THE GLOBALIZED WOMAN

By Christa Wichterich

At the recent review-conference five years after the 4. world women's conference in Beijing, the impact of globalization on women was one of the most controversial points. Governments of the South stressed that globalization in terms of liberalisation of markets and trade, privatisation and structural adjustment programmes predominantly have adverse effects on their economy and on women, often enough bringing about impoverishment and a feminisation of poverty. Contrary to this assessment, governments of the industrialised countries of the north insisted on the "greater opportunities and autonomy" the process of globalisation is able to generate for women.

Women are deemed to be the winners of globalised production, services and trade because more women are able to obtain employment. However, this "feminisation of employment" pulls the vast majority of women into three sectors of the labour markets. Firstly, female labour-force has been the main comparative advantage of the new export-oriented economies in Asia, Middle America and Eastern Europe because it is cheap, flexible, and unorganised. Women are not only the trump-card in the ruthless competition in labour-intensive manufacturing, such as textile, electronic and toy industries, but increasingly in off-shored services and office work like data processing, tele-work and call-centre work.
Secondly, women are pioneers in the new modes of labour, as temps, just-in-time- and part-time-employees, as piece-rate- and home-based workers, as self-employed in the informal sector, or as small-scale entrepreneurs assisted by a micro-credit. It is not only in countries of the south and the eastern transformation economies that the informal sector booms. The sweatshop- and out-sourcing-economy makes a comeback to western, highly industrialised countries as well. Deregulation of labour markets results in a split up of formal employment into flexible jobs, which mostly do not yield enough income to secure a living, are usually unprotected by labour laws, and are not covered by social insurance. The Asia crises functioned as a huge mechanism for informalisation: women were the first to loose formal employment and were forced to take up an informal job to make both ends meet. Many of them do the same work they did before but as part-time job and with only part of the former salary. In future, this casualisation and informalisation of labour will affect men as well.
Thirdly, as migration and more recent the feminisation of migration have become a characteristic feature of globalisation, low-waged and undervalued jobs, especially in the urban service sector, are taken up by migrant women. Often they work as cleaners, housemaids, as entertainers or sex workers at an interface with the reproductive sector, meaning that not only paid but unpaid labour as well is restructured. While middle class women try to build up a professional career, they delegate their house- and care-work to mostly illegal, under-paid migrants.
In those three segments of the labour market, women are instrumental to the reduction of labour-costs and the deregulation of labour markets. Their rights are curtailed even if they improve de jure. For example, the ILO stated that more and more states introduced legislation for maternity protection. However, in the informal sector and in flexibele employment often women don't have any work contract and are not entitled to legal provisions. Sometimes employers even force them to sign that they won't demand any benefits guaranteed in labour legislation.

The majority of women around the world is integrated into the labour and cash market, but marginalised at the same time into low-income and precarious jobs. Although more women become cash earners, less reap security. Gendered discrimination is a determining principle in the process of restructuring of markets and labour.

Unlike earlier stages of industrialisation, nowadays women are more than just an industrial reserve or temporally proletarians before marriage. Despite of their discontinuous work biographies, many are significant or main breadwinners in their families and a growing number are sole income earners in their households, mainly single mothers.
The feminisation of employment on the one hand, an increasing number of men who, due to rationalisation, loose their full-time jobs or can earn an income only in the informal sector or through insecure employment on the other hand cause a change in gender roles and regimes. Access to the labour market means for a number of young women a “coming out” of the confined and rigid traditional patriarchal institutions in their villages: they enter public space, are confronted with new value systems, earn their own money and provide for the first time an asset to their family. In the west, the new gendered patterns of labour mark the decline of the Fordist paradigm of labour relations and challenge the deeply patriarchal family model: the lifelong wage-working male breadwinner who provides for his wife and the children, and the dependant housewife who does in return for her husband’s maintenance the unpaid reproductive work in household and family.

However, an amazingly stable feature in the changing world of work is the sexual division of labour with a sustainable feminisation of unpaid care and subsistence work, and a sustainable male resistance against reproductive work. This continues even after women take up a job or even when men are unemployed. It’s middle classes only, where women manage to employ cheap female labour for the reproductive work, that male and female labour and career patterns assimilate to each other, while time pressure is high for both sexes as well as lifestyle and level of consumption.
Often enough however, unpaid work of women is on an unprecedented increase as labour is shifted from the paid sector into women’s unpaid economies. In the North this happens in the wake of the dismantling of the welfare state, in the former communist world after the collapse of the authoritarian socialist overprotecting regimes, and in the South as part and parcel of structural adjustment. Both, states and markets externalise their social costs. States withdraw from their responsibilities for social security and redistribution of wealth. The decomposition of social welfare results in a transfer of social services and obligations back to the private household and the communities where women take over, either individually in the household or collectively into the community, self-help and voluntary work done by women’s groups. This feminisation of social responsibility cushions the abandonment of social duties by the state.

It is evident that the neoliberal globalisation is neither a gender neutral process nor a win-win-game for everybody as it claims to be. It has strongly unequalizing tendencies, both between and within nations, between gender and between women. This results in a polarisation of the labour market and the social fabric of society. The composition of new classes emerge: the “owners” of a permanent job yielding an income which renders possible a high standard of living and social security. At the top end of this segments of the labour market, overvalorized professions develop in the fields of new technology, information, finances and top management. Only very few women manage to crash the class ceiling and to enter this elite segment although their qualifications often exceed those of male competitors.

A third class of the workforce does paid labour on an irregular and low waged base, mostly in the informal economy. The share of women in these undervalorized segments of the labour market is high. Many of them are always at risk to be retrenched, to drop-out or not to yield enough income for their living.

Class and gender interests are increasingly fragmented, resulting in a diversity of civic actors, interests and objectives. Shared gender interests are overlapped by interests related to class, ethnicity, age, religion etc. This social differentiation, the ongoing fragmentation of social relations and the informalisation of work make solidarity and the organisation of women more difficult.

However, while globalisation causes social differences within societies and among women, at the same time, it equalizes economic structures in different societies and experiences in women's life. From this, especially during the six UN-summits in the nineties, common concerns emerged around human rights, the gendered structures of globalisation, and its gender-specific impact.
Women's organisation changed their strategies in the nineties. More NGOs got involved in mainstreaming and intervention into institutionalised politics through lobbying, monitoring and negotiations in the context of UN-conferences. Networking increased and intensified, at national level and cross border, and more and more virtually – in the internet.

These new strategies have to be perceived on the background of certain paradoxes of globalisation. On the one hand, global players, namely transnational corporations, international trade and finance institutions manage to concentrate power in their hands and to disempower nation states, political institutions and democratic mechanisms. On the other hand, new space beyond formal democratic mechanisms opened up for agenda setting, participation and representation of civic forces and NGOs; opportunities for transnational networking and the internationalisation of civil societies grew, based on the latest information and telecommunication technologies. While markets are deregulated and workers rights curtailed, a transnational normative framework of human and women rights has been established to which women's organisations increasingly refer.

As a kind of stocktaking, three different strategic perspectives can be identified. 1) Globalisation from below: Resistance is organised between the local and the global, which tries to tame the most exploitative and oppressive features of the global economy and prevent the worst. 2) The second strategy is political participation and influencing governance to re-regulate markets, engender the economy and mainstream gender into politics. This concept of power sharing is the one which demands a lot of adjustment to existing structures and political contents, and is most at risk of co-optation. 3) The third strategy puts emphasis on building local and regional alternatives to the global structures. These initiatives build niches in the market economy or some deliberately try to delink.
Each of these strategies has its limitations. However, they try to counter globalisation from different angles and on different levels, on a range between autonomy, resistance and adaptation. Forming a „strategic sisterhood" on the base of shared concerns and at the same time mutual respect for diversity, and linking up the local and the global seems to be the main challenge for the near future.

- Christa Wichterich *(1999): The Globalized Woman*. Reports from a Future of Inequality, Zed Books, London