Gender and Development Initiative
201 Renaissance Park
360 Huntington Ave.
Boston, MA 02115
617.373.5472/5367 (f)
www.northeastern.edu/cssh/internationalaffairs
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Women’s Economic Empowerment in the Changing World of Work

A Report by Prof. Valentine M. Moghadam

IAF Director (Jan. 2012-July 2017)
Professor of International Affairs and Sociology

The International Affairs Program at Northeastern University covers issues pertaining to globalization, international organizations, international norms and law, population and development, citizenship and rights, and women and politics. As such, the Program is attuned to norm-setting as well as structural change, and the theme of this year’s meeting of the UN’s Commission on the Status of Women – the economic empowerment of women – was an excellent opportunity to observe deliberations on the normative, institutional, and structural impediments to women’s economic empowerment and the policies, standards, norms and activism needed to improve women’s economic conditions and rights. I attended sessions at the UN as well as the side events at the Church Center and other venues organized by various accredited non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Also in attendance were students Chloe Lesieur and Cory Le Blanc. Because only representatives of accredited NGOs may register and obtain the badge required for entry to the CSW events at the UN, I attended as a member of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), and helped Chloe attend as part of WILPF’s student practicum. (See her separate report.) Chloe arrived at the start of the CSW meetings, I arrived on the 15th, and Cory Le Blanc arrived to attend side events during the final days, after Chloe’s and my departure. What follows is a brief report on my observations.

The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW): The Process

The CSW is comprised of representatives of 45 member-states and meets annually to discuss the year’s pertinent theme and to agree on an outcome document; members of the CSW serve a four-year term. UN Women, the agency responsible for research, policy, and advocacy related to women, organizes the annual session, sponsors or co-sponsors many of the individual parallel meetings or side events, and drafts the major documents, including this year’s Report of the Secretary-General on women’s economic empowerment in the changing world of work.¹ UN Women works with other UN agencies, governments, experts, international organizations (IOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to advance the global women’s rights agenda – notably, the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action; Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (adopted Oct. 2000; the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls (2000-15), and the current 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (including the Sustainable Development Goals).

Each year, at the large conference room within the General Assembly building, member-state representatives engage in “interactive dialogues” at which they present statements; the chairman also calls on various NGOs to make statements. This year, the interactive dialogues pertained to the social and economic importance of women’s economic participation; the significance of educational attainment for women’s economic participation, advancement, and rights; gender pay gaps in the

¹ For details, see http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/csw61-2017
private and public sectors; informal and non-standard work; the ways that women’s care-giving and family responsibilities impede their access to jobs and advancement; economic and employment discrimination faced by indigenous women; challenges and achievements in the implementation of the MDGs for women and girls; enhancing the use and availability of data; and examples of how government and NGOs work together to improve women’s economic conditions and rights. The chairman calls on various government representatives to make short statements, and may also call on representatives of NGOs that have asked for the floor. There are parallel sessions at various rooms within the Secretariat building or the General Assembly building; these are typically sponsored by governments, UN agencies, and NGOs; some, however, were held in small rooms that were overcrowded and hot. Many of the sessions involving governments and UN agencies were closed, and the deliberations therein will likely find their way in the final documents. Finally, there are side events organized largely by NGOs that typically take place at the Church Center of the UN, located across the street from the UN building, although this year sessions were also held at the Armenian cultural center and the Salvation Army building. The CSW ended on 24 March with a provisional agenda for next year’s meeting.

Some of the government statements were substantive, and I found especially interesting a statement by the representative of Mongolia who called for “a global women’s bank”, similar, she said, to the World Bank. It was also interesting to hear from the representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran regarding the many vocational training and skills upgrading programs that have been put in place to assist women’s employment and advancement, in such fields as mechanics, computers, electronics, ICT. She mentioned that women’s economic participation in the private sector had increased, and that there were now 325 women-led cooperatives. Indeed, cooperatives and other non-profit businesses constitute – in my judgment – a valuable alternative to the mindless profiteering of the current economic model in place. It was especially gratifying to hear, from the Moroccan representative, that the arms trade to the Middle East should stop, if peace as well as financing for women’s economic empowerment were to become genuine priorities. An Iraqi woman delegate spoke of the “exceptional circumstances” in her country that included widespread violence, including violence against women and displacement. It is sobering to note that 14 years after the Bush administration made the terrible decision to invade and occupying Iraq, the country continues to suffer.

**Discussing the Issues: Economic precarity and women’s economic empowerment**

Many of the statements at the interactive sessions are boilerplate statements meant to put governments in the best possible light. For example, the delegate from Turkey, a man, made statements about “the importance of women in social life and work life” and about trade unions and collective bargaining, but said nothing about the many arrests of trade unionists, journalists, academics, and dissident military personnel since the failed coup of July 2016. In contrast, statements by the NGOs tend to be more substantive as well as critical. For example, a statement by a representative of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), Chidi C.J. King, argued that “urgent action is needed to improve working conditions”, adding that in most countries today, “the environment for trade unions is restricted with respect to the flow of information, organizing, and so.” In the context of neoliberal capitalist globalization, liberalized markets and free trade have benefited some countries and populations within them, but they also have driven out small businesses, undercut domestic producers, and promoted “the race to the bottom.” Thus, the kind of “decent work” that the International Labor Organization (ILO) has promoted – well-paying jobs with good benefits; policies to enable families to
balance work and family responsibilities; recognition of women’s care work and its redistribution so that women can reconcile work and family and be guaranteed a decent pension or retirement plan – is elusive to most workers. Women’s “human capital” has been improving across the world, but gender bias persists and education has not proved to be the great equalizer. Civil conflict, wars, invasions, and occupations impede or reverse any gains for women, exacerbate or reinforce patriarchal controls over women, or compel women to make a living through prostitution. In such a global environment, then, how can women attain economic empowerment? In particular, how can Sustainable Development Goal 8 – full and productive employment and decent work for all – be realized?

**The trade union and women’s social rights perspective**

One answer was clear: workers need to organize to maintain, expand, or establish decent work conditions. In addition to the ITUC, trade union representatives at this year’s CSW included Education International, Public Services International, the International Transport Federation, and the relatively new Domestic Workers Federation. Shirley Pryce of the Domestic Workers Federation, mentioned that her union, which came about as a result of the International Labor Organization’s agreement in June 2011 to issue Convention 189 on the rights of domestic workers, now has 59 national affiliates, but many countries refuse to implement the convention and adopt national legislation to protect domestic workers from exploitation and abuse. What is needed, the trade union representatives stressed, was “widespread ratification.” A representative of Nigeria’s Federation of Nurses spoke of the problems of employment precarity and the importance of unions and collective bargaining to ensure progressive labor rights and social rights that would also serve to enable women to enter and remain in the labor force. A trade unionist from Rwanda spoke of flaws in the global financial system that allowed for offshore accounts and tax evasion that undermine development spending and employment generation, compelling many women to seek income in the informal sector – which, however, did not offer any social protection, much less job security.

The most instructive sessions were found in the parallel events at the UN or at the NGO side events. Here delegates spoke more openly and critically about the state of women’s economic conditions and rights, the adverse global environment for women’s economic empowerment, and the needed policies. At one session organized by the AFL-CIO, Cathy Feingold, who heads the international affairs department, introduced women union leaders from Cambodia (representing garment workers), New York and the Dominican Republic (from UNITE HERE, which organizes food, beverages, and retain workers), and the National Domestic Workers Alliance (an organizer based in Atlanta). They all spoke of the difficulties but also the rewards of organizing. Feingold herself mentioned that only 7% of all workers globally are organized; in the USA the proportion is 12%, though half of that figure consists of women workers. The National Policy for Research on Women has consistently found, in their periodic surveys, that unionized workers have better wages and benefits. But policy gaps for women remain, most notably around paid maternity leave. A very interesting point was made by the UNITE HERE representative, a Muslim woman wearing a headscarf, regarding the presence of common ground despite differences. “Because of my religion”, she said, “I might not be in favor of abortion, but I know

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2 The ILO defines decent work “productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security, and human dignity.”

that I have other things in common with the woman who makes the choice to have an abortion.” Improving economic and working conditions is certainly a major part of that common ground.

The AFL-CIO’s Feingold stated that US labor law “has always been exclusionary”, inasmuch as it has always excluded domestic workers – historically black – as well as farmers and agricultural workers from its provisions. “We’ve been fighting for a long time to change our labor law”, she said, adding that “it reflects deep systemic inequality and exclusion.”

Speaking through an interpreter, Cambodian labor leader Sophorn Yang of the Cambodia Alliance of Trade Unions, which represents about 10,000 garment workers, asserted that “without organizing, we can have no change.” She explained: “A lot of people hate us – the government, employers, buyers – but we have to continue to educate workers about their rights.” She explained: “In my culture, men look down on women like me but I feel I must continue my work to improve the lives of the many women in my sector. Who can support women but other women?” (On Saturday the 18th of March there was to be a rally outside the Nike store in Soho to demand independent monitoring of garment workers’ working conditions from the Workers’ Rights Center and United Students against Sweatshops.)

In response to a question about the new technologies, Feingold noted the spread of self-pay machines at supermarkets and pharmacies. But the “gig economy”, she said, covers a small part of the workforce. The union perspective is that “cool technology” should not be used as an excuse to undermine labor standards and rights.

It is here where a statement at the inter-governmental meeting by the representative from Finland is instructive. She spoke of her country’s emphasis on work-family balance, including paid parental leaves, childcare facilities, and warm meals for school children. Young people have access to sex education, she said, and sexual health services are provided for all. She noted that typically both women and men work fulltime and for that to work elsewhere as well as to continue to work in Finland, both taxation and conducive structures are needed. Finland has long had a high proportion of women in government and cabinet positions, and those women, too, can be counted on to protect Finland’s impressive welfare state system that enables women to reconcile work and family.

During my stay, I was pleased to meet two women trade unionists who work with the AFL-CIO’s Solidarity Center, one from Tunisia (Khaltoum Barkala, who also was part of the International Transport Workers’ Federation delegation) and one from Algeria (Yamina Maghraoui). I had met Khaltoum at an orientation session for Arab activists, and – having identified herself as a syndicaliste féministe – she expressed the view that the right to equal inheritance was key to women’s economic empowerment. I encountered Yamina Maghraoui at a Solidarity Center event, and she expressed the view that women’s economic conditions in Algeria left much to be desired. “Yes”, she said, “we have a large number of women in parliament and yes we have women professors and doctors and lawyers, but most Algerian women live in miserable conditions.” She also criticized le pouvoir for its repression and attacks on freedom of expression and organizing.

In this regard, statements prepared by various women NGOs and delivered to ECOSOC for website postings and distribution proved most instructive. For example, Forum Azzrahrae pour la Femme Marocaine called for “an end to the heinous exploitation of women by employers in factories and the unregulated sector, particularly in poor States with few jobs and deteriorated economic conditions.” The statement by the International Federation of Social Workers called for the use of “social protection
systems as a means of combating injustice faced by women across the globe”, and recognition “that social protection can prevent or reduce poverty.” The joint statement by Educational International and Public Services International emphasized the importance of organizing for women’s economic empowerment and for decent work.

**Violence, conflict, and war**

Several side events focused on domestic violence, sexual harassment, unequal family laws, and harmful traditional practices as impediments to women’s economic participation and empowerment. For example, Nigeria’s Ministry of Women’s Affairs organized a side event on eliminating female genital mutilation, to “enhance women’s productivity and overall contribution to the gross domestic product.” A side event organized by ActionAid, the African Women’s Development and Communication Network, and the Association for Women’s Rights in Development focused on key strategies and opportunities for ending violence against women and girls and transforming economies “by tackling dominant macroeconomic structures that exploit and perpetuate women’s economic inequality and increase women’s exposure to violence.” A statement submitted to ECOSOC by the Women’s Learning Partnership for Rights, Development, and Peace, identified patriarchal family laws in Muslim-majority countries as barriers to women’s social and economic empowerment.

Statements submitted to ECOSOC by the Center for Egyptian Women’s Legal Assistance, Nazra for Feminist Studies, and the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights noted violence faced by women human rights defenders: harassment and prosecution in Egypt, smear campaigns in Yemen, imprisonment in Bahrain, abductions by armed groups in Syria; the persistence of discriminatory family and labor laws; increasing informalization of women’s work and lack of social protection; and “the social impact of the rising tide of political Islam” and “socially conservative groups that totally deny the right of women to work.”

Another theme widely discussed at CSW 2017 was the impact of intra- and inter-state violence on women’s economic empowerment, and on how Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security can help realize women’s economic empowerment. A panel discussion organized by the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP), the International Civil Society Action Network for Women’s Rights, Peace and Security (ICAN), and GenderForce provided an interesting perspective on the subject, given the interrelated – and indeed, indivisible – nature of development, human rights, and peace and security. Mavic Cabrera-Balleza, GNWP international coordinator, began by explaining that the network provides various services such as counseling, training, and help with national action plans for 1325. Weak or nonexistent implementation of 1325 has been of concern to many feminist scholars and women’s rights activists. Mavic spoke of progress in some contexts – for example, two women were eventually involved in the peace talks in Colombia – but she noted that in many conflict or post-conflict situations, “women’s participation is close to zero.” The “community-social dialogues” in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), for example, included rebels and the government, but it remained a two-sided dialogue rather than a roundtable that would involve more civil society actors. Noting the dangers of mediation and peacemaking, she said that “it takes a lot of courage to wage peace” and stressed that

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two important objectives should be to “look at the causes of conflict and war” and to “localize 1325” in order to make it resonate with local communities.

Aram Hong described how Genderforce provides security for women negotiators and peacebuilders, and provided an example from the DRC. Carol Cohn of Boston, author of Women and Wars (Polity Press 2013) and founding director of the Consortium on Gender, Security, and Human Rights, spoke of the overestimation of how effective the military can be, and the underestimation of the costs of military intervention and war. To be sure, security is a prerequisite for women’s participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction, but there are also far too many examples of outside control over how peacemaking, power-sharing, reconstruction, and economic development proceed. Such impositions are often neither sustainable nor regarded by many citizens as legitimate.

During the Q&A, an interesting point was raised by a WILPF member as to why there was no mention of the Non-Violent Peace Force, given that it could serve as an alternative to the approach of Gender Force. Another question, posed by an Afghan male participant, pertained to how men could be brought into the conversation about women’s rights and dignity during times of conflict as well as post-conflict reconstruction, development, and governance.

When SCR 1325 was adopted in 2000 it was rightly heralded as a major achievement of both the women’s movement and the United Nations. However, it has neither prevented conflict nor protected women from violence. Violations of international law and world-systemic hierarchies enable some countries to provide logistical and military support to rebels and other countries to invade or bomb sovereign countries. Just since 2000, we have had:

- The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan 2001
- Insurgency in eastern DRC fueled by neighboring countries
- The US/UK invasion of Iraq 2003
- Israel’s attack on Lebanon in 2006
- The Russo-Georgian war of 2008
- The NATO bombardment of Libya 2011
- Israel’s attack on Gaza in 2013
- Attempted regime change in Syria and support for armed rebels since 2012
- The Saudi bombardment of Yemen since 2015
- Civil conflict in South Sudan since 2015

Although WILPF International did not attend the CSW this year in protest of the Trump administration’s executive order and travel ban, it did submit a statement to ECOSOC that began: “To achieve transformative, sustainable development and peace, action for women’s economic empowerment must include women across the conflict spectrum and address root causes of inequality and violence. The time is now to put people over profit and those marginalized at the mainstream; to create political economies of feminist peace based on gender justice and fulfillment of women’s economic, social, and political rights, rather than maintain outmoded political economies of militarism, exploitation, violence, and war against both people and planet.” It pointed out that in 2010, funding for the world’s feminist movement - $106 million for 740 women’s organizations – was less than the cost of a single F-35 fighter

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5 See http://www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org/
plane ($137 million). It called to “Move the Money” from a political economy of war to a political economy of peace and gender justice.

Concluding Thoughts

Today, women’s economic and physical insecurity is widespread and the impunity of states, banks, corporations, and armed groups appears unlimited. Recommendations to achieve women’s economic empowerment cannot be realized in a world of gross inequalities, violence and war. Similarly, violence and war will continue as long as women are unequal and subordinate in the family, economy, and politics. Deliberations such as the annual CSW meetings will help to highlight the problems and the policies needed to improve women’s lives. Ultimately however, real economic and political change will come about through concerted advocacy and activism of the world’s feminist organizations in coalition with partners in social movements, civil society, progressive political parties.

The figure below summarizes what I see as the key barriers to women’s economic empowerment and the needed solutions.

### Structural and Institutional Constraints to Women’s Economic Empowerment and Some Alternatives

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actors/agents</th>
<th>Impact on women’s economic empowerment</th>
<th>Alternatives and solutions</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patriarchy / gender inequality</td>
<td>States; male kin; various institutions</td>
<td>Ties women to family roles; prevents equal access to employment or to advancement &amp; promotion; limits women to a narrow range of acceptable jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neoliberal capitalism</td>
<td>States; international financial institutions; corporations;</td>
<td>Undermines decent work; prevents work-family balance; prevents inclusive development; puts profit and markets above welfare and people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflicts and wars</td>
<td>States; non-state actors (armed rebels); military-industrial complex</td>
<td>Encourages militarism and arms proliferation; sets back or impeded women’s advancement; is accompanied by sexual violence; reinforces hyper-masculinity, patriarchy, gender inequality; destroys development gains: infrastructure, livelihood, sustainability</td>
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