

We dedicate this paper to the greatest amongst us

Fatema Mernissi



The dream of flying “Allah made the earth a carpet for you so you can travel...”

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Encashing on Women's Intelligence

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I am grateful to my sister Zanele Mbeki for giving me this privilege of preparing an address for a community of young women who are building up their strength and their skills to engage with the "big picture" or the "world outside" as represented by various international institutions such as the UN, World Bank etc. I think she also intends to ensure that this community of women also affirms their identity as *African* and *Feminists*.

In this address - I was to be here but due to ill health can only be present through paper and words. My loss!!

However I hope that you will find these words and ideas of some interest and use, as you move out of the seminar/ course into the outside world. Once again I thank my sister Zanele for giving me this opportunity.

¹ Assisted by Jasleen Arora, Mphil in Women and Gender Studies from Ambedkar University, Delhi and Neha S Chaudhry, Mphil in Women and Gender Studies from Ambedkar University, Delhi

According to the dictionary, intelligence is
-the skilled use of reason
-able to learn and understand things easily

Hence my title

Encashing on Women's Intelligence

This paper is divided into the following sections:

Section I: Reflection on South Africa

Section II: Development: It's complex Relationship with Women

Section III: Justice refuses to be captured

Section IV: Has the Pursuit of Gender Equality been blinding?

Section V: The bubbling up theory of growth

Section VI: Why is UN not important and why is it important?

Section VII: So what NEXT??

Section I: Reflection on South Africa

One of the most painful reflections that haunts me is when I think of South Africa and when I am asked to make any presentation in South Africa or participate in any discussion. This pain is the recognition that I was walking the world, going to UN conferences, creating international networks assuming that I was generating change while the Black people of South Africa were being incarcerated. Apart from Nelson Mandela and his colleagues being in prison - a prison notorious for its cruelty there were also thousands of Black people

outside who were being abused, killed and ill-treated in unimaginable ways.

Some of this I confronted when I lived in South Africa for a year, the first year of South Africa's freedom, when Mandela was made the President. I heard stories of white soldiers who were carrying a black prisoner from one place to another, enjoying seeing his arm being burnt in the same fire in which they were roasting their barbeques – a kind of inhuman or beyond human attitude to the Blacks. To think that UN existed, that the UN had conferences, that there were arrangements between countries and the UN for people like me to participate, to create change while a whole nation of Black people was in prison seems unimaginable . That thought torments me that how could we do that. How could the rest of the world pretend to be normal? How could the UN continue to do its normal activities knowing that one country's people were not only enslaved but were being tortured?

We have been through the whole story of Black people in the United States, the slaves who were taken from Africa - what they endured, how they survived. To some extent many of us walked with that walk and felt a sense of satisfaction if we were engaged with steps towards their liberty – the liberty of the Black people in the USA. But that is so different from what was happening in South Africa. A whole nation owned by the Black people was enslaved by White people and treated in ways that seem to be difficult to imagine.

Inspite of that torture the Black people of South Africa emerged. Not all the arrangements made for their emergence, claiming their

country has been universally accepted or satisfactory. However, they are now out and they are claiming citizenship.

The question then is how this set of citizens engage with the world which has been engaging with itself for 5 decades before they crawled out of their jail. How can they make a difference since for this period they have gone through much more than this other group. What can we learn from the Black South African which can transform the world around it whether it is other nations in Africa, other nations outside Africa or the international agencies like the UN and the World Bank?

My hope/my dream to recall Fatema, is that South African, may be African women, can transform the power and idea structures of the world , with their genius ?

Section II: Development: It's complex Relationship with Women

The history of women- or gender-and-development theory is interwoven with the history of policy interventions in developing countries and with the history of the women's movement around the globe. Over 60 plus years since the end of World War II, there have been many shifts in how development might best be promoted. "No area of economics," says Irma Adelman, "has experienced as many abrupt changes in its leading paradigm.

Over these decades, women's engagement with the UN's work in Development, as different from development itself-has been to challenge the terms of reference – open the door to reveal other contours even of the industrial typology, of the hierarchies in values given to various aspects of social and economic organisation, to spaces, - the public and private, to the basis of knowledge creation, to the very notions of theory or bounded ideas. Their engagement, revealed the variety of interpretations and appearances of what can be called difference and the prismatic quality of the concept of equality and its accommodation by even the basic mandate of the UN, as envisioned in its charter. The dilemmas these concepts pose are summed up as the equal but different debates and also permeate into ideas such as giving of quota to redress inequality.

It is my proposal that the time has come for women to rise as opinion builders, drawing from their lived experience as economic political and social agents, as social scientists and politicians .The space is

now open as it is somewhat rudderless, and its powers have diminished dramatically. Using their skills in networking and building opinion, they must influence not only the UN , but the global intellectual spaces and the economic configurations.

Discontent, conflict, violence are overpowering influences in the world today. Analyses, from various sources, - be it scholars or activists; be it in the white or black and brown countries, - are pointing to the presence, the in-your- face nature of the inequalities that are pervading every space. Dissatisfied with the efforts made by what appeared to be progressive or radical leaders, citizens are turning to conservative, “right wing’ politics.

Section III: Justice refuses to be captured

Women have been struggling, for centuries, through both, - mind and body -, to claim justice, to level the playing fields between men and women. Governments, international organizations, social movements, -all, have joined in the effort. – but the persistence of injustice , and its extension to other identities , like colour and caste, and in many cases to religious belief reveals the challenges that are posed by the presence of inequalities , both physical and social.

What can we, the citizens, especially women do to make the world a better place for more people. Indeed the world is a comfortable and enabling space for many. These many are those who are either economically well off with home, wealth and may be even employment or are engaged in public institutions or are representatives of people in

various countries, and bureaucrats etc. So, there are a whole lot of us who are doing well in this world but the larger number of people are not doing so well.

Section IV: Has the Pursuit of Gender Equality been blinding?

Gender inequalities- unearthing them, tracing their roots as well as proposing remedies has been a strong presence or an important theme for feminists, not only in economics but also law and other subjects and for global organizations like the UN, the World Bank and the governments.

Feminist lawyers have also addressed the neglect of women and their economic worth. So the quest for justice for women, the understanding of their neglect is a broad based program adopted by all actors- feminists from all disciplines, governments and the UN.

But while this quest focused on the idea of gender equality, it is my view, that the advocacy which includes all of us feminists, women's movement, officials lost out on capturing the opportunity provided by the resurgence of the women's movement, to build a more just world, to use a cliché.

Many scholars, have redirected the idea of gender equality, broadened the scope of inequalities bringing other dimensions such as stratification (Stephanie Seguino²), Human Rights (Diana Elson

² Seguino, S. (2013) Towards Gender Justice: Confronting Stratification and Unequal Power, *Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies*, 2(1), 1- 36

and Radhika Balakrishnan³). Andrea Cornwall⁴ sees this quest as distracting from the broader based quest for equity and justice,- I feel an identity with this view..

In some sense while this measure, was useful as an exposure to the injustice and exclusion that genders, other than male, have experienced, the overarching pressure dominated the work of many agencies including Governments and made the goal one of **catching up**.

This existing model⁵, driven by the free flow of capital, and the competitive global markets is stimulating/building unequal, unjust, societies and economies, and leaving behind millions as the data showed. There needs to be a moral awakening.

We need to build a theory of economic growth, political and ground breaking, something which includes the idea of justice, in partnership with morality, or morals, **with the poor as the central figures**. Within that ocean of change or along with those waves, gender inequalities would have a place or need to be given a place.

The field is fertile for another model of GDP growth starting from the bottom and bubbling up instead of trickle down. **Building such a**

³ Balakrishnan, R.& Elson, D. (Eds.) (2011) Economic Policy and Human Rights: Holding Governments to Account, Zed Books Ltd, London and New York.

⁴ Cornwall, A. & Rivas, A.M. (2015) From 'Gender Equality and Women's empowerment' to global justice: reclaiming a transformative agenda for Gender and development, Third World Quarterly, Routledge.

⁵ Sundara, Jomo K. & Chowdhury, A. (2007) Out of Africa: Understanding Economic Refugees (<http://www.ipsnews.net/2017/09/africa-understanding-economic-refugees/>)

theory and selling it to public policy, the state and other actors is a task, which I think we feminists, driven by our moral sensibilities, are capable of doing.

In other words, taking off from our pre- occupation with Gender Equality and what drives us, we need to pull our political and social power to argue and for another type of economic theory- another growth theory. We have the experience, skills and knowledge to do that. Hence my argument that gender equality as an objective- as a pre-eminent topic among feminist need to give place to a moral imperative- removal of extreme poverty.

Section V: The bubbling up theory of growth

I would propose that poverty eradication is a dynamic and purposeful engine of growth, so that it becomes possible to make currency out of a new theoretical proposition I have called “Bubbling up Theory of Growth”. This counters the old ‘Trickling down Theory of Growth’. The Bubbling up theory argues that the process of removal of poverty can itself be an engine of growth, that the incomes and capabilities of those who are currently poor has the potential to generate demand which in turn will engine production, but of goods that are immediately needed by the poor which are currently peripheral in production. The oiling, then, of this engine will bubble up and fire the economy, in a much broader based manner. Unlike export led growth, it will not skew production and trade into the elite trap, which is accentuating disparities and creating discontent... It may be of interest to some of

you, to know that this was in fact Gandhi's formula for building a just and caring economy. To start with the poor.

Section VI: Why is UN not important and why is it important?

Traditionally it has been considered a place where international negotiations can be settled in some way or the other and once they are settled at the UN they become international norms or laws or programs. Thus legitimizing a global agenda- this was a role that the UN and its system whether it is conferences or special groups enabled. Certainly the UN became a great repository of knowledge. This I know because I was on many special groups- Eminent Persons Group led by Graca Machel to look into the rehabilitation of the child soldiers especially those who came out of Liberia. We learnt a great deal not only about Liberia but about the youth and what they can do? What they cannot do? How the world treats them? We went to Mozambique and found war amongst groups. The children had got trapped and often were mutilated and abused as a form of fighting the enemy. So UN did become a kind of a funnel which drew in the experience, knowledge and ideas from more than we can imagine- the whole world.

The question that arises is - Was that pooling of knowledge of a value to the rest of the world? This is where some of us have doubts as the actual power of the UN to penetrate within countries is limited. They may have human rights, they may have rules against armed conflict but there is no way the UN is able to prevent these happenings.

Section VII: So what NEXT??

I go back to where I began that women's experience of injustice, inequality in partnership with their extraordinary creativity can lead economies and societies into more enlightened and constructive social science theories. These theories and the kind of action that they suggest might soften the blow of inequality - or better still, generate more equitable political and economic spaces. A dream? Yes. But as Shakespeare said "***We are such stuff as dreams are made of***".

A great woman, one whose mind and language inspired many of us made us look again at propositions and theories that we had inherited - Fatema Mernissi taught us that

“The dream of flying: Allah made the Earth a carpet for you so you can travel...”

2443 words

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