



# Concluding remarks

Women's agency is today increasingly visible and impressive in women's movements around the world, in organizations of civil society, in the state and political society, and in the international development establishment. Processes of democratization, to which women's movements contributed, have altered the terms under which women's groups engage in political activity. Despite some initial setbacks and loss of momentum, strategies have been adapted and revised to help women gain political power under the democratic rules of the game. The entry of more women into national legislatures as well as municipal councils and other locally administered bodies has contributed to the deepening of democracy around the world, while providing valuable openings for women representatives and councillors to articulate different priorities in national and local decision making.

Dovetailing with the vociferous demands of women's movements, "femocrats" from within the state and women legislators have worked hard to make national laws responsive to women's reproductive health and rights, and to prohibit violence and discrimination against women, no matter where these violations occur and who their perpetrators are. Landmark international prosecutions against sexual assault in war as a crime against humanity now mean that public actors responsible for sexual violence are beginning to be held accountable not just to the citizens of their own countries, but to global society.

These explicit policy and legislative moves have combined with long-term processes of social change in families and cultural practices to bring more women into the public domain. A decade on from Beijing there is indeed much to celebrate.

But there is also much at risk. On the tenth anniversary of the Beijing Conference women's movements will be pondering not only the continued dominance of neoliberalism in some important arenas of policy making, but the challenges thrown up by the recent shifts in geopolitics and new forms of religious-identity politics played out at the global, national and subnational levels. Women's ambitions for social change risk taking a back seat to concerns with security. Unilateralism is eroding the multilateral framework within which transnational feminist networks have painstakingly nurtured a global women's rights regime over the years. In a polarized ideological climate where security concerns loom large and internal dissent is discouraged, sustaining autonomous spaces where women's groups and movements can address critical and controversial issues of gender equality and liberal freedoms will require political agility and alliance building with other social movements, political parties and states.

## ECONOMIC LIBERALIZATION

In reflecting on the achievements of the 1990s, the report has paid particular attention to the contribution that development policy can make in accentuating or diminishing women's subordination. It has suggested that among the reasons for the persisting gender inequalities has been the prevailing policy orthodoxy with its emphasis on monetary and fiscal restraint.

Economic liberalization has never been smooth or uncontested, and there have always been spaces for policy experimentation



and heterodoxy, whether with respect to macroeconomic policies or social policies. Where policy makers have followed orthodox prescriptions—whether under pressure from Washington or of their own volition—the outcomes have been disappointing, even in the estimate of their designers. Rural livelihoods have become more insecure (as well as more diversified) in contexts where cutbacks in state support to domestic agriculture have coincided with increasing exposure to competition from large subsidized producers. At a time when global commodity markets have been volatile and depressed, large numbers of people have been trapped in poverty, hunger and even famine.

Insecurity is also etched into the growth of informal economies across the world, where “flexibility” has come to mean a weakening of labour standards rather than creating a better balance between work and life. With weak public health and welfare programmes, fragile infrastructure and thin social protection mechanisms, the provision of unpaid care by women and girls has been intensified—to intolerable degrees in sub-Saharan Africa, where the HIV/AIDS epidemic is taking a staggering toll of lives. At the same time taking on paid work has become ever more necessary for all household members—whether male or female, young or old—to make ends meet in increasingly commercialized contexts.

However it is important to underline that the economic policy agenda that has been so deeply adverse to many women and men around the world has also provided new opportunities to some social groups, including some low-income women. Jobs in export-oriented manufacturing firms and capitalist farms producing “high value” agricultural export crops around the world, no matter how fragile and short-lived, and how low the pay and unfavourable the conditions of work, have benefited some women: giving them their first discretionary income, new social contacts beyond the confines of kinship and neighbourhood, the chance to postpone marriage at a young age, maybe save for a better future, invest in their children’s education, or have a greater say in how household resources are allocated. This may not have ended women’s subordination and dependence on male protection, but it has given some women at least the tools with which to whittle away at the pillars of patriarchy. For those who command more capital and resources, liberalization of markets has provided

opportunities to trade and invest, to purchase land and housing in their own name, and bequeath it to their offspring or siblings, perhaps in return for the promise of protection and security in old age.

For the vast majority of women, however, gender equality will remain a distant dream as long as the market calculus remains the principal arbiter of policy. Attaining gender equality requires the strengthening of publicly accountable systems of mutual assurance against entitlement failure. This means investing in areas that orthodox prescriptions cannot countenance: well-functioning and accessible public health and education services, labour standards and rights that protect women’s employment and conditions of work, and investment in public provision of a range of complementary services (clean water, sanitation, electricity, paved streets, childcare) to support the care economy.

To have substantive rights and entitlements implies access to an accountable process where access to a resource is not at the arbitrary discretion of a public official, dependent on the favour of a patron or the goodwill of a husband, or the price-fixing power of a monopoly supplier.<sup>1</sup> Genuine empowerment is about having meaningful institutional alternatives to dependence on familial and conjugal relations, on markets and employers, and on public and non-state actors when the terms of any of these relations become unacceptable. It means decent jobs with employment rights, and fair allowances for lifecycle contingencies such as old age, ill-health, disability and periods of intense care. It also means a more equal sharing of unpaid care between men and women, and thus a redefinition of full-time work.

## EMBEDDING LIBERALISM?

In response to widespread discontent with the liberalization agenda, more attention is now being given to social policies and governance issues. There is the view in some policy circles that if globalization is to stay on course, then it must be “tamed” or “embedded” through social policies and political reforms.<sup>2</sup> However, the full potential of these positive moves is vitiated by the persistent dominance of “market fundamentalism” in some of the most influential arenas of policy making.<sup>3</sup>

The social distress and inequalities that are being unleashed by current economic policies are far more extensive than the remedies that are suggested. Such prescriptions thus risk replicating the by now well-rehearsed limitations of minimal safety nets in the era of structural adjustment. In the context of liberalized trade (which reduces import and export taxes), and the pressures from mobile capital (which reduce corporate taxes, capital gains and income taxes) it is very difficult for governments to raise the kind of revenues needed to finance public services and transfers that can meet the casualties of economic policies. In sum, there is a lack of affinity and complementarity between sectoral and macroeconomic policies.

It is now more widely recognized that effective governance is not about shrinking the state. The neoliberal reform agenda is criticized by some of its own architects for its failure to unpack the different dimensions of “stateness” and distinguish between state scope and state strength.<sup>4</sup> Even on the restricted versions of governance, as seen by the international financial institutions (IFIs), the nimble, responsive state that regulates private industry and commercialized social services is a pretty high-capacity state. That means training, salaries and incentives.

It is also increasingly clear that the view of the modern state envisaged in governance reforms—with lean and clean bureaucracies and judiciaries creating the conditions for unfettered market competition, inviolable and individual property rights, well-enforced contracts—never actually existed in any historical version of the development of capitalism.<sup>5</sup> The “blueprint” versions of institutional reform that are being pushed on developing countries in order to foster growth will not necessarily promote vibrant private sectors, at least if history is to be taken as the guide. The dangers of institutional “monocropping”<sup>6</sup> mean that governance reforms are likely to run into as many problems as economic reforms, as they encounter the unruly reality of developing-country institutions.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, there is an increasingly coordinated assault on domestic market and state institutions to make them resemble this abstract model. In this ideal state and market, gender equality hardly figures. Instead, the “abstract market” and “rational-legal” state are based on the notion of the rational, unencumbered, free-choosing individual. As the analysis in

this report suggests, women do not fit this model. They have dependants and care burdens. Their political “voice” can be muffled by gender-biased institutions and the restricted notions of participation that some governance reforms entail.

## TOWARDS A GENDER-EQUITABLE POLICY AGENDA

Any proposal for alternatives must eschew prescribing a “one-size-fits-all” solution in the manner that orthodox approaches have done, given the immense institutional, historical, social and political diversities among countries.<sup>8</sup> Charting gender-equitable macroeconomic policy is in a sense an art, for which there is no simple recipe. There are certain guiding principles however that macroeconomic policies need to observe: avoiding deflationary policies that sacrifice growth and employment creation, placing equality as a central objective at the heart of policy making along with macroeconomic stability, and ensuring affinities and complementarities between sectoral and macroeconomic policies. As a leading economist puts it:

“Financial conservatism has good rationale and imposes strong requirements, but its demands must be interpreted in the light of the overall objectives of public policy. The role of public expenditure in generating and guaranteeing many basic capabilities calls for attention; it must be considered along with the instrumental need for macroeconomic stability. Indeed, the latter need must be assessed within a broad framework of social objectives”.<sup>9</sup>

While economic growth provides the necessary conditions for escaping poverty, improving standards of living, and generating resources for redistributive policies, it is not sufficient for gender equality. The widely praised East Asian growth trajectories may have produced relatively egalitarian societies in terms of asset and income distribution between social classes and households, but they were far from egalitarian when it came to gender relations and outcomes. This is not to suggest that growth is inherently inimical to gender equality, but to underline the point that some growth trajectories may indeed

coincide with, or be premised upon, a highly inegalitarian gender order. High rates of economic growth, for example, may draw more women into the labour force, but this can coincide with persistent gender segmentation in labour markets. What this suggests is that more specific policies are needed to make growth and gender equality compatible: social regulation of all labour markets to erode gender-biased social norms and remove discriminations that account for the persistence of gender segmentation, together with removal of structural constraints on women's ability to take up widening labour-market opportunities.

Similarly, higher rates of growth together with taxation policies that generate higher levels of government income do not necessarily lead to a more gender-equitable use of these resources. To ensure that public expenditure is actually reaching women and girls equitably, for example, and that women benefit from mechanisms promoting social security, gender-policy objectives have to be set and mechanisms put in place to guarantee that public expenditures are channelled to these areas, and to the provision of infrastructure and services that contribute to a reduction in women's unpaid labour time.

The feminization of national parliaments and local governments in some parts of the world will not necessarily mean that women politicians will use gender budget initiatives—or indeed other mechanisms—to advance women's interests. The responsiveness of women in public office to the gender-equality cause will depend upon a number of factors, including whether their means of access to politics enjoins them to respond to a female constituency, and whether their political resources include the capacity to ensure that political parties place gender equality on their platforms. The effectiveness of women politicians as gender-equality advocates will also depend on whether the institutions of governance—the judiciary, the audit systems, the legislature, the public administration—can be reformed to make social justice and gender equality a measure of excellence in public service.

As the preceding paragraphs have argued, where economic and governance reforms do not pay heed to the protection of human rights and do not contribute to building meaningful opportunities for participation and deepening democracy, it

will remain difficult to enshrine gender justice as a measure and objective of performance in the public sector. Indeed, if the privatization of core state functions in some places, and the limitations imposed on domestic policy making by economic globalization in others, are heralding the demise of the proactive state capable of “governing markets”,<sup>10</sup> then the capacity of women in public office to bring gender equality into public policy will be greatly diminished.

It is far too early to mourn the demise of the state, however. The many contradictions in the liberalization agenda are forcing a reassessment of policies for market and state reform that have proven destructive for secure livelihoods and for national stability. Democratization and globalization have also raised citizen expectations about the role of the state. In diverse contexts there are growing popular expectations that principles of greater accountability, transparency and openness should apply not just to commercial transactions, but across all institutions, public and private. Globalization has meant that the jurisdictions for rights-based struggles have multiplied: no longer limited to the state level, but evident at both supra and subnational levels. It is now possible for women's justice struggles to find an international audience through global justice institutions, and new local audiences through new institutions of local government.

These efforts to advance women's access to resources and to justice can support the efforts of gender-equality advocates at national levels to create and enforce progressive legislation on women's rights. This kind of multiple-jurisdiction strategy is evident today in, for instance, efforts to deal with sexual and domestic violence in Rwanda.<sup>11</sup>

The central instrument for the protection of rights has been, and must remain, the state, even if its own practices and institutions need to be thoroughly democratized to deliver gender justice.<sup>12</sup> Where market fundamentalism has reduced the legitimacy of the state as the maker of national rules about the obligations and rights of citizens, the utility of the state as the most important mechanism for promoting social change and enforcing standards of gender equality is diminished.

Fragile, failing or conflict-ridden states present acute challenges to the project of pursuing gender equality, challenges that

will demand increasing international attention over the years to come. Where core state functions, such as the provision of basic social services, are offloaded onto humanitarian and international aid organizations, where the processes of state building and peace consolidation are themselves subject to blueprints laid out by international players, and where domestic women's movements are weak, it is extremely difficult to build a national consensus for gender justice.<sup>13</sup>

On the contrary, when people seek social protection from traditional or informal social institutions, because of state failure to provide services or a sense of national purpose, conservative scripts for gender relations may enjoy a revival (or be invented from scratch). The resilience of these informal institutions, their ingenuity in substituting for state services, and their enduring effectiveness at providing members with dignity and social purpose, mean that these institutions must be recruited to the task of rebuilding social cohesion in post-conflict situations or in failing states.

It may be difficult to insert gender-equality concerns (or broader social equality concerns) to these processes, where traditional institutions have a patriarchal character,<sup>14</sup> but it is not impossible. South Africa provides a model of holding traditional institutions to basic constitutional standards of social equality. The South African case underlines the need for the state to uphold gender equality across all social institutions, and this will remain a challenge in fragile or failing state contexts.

What this shows is that good governance and equality projects are costly—they require strong states—but they are essential for building secure states and societies capable of tolerating diversity and difference. Neoliberal prescriptions for market and state reform avoid issues of inequality. In the short term inequalities, including gender-based inequalities, may facilitate rapid growth, but in the long term they deeply undercut the contribution of growth to poverty reduction, they erode social cohesion, and they can foster extremist political activity and instability.

## Notes

- 1 Elson 2002.
- 2 ILO 2004d; Ruggie 2003.
- 3 Molyneux 2002.
- 4 Fukuyama 2004.
- 5 Upham forthcoming.
- 6 Evans 2004.
- 7 Mkandawire 2004.
- 8 Rodrik 2004.
- 9 Sen 1999:141.
- 10 Wade 1990.
- 11 Goetz and Jenkins 2004:chapters 2, 4.
- 12 Molyneux and Razavi 2002b.
- 13 Kandiyoti 2004.
- 14 Kabeer 2002.