

Global Empowerment of Women:  
Beyond Gender Neutrality and Neoliberal Governance

**Scholars' Statement**

We embarked on the New Century Scholars (NCS) program a year ago with the goal of addressing the theme, "Toward Equality: The Global Empowerment of Women." Our individual research, collective discussions, and collaborative projects have concluded that the global empowerment of women depends on moving beyond gender neutrality and neoliberal governance. This statement outlines how we reached this conclusion and how we plan to use it to contribute to the global empowerment of women.

We support international commitments and conventions such as the Beijing Platform for Action, Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), The World Summit on Social Development, and the Millennium Declaration. However, we note that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are a step back from earlier UN-based initiatives associated with the conferences on women and social development. The recommendations from these conferences were concerned not just with individual claims but also with broader questions of structural change that now appear off the mainstream agenda. The rise of neoliberal policies over the last 25 years has resulted in the dominant rule of the market, greater openness to international trade and investment, reduced role for government, privatization, and a focus on individual rather than collective responsibility. We note that the world is moving toward greater inequality and injustice within and among states as well as among women—even while women in some settings are achieving a degree of equality with men. In this setting of increasing worldwide inequality, the path toward gender equality becomes more difficult.

We focus on understanding what the global order and its restructuring means for women and women's empowerment. Our work is guided by an explicit commitment to developing analytical and practical alternatives to contemporary global hegemonies. We situate our research and action in the context of the rise of neoliberal economic policies, neoconservative political turns, the use of religion to disenfranchise people, and heightened militarization and war. Structural adjustment, state privatization, and the expansion of market economies contribute to widening the gap between North and South, rich and poor, and men and women. In this context, religious, ethnic, and national tensions are used to obscure and justify material injustice. We see these processes as intertwined with continued violence against women, the feminization of poverty, transnational labor exploitation, the limitations on women's sexual and reproductive rights, and the ongoing control of women's mobility.

At the same time our individual and collective research, and many years of previous work, has identified key sources and sites of empowerment. Empowerment has been a critical

concept for the international women's movement, underscoring the effectiveness of women's activism in changing our world. We have discovered numerous ways women have transformed their lives. We have also found multiple instances of individual and institutional resistance to negative global trends. Further, our research has confirmed and exemplified the power of women's collective action toward social change.

Yet we also recognize problems with the way empowerment has been defined, measured, and deployed. One such problem is the tension between empowerment as a series of individual choices and the structural constraints within which those choices must be made. Another occurs when local and international institutions devise "empowerment programs" that end up limiting women's choices, entitlements, and capabilities. Empowerment is too often used in instrumental ways to meet program-related goals rather than to transform structural and gender inequalities. Yet another problem emerges in notions of empowerment that privilege individual rights without a recognition of societal responsibilities toward women as well as women's responsibilities for others. Another problem surfaces when the empowerment of one group of women disempowers another. In these ways, we recognize that empowerment is not an all-or-nothing outcome. It can be uneven and inconsistent across social domains or within a given woman's life.

We have worked on a broad variety of issues—from sexual autonomy to market participation to redefinitions of power to war and occupation. We come from and work in a variety of places—61 countries and all continents. Our research is located in a variety of spaces—from villages to prisons to health care systems to the International Criminal Court. From this diversity, we have identified some powerful cross-cutting themes that constitute our distinctive approach to women and gender concerns:

1. We need to hear the voices of women, and we have found innovative ways to do so. We maintain that women's voices must be heard in "public" as well as "private" for women to be empowered—for the boundary is blurred, ever-changing, and ultimately a cultural fiction. We have examined women's folk tales and creative writing, truth commissions that received women's testimony, and public memories of violence and war that recall how women have figured in nation-building projects. We have identified institutional obstacles and cultures of silence that prevent women's voices from being heard; developed alternative frameworks that account for women's experiences; and suggested ways to ensure women's voices become part of future public records.
2. We have found that to see and hear women, we must expand our conceptual and linguistic tools. For many years, women's studies scholars have questioned a definition of labor that ignores unwaged work and women's participation in the informal economy. We have engaged the larger concepts of care work and social reproduction in order to see the broad range of work women do to sustain families, communities, and societies. Our work on HIV/AIDS demonstrates how models of health behavior based on narrow assumptions of individual choice fail to consider how women's vulnerabilities are embedded in the local and global, social, historical, economic, and political environments.

Our work also expands the definition of citizenship beyond patterns of inclusion and exclusion to encompass the individual's relationship to a variety of collectivities—the state, civil

society, ethnic group, and religion. Any feminist understanding of citizenship must question notions of the “common good” and definitions of “the political” so as to account for informal politics and activism (one *acts* as a citizen rather than *is* a citizen). Further, we urge dropping the analytic technique of assessing “impacts on women” in favor of a more nuanced, multi-faceted approach that recognizes women’s agency.

3. We note that the discourses and frameworks used in debates about women and gender are historical constructs implicated in relations of power and in the dynamics of change. We find that the constructions and manifestations of masculinity and femininity vary by context, and that gendered power relations result in women being disproportionately infected and affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. This is exacerbated by funding for HIV/AIDS that is tied to restrictive policies around women’s sexual and reproductive health, as well as the privileging of pharmaceutical interests over affordable access to essential medicine. We examine global discourses on women’s rights and how they may be appropriated by local power structures to re-institutionalize control of women’s bodies. We note that multiculturalism may be used in contradictory ways to offer spaces for diversity or to enshrine local hierarchies of gender. These issues can only be understood by investigation on the ground, with sensitivity to potential contradictions, unintended consequences, and dynamics of power.

4. Virtually all of our investigations note the growing impact of global institutions on national and local contexts. Citizenship is mediated by international financial and trade institutions that affect the migration of labor and the creation of diasporas. Global authorities have privileged Western medicine and ways of knowing while marginalizing investigations into indigenous understandings of coping with a variety of health issues. We believe that both indigenous and non-indigenous medicines are essential. Global trade regimes have altered the nature of women’s participation in local labor markets. And global patterns of social insecurity have led to sharp increases in the incarceration of sub-populations. All of these reflect changing definitions of citizenship.

5. We have become keenly aware of the difference that states make in women’s lives—both in their presence and in their absence. In this neoliberal era, it is often assumed that states are retrenching or withdrawing from social life. While some are indeed retreating, others are expanding their scope of intervention but redeploying resources in ways that disempower women. We have recognized the appalling consequences where there is no effective state or in cases of civil war or external intervention. We have noted that the political nature of the state, as well as its particular welfare regime, have serious consequences for women’s lives, requiring continuing attention.

Our collaborative work has enriched our individual research projects in countless ways, far beyond the usual academic exchange of commenting on one another’s work. Those of us who work in specialized disciplines have learned from multidisciplinary perspectives on key concepts like citizenship. Our seminar in New Delhi at the midterm of the NCS program exposed us to new ideas and possibilities for collaboration with Indian institutions on issues such as public silence around sexuality. Those of us working on multiculturalism in Europe and the Caribbean learned from India’s experience with multiple sets of family law that govern different

communities. All of us have become more aware of how we individually have been shaped by the political histories of our communities and their trajectories of feminism.

We have planned a number of publications that will put our work before specific audiences in Africa, Asia, Australasia, Europe, and the Americas—in Arabic, Spanish, English, and other languages. Below we emphasize specific recommendations for research, policy, and action made by our thematic working groups.

### **Negotiating Citizenship and Diversity: Gender, Nation, and Diasporas**

Any project of empowerment for women must take into account their membership in ethnic, national and religious communities. Projects of empowerment must be attentive to the contradictory roles of women in social and political tensions, conflicts and occupations. This group's discussions focused on the complex and dynamic relationship between gender, citizenship and various processes of social inclusion and exclusion. In particular, they examined how gender informs the construction of national and ethnic identities.

Group rights are often prioritized over women's rights. Women accept, actively embrace, reject or refigure their roles as symbols and markers of identity. In some contexts women have found participation in liberation and resistance movements empowering. However, in post-liberation contexts the results have often been contradictory, uneven, and disappointing.

When communities and identities are under pressure, ethnic/national/religious groups tend to react with increased concern about gender roles, and seek to tighten control and surveillance over "their women." In situations of conflict, women and girls are affected in specifically gendered ways. Collective memory is also gendered. Where violence occurs—for example, in the inter-ethnic conflict in Guyana in the 1960s, or in the former Yugoslavia of the 1990s—the memory of the rape of women is transmitted from generation to generation, making reconciliation difficult. Women's memory projects focusing on victimization, activism, and resistance can be the basis for new forms of democratic development, and the achievement of gender justice and sustainable peace. This group proposes to do the following:

- Establish a Global Institute for Women's Empowerment: Negotiating Citizenship and Diversity. The goal of this Institute is to establish partnerships among activists, policymakers, and public intellectuals on this theme; to refine alternative methods for conflict resolution; and to contribute to curricular development, teaching, and activism. Participants will be recommended by NCS scholars, and the Institute will be hosted by one of their home institutions.
- Publish a collection of articles or a special thematic issue of a journal with work by members of the NCS group.
- Develop a series of publications on folktales collected from Egyptian and Senegalese women including three volumes with gender sensitive introductions in the national

languages of Egypt and Senegal. The volumes are to be used as pedagogical aids in both literacy classes and gender-sensitivity training courses.

## **Gender, Globalization and Governance**

This group's work intervenes in debates about globalization and global restructuring through the development of a critical transnational feminist framework for analysis and action. They focus on governance, which they understand to be a multi-faceted political process that involves both the public and the private sectors in the determination of social and economic inequalities. Global restructuring has shifted governance processes to increasingly private institutions and international actors, which are often removed from democratic accountability. This current paradigm proves detrimental to poor people in general and to women in particular. Their work thus challenges the narrow understanding of economic governance inherent in the neoliberal paradigm. While economic governance is generally posited in terms of states and markets, they broaden these concepts to include inequalities of power, production and distribution. Critical to production is social reproduction and the care economy. These are key features of global restructuring processes. Therefore, their framework both counters the erasure of social reproduction from the neoliberal paradigm and also identifies its negative effects for women.

They propose to do the following:

- Hold a series of policy dialogues: in different regions of the world, workshops will be held with stakeholders such as government officials, parliamentarians, representatives from international organizations, and members of civil society.
- Collaborate on a publication that provides a launching point for developing alternative frameworks and policies to the current neoliberal paradigm that will serve as the foundation for policy dialogues.

## **Responses to Violence**

Violence against women has been widely recognized as a pervasive global problem. It occurs in many forms and in many spaces, and is an enduring impediment to the empowerment of women. Cultures of violence are based on repression, denial, and manipulation. In the case of violence against women this is particularly acute. Historically women have been blamed, shamed, and silenced about violence perpetrated against them, especially sexual violence. Silence surrounding gender violence contributes to violence by maintaining it and exacerbating its traumatic impact on victims and its broader consequences for all women. Within such a context, the identification, documentation and validation of these silenced crimes, as well as providing multiple forms of accountability and redress, are critical toward achieving a more just truth. The magnitude of the problem of violence against women is such that it requires multiple strategies on many different levels.

As but one such strategy this group has developed a proposal for responding to violence against women in situations of war and conflict.

- Convene an International Truth Commission on Violence Against Women (ITC-VAW): In response to United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. All previous truth commissions over the last three decades have either totally ignored or inadequately addressed crimes against women. They have prepared a document that proposes that an ITC-VAW should initially re-open all past truth commissions to ensure that the voices and experiences of women are heard. They emphasize the empowering aspects of inclusion and justice which recognize women not solely as victims, but also as leaders and agents. They see the ITC-VAW as changing cultural contexts from ones that support and encourage gender violence to ones that regard it as both criminal and immoral.

### **Sexual Autonomy and HIV/AIDS**

The challenge they have taken is to translate social science theories and feminist analysis into usable terms for policy-makers and prevention programs. Through their individual case studies conducted in East and West Africa they demonstrate this analysis can be used to assess critically both the intended and the unintended effects that HIV/AIDS interventions have on females and their sexuality and reproductive health. Ironically, as their various research projects show, intervention programs that are intended to protect public health may be doing so by drawing females further under the surveillance of local and global patriarchal structures, hence further undermining their sexual rights and sexual autonomy. As the spread of the epidemic accelerates, it has become evident that the behavioral health and risk reduction models used to understand and address the epidemic are inadequate. These models incorrectly assume that populations are undifferentiated (by sex or class), that males and females have equal control over their sexual health decisions, that individuals act autonomously, and that culture is an impediment to risk reduction. Such assumptions narrowly define the spread of HIV as a problem of individual choice and fail to account for the political, economic, and social contexts surrounding sexual health decisions.

They will dialogue with practitioners involved with HIV/AIDS intervention and policies in the following ways:

- Place articles in the special commentary section of industry periodicals, such as the WHO Forum or Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA).
- Prepare policy briefs for the National AIDS Councils, bi-lateral and multi-lateral agencies, NGOs, and appropriate legislative committees in their respective countries.
- Hold two training workshops: First, a 2-week Institute on HIV/AIDS and Gender coordinated by Gender Division of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS); second, grassroots exchange visits for HIV+ groups in East Africa and the community-based organizations (CBOs) assisting them.