The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), commonly known as Rio+20, aims to bring governments, the private sector and nongovernmental organizations together to discuss poverty reduction, social equity and environmental protection. It comes on the anniversaries of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD). The ambitious agenda of Rio+20, marred by growing inequality within and between countries, a financial crisis in high-income countries, stagnant (to be generous) economic growth, and increasing militarization and conservatism around issues related to reproductive and sexual rights, begs the questions: where are we now, and what have we achieved in the last 20 years from a feminist human rights perspective?

Where it is possible to point to some economic gains in the so-called emerging economies and tangible changes in policies related to women, it is undisputed that we, as a world community, have a ways to go if we are to achieve sustainable development, and it is essential for us to learn from the past. In particular we need to continue to resist the neoliberal belief in the free market as the sole means of achieving growth and development. In this faulty model, the State takes on the role of facilitator, and notions of “comparative advantage” and the “invisible hand” undermine the responsibility of the State vis-à-vis its people, specifically in terms of its human rights obligations. Instead we should promote the reality of the market in its complexity as a *gendered, political and historically constituted mechanism*, and direct it to facilitate the realization of human rights, including through macroeconomic policy interventions; for which governments must be held accountable.

Market-based and private sector driven economies were promoted during the 1980s by the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and quickly became the model for economic growth and development. According to the promptings of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the G7 (at the time) countries, this model
required the decentralization of economic power with the role of the State being reoriented to facilitate neoliberal economic policies. In addition, advances in technology, communications and access to information, and the intensification of international flows of capital, goods and services have served to deepen interdependence between states, and broaden the scope of contagion resulting from the latest iteration of the financial crisis.

Women's ability to exercise their rights is often threatened by such economic policies. Rather than creating greater equality, multilateral economic prescriptions over the last 30 years have strengthened the position of transnational corporations through unfair trade advantages, while reducing the long-term productive capacities of developing countries, with accompanying effects on women and men who are producers, consumers and workers. Trade liberalization, privatization and market concentration have also increased the burden on women due to increased unpaid work and/or precarious employment and reduced or for-fee social services, while in many countries the invisible hand of the market has failed to pull women out of poverty.

The persisting economic crisis, coupled with ecological destruction, which negatively impacts on the overall conditions for sustainable development, demand that we make clear that no effort to reduce poverty can succeed if half of the world’s population is not taken into account. In order to better address and redress the crises, economic and trade policies and the institutions that design and implement them must be held accountable. For example, the financialization of agriculture has played a pivotal role in promoting volatile food prices that have negatively affected small-scale farmers. High food prices make it difficult for heads of households, and women in particular given the gender division of labor, to provide adequately for their families. The “State of Food Insecurity” report notes that “even if the Millennium Development Goal were to be achieved by 2015, approximately 600 million people in developing countries would still be undernourished.”

Interrogating economic policies with a feminist human rights lens will shed light on ways in which governments and IFIs can be held to account. In addition to trade policies, fiscal policies also affect the realization of human rights and gender in/equality. For example, tax breaks and cuts in public investments in the agricultural sector have greatly reduced food and agriculture budgets. These reductions have in turn worked to the detriment of populations by decreasing available government revenue to support production incentives, infrastructure investments and price stabilization measures, necessitating an increase in women’s work burdens and undermining their human rights.

Given the interconnectedness of issues that affect our lived realities as women, men, girls and boys, Rio+20 discussions and decisions forged by governments, the private sector and representatives of nongovernmental organizations will necessarily involve issues that have to do with more than “sustainable development” policies and practice. They will also involve political and economic security and rights and in part determine whether we foster the kind of solidarity that the founders of the United Nations intended: “To achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic,
social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.”

Given economic policy and economic growth’s starring roles in the sustainable development narrative, we benefit from seeing macroeconomic policy as a means of either facilitating unsustainable development and inequality, or facilitating sustainable development and human rights. For the latter we will also need institutions and processes at the national and international levels directed at the realization of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights, and democratic governance. In other words we need to replace the notion of the “invisible hand” with “standing shoulder to shoulder,” for the achievement of sustainable development for all and the realization of gender equity.

References

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