

8th National Conference of Indian Association of Women's Studies

**May 30-31 and June 01, 02 1998
Pune, Maharashtra, India**

Theme: “Survival and Sovereignty: Challenges to Women's Studies”



Economy and Ecology

by Sarath Fernando

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“Survival and Sovereignty Challenges to Women’s Studies”

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Ecology and Economy:

I consider this meeting, the 8th National Conference of the Indian Association of Women’s Studies to discuss the theme, “Survival and Sovereignty: Challenge to Women’s Studies”, a very important event and a very valuable opportunity for us in Sri Lanka due to several reasons. Therefore, on behalf of my organization and many others concerned about these issues in Sri Lanka, I wish to express our deep gratitude to you for providing us the opportunity to attend this meeting.

What I wish to do is, therefore, to discuss with you, the situation and the experiences in Sri Lanka, in relation to the topic given to me, “Economy and Ecology” and the particular role of women in our societies, in dealing with the serious conflict that has emerged between the “Economy”(in the way economies are being organized and restructured) and the struggle of the people, particularly of the poor, to maintain, protect and regenerate the potentials of ‘Ecology’ to remain the most valuable ‘source of survival of life’ and the right of the people to protect their ownership and control over it, in a sustainable manner to ensure their “survival and sovereignty”.

Present processes of Globalization of market, clearly aims at capturing all resources of the World and enslaving the whole of human kind to be used for quick maximization of profits, by the most powerful private capital (the TNCs). This process, as experienced in the last few decades, is destroying livelihoods and means of survival of millions of the poor in all countries (both in the Third World and in the richer western countries).

The “Economy” as planned and repressively imposed upon all people today, has become the most powerful "weapon" in the hands of the richest and politically most powerful minority. It no longer aims at performing its original and the rightful task of looking at the best way of organizing human activity and human relationships to ensure the survival of the whole of human kind. It no longer looks at the most effective way of arranging for survival of the human kind in the most sustainable, rational and just manner. It has become a weapon of destruction of many and of nature.

“Ecology” on the other hand has historically been the most important source and the most stable provider for survival of largest numbers of the ordinary (poor) people in almost all countries.

It has become much clearer today than ever before, that “economy” organized and run on the motive of private profit making and accumulation is destroying the capacity of nature to remain a “Source of Life” that regenerates itself unendingly / unceasingly as the main or the only safeguard for survival of all.

Economy today is no longer a means of releasing the creative potentials of human kind, of a vast majority of the human community to protect and build the capacity of nature to provide for the life needs of people and of other living beings of the present and of the future.

As this present process continues, the battle to protect ecology (environment) not only becomes a battle of the whole of human kind for survival, it becomes an “essential battle” of the poor masses, the world over, who are increasingly displaced / expelled from the “Globalized Market Economy” as no longer necessary and acceptable. Those people, no longer necessary are compelled, in diverse

ways, to disappear , to make way to a small minority to enhance their greed by plundering nature and by enslaving human beings in a most destructive and violent manner.

Thus, as the “Economy” becomes a powerful weapon in the hands of the rich for profit accumulation and a weapon of destruction of nature and the poor majorities, “Ecology”, its protection and enhancement of its capacity to protect the survival of the poor and of all life in general, becomes a major task and responsibility of the poor. Their battle for survival and the battle against enslavement under international (Globalized) capital will increasingly become a battle against destruction of ecology and for protection of their right to the protection and sustainable use of natural resources. This battle indirectly will serve the purpose of survival of all.

I do not intend to elaborate and describe this general process in detail, since what has been presented so far, at this meeting, has provided ample illustration to prove this point. There is also such a vast collection of the life experiences of millions of the poor, through out the world and the world wide expression of the un sustainability and injustice of this process of control of the economy and destruction of nature at the recent attempts made by the UN world summits

I also consider it very important that the Indian Association of Women’s Studies has decided to take this as one of their major areas of concern and activity for several reasons.

I feel countries in Asia such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and other parts of the third world are the major areas where this battle will have to be fought. They are the countries where largest millions of people are presently being pushed out and are threatened to be pushed out of survival.

They are also countries where the wealth of resources in terms of bio-diversity and historical knowledge systems build on centuries of experience in living in harmony with nature is largest. These resources not only are in terms of practical methods and technologies but in terms of philosophies and ways of life. Although much of this wealth has been destroyed and discarded in the past, as unscientific and backward, by the very same forces that invaded and enslaved these societies, we still feel and many genuine scientists who are concerned about the real threats to survival of all, have begun to realize that there is a possibility of recovering and reviving this wealth.

In areas such as biological resources, use of medicinal plants, methods of agriculture and the knowledge of the people, the process of plunder and destruction has also been very large and they are likely to be the worst targets in the future too, when one looks at the presented trends.

Since the extent and the quality of damage is very large and the numbers affected are equally large and since they have also some of the strongest weapons to fight back, the people in these regions, particularly the poor have the largest potential and the need to become the strongest bases of resistance and regeneration.

The Indian Association of Women’s Studies may have decided to take up this theme with the realization that women in our societies are the worst victims who suffer the worst consequences of this attack of the “Market” against survival. It is an attack against our right to survival, our right to

decide and rule our lives (sovereignty), against the very sources of our lives, that has destroyed our valuable past, the present and the future in a worse form.

It may also be on the realization of the tremendous potential that women in our societies have in fighting against this destruction as the strongest protectors of life and also the tremendous capacity to take leadership in building the required new. They have played the most important role in the longest period in history. Even today they are the most active and the most experienced in these tasks of sustaining the “Nature’s Economy” and the “Subsistence Economy” for survival against the many forms of aggression.

However, we must admit that women today and our societies in general today, have been prevented in many ways by very strong forces in seeing these realities, understanding these processes, learning about their own historical contributions in the past and their present potentials. Their contribution in history has been devalued not only in the eyes of the larger society, but, in their own eyes. The vision of the role that women could play in guiding the whole of society out of this destruction do not exist. The globalized market, presenting itself as the only reality, an unchangeable reality has begun to assign new tasks that they should fit into. This is one of the strongest ways of preventing the women from discovering the vision that they should build. This is one of the strongest ways of disemboweling them.

One of the most tragic realities is that those who are becoming the worst victims, who are seriously threatened in the survival in the very near future are the people who are prevented most from understanding these global processes and dangers. They don’t see themselves as the potential forces, leaders in building the “new future”. Often they are deceived to believe and accept the process that plans to ‘use’ them and discard them quickly, as new opportunities. They are compelled to accept processes that envisage their disappearance, out of survival, through an extremely painful, unjust and repressive process as unchangeable realities. Sometimes, they are told to believe that this would provide them opportunities to enter into “The Modern World” overcoming the age old forms of oppression, without any opportunity to assess the new type of oppression that is crushing every body, reducing them to slavery.

Those involved in Women’s Studies, therefore, have a very serious and an extremely important task in their hands.

It is to build this “dream”, the “new vision” that is needed by all of us for our survival as humans – as free humans and not as slaves. The process of strengthening and empowering people particularly the most endangered group, the poor, rural and working women and also those millions who are prevented from engaging themselves in any form of creative and empowering work, to assume the required role begins with a “dream”, creation of the dream of the possible, truly human future.

This ‘dream’ is realizable, it can be made a reality. This “dream” needs to be created in a way that includes all the different elements, aspects and components to understand that it could be made a reality. Firstly, the elements to show the necessity of it with a sound and concrete understanding of how the present economic processes are working and its concrete implications. The strongest element of this understanding, that would convince them to begin this process would be the realization that the present system of globalization envisages their destruction and disappearance in large numbers through a very painful and unjust process of total enslavement.

Secondly, it is necessary to assess the potentials, the resources and the wealth we have to overcome this destructive processes – our strengths and the particular strengths of women and their roles.

Thirdly, a picture of the future world that can be and needs to be build with its diverse aspects. In this it is important to study and understand primarily the ways and approaches to safe guard the survival of those threatened by hunger, malnutrition, loss of livelihoods, loss of their rights to means of survival, natural resources, biological resources and right to their cultural heritage, the knowledge systems, philosophies, attitudes to life and value systems. It is also necessary to have a vision of the global processes in building alternatives in order to strengthen the confidence in a different future.

Now let me deal briefly with the experiences in my country Sri Lanka to illustrate both the serious implications on lives & livelihoods of the present economic processes as well as the potential we have in building a new future of freedom and sovereignty.

The Sri Lanka Experience

1. History of Experience in living with nature
2. Impact of “ Market orientation” since 1977
3. The new recommendations after change of Government in 1994 : For further destruction and disaster
4. A Strategy for prevention and recovery
5. Women’s leadership in the struggle for survival and freedom
6. A New Dream to be created : A shared dream of the poor in South Asia
7. Solidarity in women’s studies and struggle

1. History of Experience in living with nature

Sri Lanka has a very long history that illustrate the tremendous ability that the people of the country had in living in harmony with nature. There are historical records that show the development of ancient irrigation systems based on a sound understanding of ecology. In the dry zone of Sri Lanka there is still plenty of evidence about the way people developed their patterns of agriculture protecting the forests, the soil, the diversity of animal and plant life, the methods adopted to ensure sustainability of the ecological system ,while meeting the food security needs and the needs of animal life.

Robert Knox, one of the early Europeans who lived in Sri Lanka rights in his book about his experiences in the country that "All ordinary people in the villages were physicians", meaning that they had a sound knowledge about the ways of living a healthy life. " When they were ill, they walked into the forest to find the required medicinal plants and they knew how to treat their illnesses". Even today there is lot of evidence about the common man's or woman's knowledge in medicine, health and the natural ways of healing themselves.

There is more specialized knowledge in the form of Aurvedic and other traditional medicinal systems that are considered to be over 3,000 years old. Such knowledge and practice was possible because of the very rich contribution made by nature, in the form of bio-diversity and the traditional knowledge of the people about conserving and using this diversity. This applies not only to medicine and health but also to food diversity and methods of food security. An important aspect of this history and of this valuable cultural heritage is that it was not the "profit motive" that was behind this development. These resources were protected, propagated and utilized not for individual profit but for the well being of all. When knowledge was handed down through generations a careful choice was made to ensure that those who inherited such knowledge utilized it not for selfish and destructive motives but for the good of all beings. There were religions and philosophies that cultivated those values and protected them. Some of this knowledge systems and practices that could be extracted and utilized in the "market" have been absorbed by the "profit makers". Much of these knowledge systems by their very nature were not "marketable" for profit. Such aspects were just left out or discarded and destroyed. Some of these that were still valuable for the survival of the people remained with the people as " non market methods " of sustaining life. Such aspects did not have any "market value" and they were considered as 'valueless'.

Although much of this heritage has now being destroyed, neglected or discarded as unscientific, out dated or not relevant for today's needs there is a tremendous potential to revive these. The natural environment and climatic conditions still provide for this revival. There is also a great need to do so particularly for those millions of people who are now being discarded by the "Globalized Market" as unnecessary. Millions of such people are being left out or rejected by the market economy. Thus, they can only survive by finding means other than those provided by the market. As suggested earlier they have the right and the potential to protect, regenerate and find their survival within the ecological systems.

2. Impact of “ Market orientation” since 1977 - Survival of millions, already affected and threatened

Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed already since 1977 in the process of adjustments into the “Market led” strategy.

Sri Lanka within these 20 years changed from a country with some social development, low income disparities (inequalities), low rural poverty with relatively less social unrest, suppression, and less violence to a country that is one of the worst in the world in most of these aspects.

By 1994 Sri Lanka had become;

1. the country with the fastest increase in rural poverty among 114 countries studied by IFAD.(" State of World Rural Poverty" study published by IFAD in 1992)
2. the country with the second highest income disparities (next to Brazil) in the World Bank listing (1993)
3. Child malnutrition (below 5 years) reached 60%
4. Low birth weight reached 30%
5. Anemia among mothers reached 65%
6. Involuntary disappearances reached 60,000 in 2 year (between 1988 – 1990) during the youth uprising.
7. War in the North has resulted in over 50,000 deaths and over 1 million displacements.
8. Sri Lanka is now said to be having one of the highest rates of suicide.

After the change of government in 1994, the new government having promised changes in the earlier economic, agricultural and social policies, is following the same policies.

Sovereignty lost

This process is being guided by the World Bank and TNC and local capital.

Political structures set up now, have put the entire economic decision making in the hands of those who strictly follow WB / IMF guidance. New structures set up directly under the President, have the ability to decide all areas of economic policy without consulting the elected representatives. These structures include the following,

1. National Development Council – Responsible for Formulation of all Economic Policy
2. Board of Investment (BOI) – Responsible for all foreign investment and measures necessary to attract them
3. Public Enterprises Reform Commission (PERC) – handling “privatization” in all sectors

4. Southern Development Authority – undertaking massive infra structure development to attract foreign investors.
5. Presidential Task Force on Agriculture – replaced the Ministry of Agriculture in most responsibilities in implementing Agricultural Policy

Complete exclusion of people and people's representatives from participating in the major economic policy decisions is the present pattern. How this happens can be illustrated using the following example.

The most important economic policy commitments are made by the Govt. of Sri Lanka, at the " Sri Lanka Aid Group Meetings held annually in Paris. This meeting for 1998 was on May 26- 28 in Paris. It was only on 21st May that the IMF announced that the IMF Annual Review Mission has submitted its conclusions and recommendations to the govt. and sent the same to the Paris Aid Group meeting. Only a very brief indication about the nature of the recommendations was sent to the media , which was published only in one English paper. The speech made by the Govt. representative at the Aid Group meeting was not published in any of the media. It is obvious that what ever commitments made to the donors, the WB , IMF and others were not discussed at the parliament or even by the Cabinet of Ministers. However, the govt. will have to prove at the Aid Group Meeting next year that the commitments have been fulfilled. This happens every year.

Further Destruction proposed under the new Government

New policy recommendations of the World Bank in 1996 proposes processes of “freeing land market”, establishing water property rights, Government moving out of all interventions in marketing, extension services, irrigation and credit.

These recommendations envisage 1.8 million small farmers selling their land and moving out of agricultural livelihoods. Similar proposals are made in relation to removal of all legislation that protects livelihoods of all workers presently employed in the name of “freeing labour market” which threatens job security of millions of workers in industry, plantations and services. Policy proposals in fisheries, intending to attract big companies to deep sea, coastal and inland fisheries threaten the livelihoods of nearly 500,000 small fish worker families.

The entire future strategy is to create a much larger abundance of cheap labour and much bigger investment on infra structure for the big capital, taking out of services and social expenditure on the poor.

The type of destruction that this whole process of further adjustments would lead to is unimaginable and unbelievable. In all these it is the women who suffer the worst.

A Strategy to Prevent Destruction for Survival and Sovereignty

Therefore, what we as the Movement for National Land and Agricultural Reform (MONLAR) believe and have tried to achieve in the last 8 years is ;

1. To create as wide an awareness as possible about this destruction, primarily among those who are threatened in their very survival. (There has in fact been people's resistance in all efforts to carry forward this process).
2. To take to them the awareness of the possibility both at the global level as well as at national level, and the Global and national need to develop a sustainable future.
3. To organize as wide campaigns as possible to pressurize policy changes.
4. The most important of all is the process that victimized people who are cast out by the present economic system undertaking the task of building their own ways of survival, adopting sustainable food security oriented agriculture. Ecologically sound ways of living, action for protecting their right to the national resources, mothers taking leadership in the fight for right to food & nutrition.

There needs to be strong collaboration at Regional and Global levels

This strategy for survival and sovereignty has now become a global strategy of the poor. The global domination of the market, has now necessitated the unity of all those who are discarded by the forces of global capital to overcome the global enslavement. It has become a global necessity for survival of all those who are threatened. It has created a new need for a global struggle for sovereignty.

The Need and the Potential for a Women's Leadership

In this global struggle for survival and sovereignty there are many important reasons that compel us to seriously think about the potential leadership role that the women could play. The women in our societies have played a very important historical role in building and sustaining economies of survival. They have been the main actors in history in developing local food security. Even today the main concern of the women in most poor, rural communities in the economy is to achieve " food security" and "economic security". By nature and by the role they play in today's societies, they are more concerned about protection and conservation rather than of destructive exploitation of life and nature. It is this very quality and concern to protect and sustain life, the life of their children and the families that is being exploited in using women as cheap subservient labour by the profit makers. There are many instances where women have demonstrated their tremendous strength in fighting for the right to protect their means of survival.

A New Dream to be Created : A Shared Dream in South Asia

What we need today is a new dream. A dream of a new future. A dream that gives people a new hope for survival. A hope of a future of sovereignty and not of enslavement. It is a dream of the possibility of recovering the people's right to their natural, ecological resources. This new dream should strengthen people to fight back to regain their right to have control over their heritage.

This is a dream that should help them to discard the "great myth" that capital if allowed to come and take control over their lives, their labour, their resources, their creative potential, and their right to decide would protect and improve their lives and make them free. The myth that the only way to survive is by going into voluntary enslavement, that it would take them to 'Modernity'. . This is a dream that can be strongly based on real facts a true analysis of the real situation and real processes that are taking place.

I say that we need to build a dream, because it is a dream of a new future that will give us the strength and confidence to begin a process of building it. It is the millions of the ordinary poor people in our societies who need this dream. They need it for their survival. Therefore, it is they who have the capacity to create it. Of course they need to know the realities and they need to understand the present processes that are affecting them. They need to know the background information about what is being done by others who have taken control over their lives to be able to reject and respond meaningfully. It is then that they will empower themselves to expel the "myths" that have been propagated.

Most of the present assessments about what is possible and what is not possible in the present context do not sufficiently take into consideration the tremendous potential that would be generated by such millions of ordinary people who have now been enslaved, kept in the dark and made submissive, if and when they are sufficiently informed and are moved by such a "dream" built on the basis of sufficient awareness and a vision. At least in Sri Lanka, it is because of these false and unscientific assessments, that we have failed during the last twenty years to find a way out of the present trap leading to further underdevelopment and destruction.

Women's groups and organizations in Sri Lanka have not yet seen sufficiently the need to address these realities. The awareness is growing slowly.

We feel and wish that women's studies done in India to build this dream and to make it a concrete reality, particularly among women, can make a tremendous contribution to help this dream to grow among our women in Sri Lanka and in our society as a whole. We need your help. We wish you strength & success. Let us together prepare our selves more fully, by equipping our people, particularly our women, with information and with studies towards building this new vision, the dream of a new future, in the battle for survival and sovereignty that we are compelled to fight.