projects to secure alternative sources of livelihood);
- National level economic/trade literacy programs in which CBOs will be key participants (aimed at helping participants gain an understanding of globalization and trade liberalization and the impacts of these on national economies and policies);
- Research (aimed at providing the information needed by CBOs and NGOs in their work, e.g. monitoring the impact of trade liberalization on local agricultural production, the provision of health services, and government revenues);

- National level monitoring and advocacy (aimed at monitoring national budgets, paying particular attention to resource allocations to the sectors of agriculture, small-scale manufacturing, health, education, low-income housing, water, and transportation, and engaging CBOs in proposing ‘alternatives’ based on their needs and experience);
- Networking and advocacy at regional and global levels (linking with networks like DAWN and IGTN through the regional networks that are part of these global networks);
- Documentation, analysis, and dissemination of processes and results (so that the implications for policy and program design can be highlighted);
- Women’s empowerment will be a cross-cutting issue. The assumption is that women’s leadership is essential if social development needs are not to be overlooked. Particular attention will be paid to the participation of women in all processes of decision-making, and to women’s sexual and reproductive health and maternal and child health.

Although small-scale banana farmers have been well represented by the Windward Island Farmers’ Association (WINFA), and WINFA’s efforts at securing markets (through their link with Oxfam Great Britain and the Fair Trade movement) have been more successful than their governments’ attempts to negotiate the retention of preferential access to European markets, the analysis that informs NGO advocacy in this area has not incorporated some of the broader social and political concerns. Nor has the analysis been linked to the broader campaign challenge to neo-liberalism, nor to the women’s movement. The DAWN project will strengthen advocacy by making these links.

There are a number of dilemmas facing women’s movements as they attempt to link networking and advocacy at local, national, and regional levels to work at the global level. A major one is the difficulty they all have in gaining space for their specific concerns within mainstream, male-led networks. Yet without the perspectives of women, these networks are limited in their proposals and advocacy. The effectiveness and credibility of civil society representation in informing public opinion and in calling for policy changes with respect to the promotion and defense of human rights and democratic development will ultimately depend on the extent to which it is representative of the rights and views of 50% of the population.

Endnotes

1. In a paper written in 1986 Crowfoot and Chesier identified three approaches to social change: the professional-technical, political and counter-cultural. My view is that all three are required for social change because of the systemic linkages between economic, social, cultural and political structures.
2. Under the leadership of the charismatic ex-US congresswoman, Bella Abzug, WEDO was established in the context of the preparations for UNCED. It later carved a niche for itself at the UN as the convenor of an increasingly effective Women’s Caucus throughout the UN conferences of the 1990s.
3. The accreditation of NGOs to the UN increased enormously in the context of UNCED and throughout the 1990s. Recently, however, there have been efforts on the part of some

governments, encouraged by the Vatican and states opposed to the advancement of women's rights, to curtail access of some groups.

4. These words tend to be used interchangeably. However, in this context, if a distinction is to be made I would use the Oxford dictionary to draw a distinction between a coalition as a "temporary alliance for combined action," whereas an alliance is a group of like-minded entities in "agreement to co-operate" in a more general way.
5. The statement was made by Jocelyn Dow of Guyana at the meeting in Barbados in May 1991. Jocelyn went on to become a leading member of WEDO, taking over as one of the temporary leaders after the death of Bella Abzug.
6. This is a good example of DAWN's analytical/conceptual framework.
7. Some protesters are there just to create trouble. Indeed, at the recent protests at the G-8 meeting in Genoa, Italy, there is evidence that fascist elements were used to provoke and justify police repression against the protesters.
8. The Women and Community Empowerment/Sustainable Livelihoods Project brings together all that I have learned in over 40 years of working on development and social change, and in particular some of the findings from my doctoral work (see Antrobus, 1998).

Bibliography

- Antrobus, P. (1998). *Micro-macro linkages in Caribbean community development: The impact of global trends and state policy on rural women in St. Vincent (1974-1994) and the role of a non-formal education project as a mitigating force*. Unpublished thesis, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.
- Bunch, C., with Antrobus, P., Frost, S., & Reilly, N. (2001). International networking for women's human rights. In M. Edwards & J. Gaventa (Eds.), *Global citizen action*, pp. 217-229. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
- Edwards, M., & Gaventa, J. (2001). *Global citizen action*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
- Sen, G. & Grown, C. (1987). *Development, crises and alternative visions: Third World women's perspectives*. New York: Monthly Review Press.