

## 20<sup>TH</sup> THE GREEN LADIES' LUNCH

### **The Global Women's Movements Perspectives of Feminisms in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

While I was completing my address about the most significant issues for feminists at the eve of the third Millennium to put forward at this 20<sup>th</sup> the Green Ladies' lunch, a meeting of G8 ministers of finance was drawing to a close on June 10<sup>th</sup> 2005, in London. The ministers were planning the next summit of the President's of the 8 richest countries in the world, to be held a month later, in Scotland. By the end of the conference, an agreement was settled on the British Government's proposal to cancel most of the debt of the poorest countries and to significantly increase aid, in order to support their economic development. The agreement wished-for writing off US\$40 billions yet to be paid by 18 African countries to the Bretton Woods institutions (International Monetary Fund, World Bank) and the African Development Fund. This proposal was central to the strategies for poverty reduction of Tony Blair's who had admitted that African's life standards had declined these past 40 years<sup>1</sup>. Later on, on June 14<sup>th</sup>, the British Prime Minister and President Chirac reinforced the Un General Secretary Koffi Annan's new framework for the United Nations by putting Africa's development as a major challenge of the international agenda for the year to come.

The annulment of the debt has been an important on-going debate propped up by African heads of states as well as civil societies throughout the continent, since the dramatic failures of structural adjustment programmes. Local and international groups have claimed the annulment of the debt on the basis of the right to development. Women's organisations have become aware of the negative impact of the debt, when the drastic cutbacks in national budgets related to non-productive sectors (mainly education, health and social services) put a heavier burden on their care of the family. African national budgets at large are not gendered. And on the pretext of the debt payments and the need to keep budgets balanced, governments pre-empted the reduction of public expenditures on programmes of education, professional training and health facilities as well job decrease in both public and private sectors. More and more women were forced into the role of the sole providers for the family. The first analysis of SAPs and their appalling impact on African economies and societies were done by activists and researchers, but their gendered effect on women was asserted by feminist critique from both South and North countries, as early as the mid-eighties.

#### ***For the Global Women's Movements, what are the Perspectives of Feminisms in the 21st Century ?***

Feminism as such has been a political tool of research and action for a large number of women's groups, even for those who do not claim its influence on their understanding and debate of women and gender issues. But as many others concepts, feminism has a long history and has spread over time and space. It substantially contributed to what all of us accept as the 'Global Women's Movement'. One cannot deny the substantial presence of a worldwide

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Blair set up a Commission for Africa in 2004, with several high rank officials, among whom President B. Mkapa of Tanzania, Prime Minister M. Zenawi from Ethiopia, M. Trevor, South Africa 's finance minister, M. Camdessus, former director of the IMF, etc. British singer Bob Geldof, who organised music concerts against famine, too was a member of the commission.

women's movement built most certainly over a long period, but consolidated during the three past decades. Its main challenges are about putting an end to gender inequalities, and political, economic and social injustice, although as pointed out by Peggy Antrobus, it is facing "the limitations of a movement based solely on gender identity and the vulnerability of civil society to manipulation by forces to oppose social justice" (2004:xiv).

The global feminist movement made several major breakthroughs since it encompassed various cultures, and geographical and historical contexts. It indeed gained momentum with the past UN decades for women (1975-1985). Despite the fact that they often led to confrontations, even crucial contradictions and divisions, the debates organised on several matters engaged official delegates and NGOs' representatives, mostly women, from various countries horizons, to discuss about opened and not so opened issues such as race, class, ethnicity, religion, citizenship, democracy or sexuality. For women in Africa, the concern about sexuality and fertility had to be more than maternal mortality and morbidity as governments and international donors tended to focus on and elaborate strategies of prevention. It too was about the right to control their body and sexuality. To access the bodily integrity right implying the abolition of early and forced sexuality, marriage and pregnancy is yet a struggle. It is true that sexuality still is a major challenge for all women since their body is the site of many struggles.

Hence, at the eve of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, new perspectives are required for feminist thinking and action. The recognition of differences (it was a very uneasy process) was a vital step in building up mutual understanding and alliances.

**One of the first challenge might be too keep faith in feminism.**

It is a challenge with younger generations, our daughters and grand-daughters, who take for granted the current women's rights and often claim that they do not need to be feminist. This is true in Western countries where the gains have been significant as well as in less developed countries where they are numbered. In the latter, we inscribe our struggles in cultural frameworks and we often are reluctant to challenge them. Here the issue of cultural relativism is critical, because in the name of culture, access to rights can be denied.

Related to the faith in feminism, I often notice a kind of disillusion among Western feminists from various horizons I meet on many occasions or whose work I read. Despite the significant breakthrough of feminist discourse and empowerment, in my view they seem sceptical, if not pessimistic about next challenges : after gender equality, what is next ? I find difficult to understand such an attitude as an African woman whose right requests are far from being fulfilled. Some others wonder if women are not on "*a fausse route*" (a wrong route). I allude to the recent book of the famous French essayist Elizabeth Badinter, *Fausse Route* (2003). Author of several essays that used to be labelled feminist, Badinter is now questioning French feminism as monolithic, essentialist and anti-men !!! While denying male domination, she claims that women are reluctant to assert their autonomy. Feminism is victimizing women and castrating men. A key element of debate, in the book, is gender violence as a form of women's oppression. Commenting the *National Inquiry on Violence against Women in France* (ENVEFF) published in 2000, Badinter refutes the identifiable violence existing against women through gender power relations, and qualifies gender violence as a consequence of men's wretched conditions of life. For her, such a study is just aggravating male/female relationships and is leading to an *impasse* (dead-end).

The criticism of women's victimisation is very common among African women's groups who indeed are reluctant to identify themselves as feminist. They have strong reservations about feminism as a Western concept, theory and tool. While the idea of a global

western feminism is contested in North America as well as in Europe, many African women denounce it as an imperialist discourse, rejecting contextual differences relevant at social political and cultural levels. This address is too short to carve out the issues currently debated in Africa about the relevance of feminism.

**Another challenge is how to share perspectives on the same ground, beyond our differences.**

Feminism is a common tool and all of us need to ground it. It is a common space and each of us should feel at the centre of this space of reflection and empowerment. It should not matter today that ideas and concepts are invented somewhere, mainly in the North, to allow ourselves to challenge and re-appropriate them. After all they are part of realities that one might share. As Africans, we don't need *humanitarian* feminism. We need to establish a dialogue among partners whose struggles are relevant to each other.

Poverty reduction is for instance an issue often raised to explain third world women's situation. But right in Berlin, the capital city of the 3<sup>rd</sup> richest country in the world, women who are do not belong to the third world face the same misfortune. In poor areas of industrialised large cities, many people are vulnerable to poverty. They struggle to meet their basic needs as food, clothing and heating. Many other groups do not have enough income, so their standard of living is endangered by poor public services and out-of-reach social services. Clearly one cannot compare the slums of Dakar and Brazzaville with poor districts of New York and Paris, but poverty and social exclusion persists in the wealthiest countries of the world. A report issued by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Poverty Dynamics in Six OECD Countries*<sup>2</sup>, surveyed in Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States, asserts that poverty in Western Europe and North America is far wider than previously measured. It states that "the households particularly vulnerable to long-term poverty are female-headed households; single-adult households with children; households headed by an individual of retirement age or by a young individual; households where the head has only basic education and households where there is no worker". This statement about industrialised countries could picture a large number of African settings. No humanitarian approach will solve issues of poverty, dearth and social exclusion, neither in the North nor in the South. Solutions have to be political and economic, certainly not humanitarian.

At the turn of this new millennium, the world is in crisis. World leaders now confess that 40 years of cooperation and technical assistance did not develop Africa. Africa is rich , yet Africans are poor. It is constrained in a political order that weighs heavily on the state and corrupts the relationships between the state and the citizen. Social, economic and political citizens' rights have never been so argued. But what differences does that make for women in Africa ? We indeed are challenged by the fact that at the turn of this millennium, the major development priority on the continent is poverty reduction. Within such a framework, how can we keep on raising the issue of the role of the African woman in development ? At the international level, we have won several rights to equality whose enforcement our countries unfortunately cannot guarantee. We are obliged to refine our demands in the face of such development which needs to be re-thought by all the stakeholders.

**Women's rights in Africa : an index**

It might be useful, in this short presentation, to have a quick glance at the issues facing the most African women, to get a sense of what common ground they discuss from.

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<sup>2</sup> *Poverty Dynamics in Six OECD Countries*, OECD Economic Studies, N° 30, 2000/1

At the Beijing +10 preparatory meeting for the African region in Addis Ababa (October 2004), the African Centre for Gender and Development (AGDI) presented its first African Gender and Development Index, that is divided in two parts : the Gender Status Index (GSI) and African Women's Progress Scoreboard (AWPS). As stated, in the preliminary pages of the index, "the GSI covers those aspects of gender relations that can be measured quantitatively. The AWPS captures qualitative issues in relation to the performance of gender policies of African governments" (2004:5).

The index is designed to evaluate the disparity between women and men's status. It mainly pays attention to issues and data relevant to the African situation. It should allow governments, civil societies and various organisations to look at the effectiveness of numerous policies towards women by measuring gender equality and equity, and women's empowerment and advancement. The index is based on three blocks labeled after Amartya Sen's perception of the success of development : social power *capabilities*, economic power *opportunities* and political power *agency* of women (2004:11).

The social power capabilities depend upon the access to education and health. Those are two sectors where discriminations against women mostly lie. The economic power opportunities have to be considered by the measure of time use or employment and sectors of employment, and access to resources (natural, material and financial). The political power is about women's participation in decision in the public and the private sectors. More than numbers in various positions (political parties, trade unions, government institutions and parliaments, administration and business), the major indicator lies in the way women change situations while they access positions of power.

Those objectives seem to be common to many women throughout the world and lie down all the challenges of the feminist global movement, in this new Millennium.

Fatou Sow

Dakar, Juin 2004.