

Women's Rights and the Dominant Neoliberal Agenda: The Current Global Trajectory Is Far from Sustainable

Reflections on the theme for the 2024 World Conference on Women's Studies - "Change makers: Women's Scholar-Activism across Disciplines"

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I have contemplated deeply about next year's conference theme and would love to share my ideas with potential participants, attendees and the Conference Chair who is also the current Director of the Institute of Gender and Development Studies (IGDS) at UWI, Mona in Jamaica as UWI is my alma mater and Jamaica the country of my birth and where I am now situated for over a year.

When I first heard the conference theme, I immediately had a flashpoint of a quote from a 2023 United Nations Mid Year update on the World Economic And Social Prospects where it states:

"today's policy makers or change makers face multiple challenges of promoting the construction of inclusive and sustainable societies by largely focusing on social equity, human and sustainable development, gender justice, economic growth and environmental sustainability amidst lingering uncertainties and structural vulnerabilities."

The lingering uncertainties and structural vulnerabilities which the report speaks of, refers to the dominant neo liberal agenda and corresponding macroeconomic policies that valorises economic growth over people-centred development, deregulation and the reduced public spending on all aspects of sustainable infrastructure and social development policy including gender equality programs or reducing budgetary allocations to social protection programs that adversely affects women's lives and livelihoods in both developing, emerging

market economies and industrialized nations.

I also thought of another quote from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) bleak outlook on social and economic development for the incoming new year where it states that 2024 is unlikely to show any substantial improvement with respect to economic, social and ecological development indicators of progress. We must be reminded that women and gender studies and interdisciplinary studies including but not limited to history, cultural studies, sociology, labour studies, anthropology, organisational behaviour in management studies, migration and citizenship studies, international development studies, international relations, public international law, political science, public health, economics, natural sciences and identity based disciplines, emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as counter movements to the ethnocentric, infantilizing accounts that the Global North created through research conducted in the Global South on women and other vulnerable groups who are depicted as helpless victims that require intervention, saving and civilizing strategies in order to be improved (Heron, 2007; Lynch et al, 2023).

As a result of this canonical, imperial and racial-colonial discourses, practices and logics, the political question on who did women or woman constitute has been debated thoroughly by decolonial and transnational feminist scholars including Chandra Talpade Mohanty. Caribbean feminist scholars like Dr. Alissa Trotz (2007) reconceptualised the examination of global sisterhood among women beyond using the simplistic, binary assumptions associated with liberal feminism.

Liberal feminism only looks at gender oppression or patriarchy as the only axis of power and domination which affects women's lives and this is insufficient analyses. Instead Dr. Trotz challenges her readers and audience to examine systemic inequalities and structural violence that affects racialized women and marginalized communities who are seen and constructed as the Others because a singular focus on gender oppression and one discipline of knowledge is insufficient to analyse the global mechanics of power (Esposito and Winters, 2022).

When I thought of the theme, I asked myself the question: what is the broader macroeconomic, social, cultural and political configuration of today's world that pose a challenges of women's studies scholarship and activism?

Two weeks ago in Jamaica, there was a strike among UWI lecturers for better salaries and working conditions amidst the fact that of rising inflation (5.1% as of October 2023, according to OUR Today, 2023) and cost of living and the fact that they have been worse off as result of the Government of Jamaica's recent wage compensation review exercise.

Despite the fact our nation has been given an indicator of 0.709 and has been ranked for high human development on the UNDP's Human Development Index, our country still continues to be plagued by high poverty and inequality levels where every 3 in 5 Jamaican households indicated that their primary source of income is not enough to meet basic necessities and demands and majority of poverty-stricken households are female led/women led (PIOJ, 2022). Wealth and income inequality at the global level has become so alarming to the point where UNESCO has released a 2022 publication highlighting the fact that the world's top 1,000 billionaires have taken nine (9) months to regain their pre pandemic wealth while the world's most poor and vulnerable, majority of which are women will take an additional ten (10) years or more to regain their wealth. Thus, global recovery is occurring but recovery is uneven and the current global trajectory is far from sustainable.

I also thought of where next year's conference is situated (Sri Lanka). Sri Lanka was highlighted as a case study in a recent Guardian article that is championing for debt relief and debt justice, given the fact that private companies have made profits up to USD \$30 billion by charging premium interest rates and taking a hard line stance of debt repayment obligations. This provides an added barrier to poverty alleviation and reduction in Sri Lanka and thus derails progress on poverty eradication (SDG1- No poverty).

Globally, the sustainable development goals (SDGs) represent an ambitious agenda yet only 15% of SDG targets have been met and at a regional level in Latin America and the Caribbean, only a meagre 5% of SDGs targets have been achieved as the COVID 19 pandemic and the Russia Ukraine war have hampered progress. The SDGs have been criticised for being aspirational on paper but in reality, these goals are difficult to attain given the global political economy landscape characterized by power asymmetries which affect resource allocation and power distribution.

In terms of politics and political ideologies, right wing populism and the election of centre right and right wing leaders across the world paints a grim outlook and this also brings more perplexing problems as ideologies of nationalism, xenophobia, homophobia and transphobia, anti Black and indigenous racisms, sexism and heteropatriarchy have subverted decades of women's movements' social organising, advocacy, critical scholarship, gains in progressive policies and claims for gender and reparative justice on behalf of marginalized communities who are victims of descendants of lives lost to crimes against humanity, dispossession, displacement and genocide.

In these perilous times of growing unpredictability, I also think of how public debt as new form of colonialism and imperialism has influenced the everyday lives of peoples in the Global South, which are former colonies of Empires. According to UNCTAD, 81 developing countries lost 241 billion dollars in their net international reserves in 2022 and more than 60% of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is allocated to debt repayment obligations than financing healthcare, education, social assistance and infrastructure and 500 million people in 37 developing countries are expected to continue experience suffering because of a deteriorating global financial landscape. The present and future for women as change makers remain daunting as the challenges are complex and interconnected.

Additionally, I also think about the climate crisis and disproportionate impacts on developing countries and on women and other vulnerable groups. Ambassador Ronald Sanders in his Jamaica Gleaner article on COP 28 climate conference pointed out that industrialized or wealthier nations continue to be the highest carbon and greenhouse gas emitters and despite their vocal commitment to combatting climate change, there is little action to solve the climate crisis. Air, land and water pollution at the expense of declining standards of living and dehumanising treatment of some groups than other is the full embodiment of a concept called the Imperial Mode of living (Brand and Wissen, 2021). Fuel multinational companies like Exxon Mobbil makes a profit of up to USD 17.9 billion in profits at the end of 2022 while developing countries like Guyana where Exxon Mobil conducts oil discovery and production, more than 60% of people are living below the poverty line and the country suffers from one of the highest emigration of skilled and education professionals (brain drain rates) in the Caribbean region (Mohammed, 2022).

I think of how women's scholar activism would interrogate issues such as war and political instability affects women's and men's lives in different ways as seen in the example of ongoing Israel Palestinian conflict. I think of the limitations of public international law

whereby there is no overarching mechanisms for accountability and enforcement of legal rules and principles unlike domestic law as I see the escalation of the land dispute between Venezuela and Guyana and even in light of the fact that the case has been brought to the attention of the UN Security Council, the UN Security Council remains legally and politically limited in its power (McGlinchey, 2023).

As this year comes to end so quickly and we welcome 2024, let us also think about change making as a political act of delinking and undoing belief systems, norms, values, notions, narratives and practices that undermine women's autonomy and quest for liberation from structures of domination – the change is conceptual, epistemic, spatial, social, cultural, economic, political and symbolic and it is full time we envision and act on a vision of alternatives to the dominant neoliberal dogma that is ever so pervasive. As Barbadian Prime Minister, Mia Motley, states,

“we cannot afford to continue doing nothing about the current crisis or get lost in all of what is happening by forgetting what our real mission is.”

I urge our audience at WCWS 2024 to be part of a change that not only champions to end gender-based violence but the many manifestations of structural violence that plague our world today.

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