

# Globalization and its Implications anti

BY MARJORIE GRIFFIN COHEN, LAURELL RITCHIE, MICHELLE

*Cet article traite des nouvelles procédures légales issues de la mondialisation qui menacent nos institutions démocratiques telles qu'on les connaît. Les auteures soutiennent qu'aux niveaux international et national, les procédures légales qui ralliaient nos notions de démocratie ont glissé de celles qui nous étaient accessibles, transparentes, vers d'autres procédures tenues secrètes, exclues du débat public, et qui forcent, transforment le pouvoir du côté des corporations internationales.*

The National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) was one of the first organizations in Canada to understand the significance of globalization for women and the first feminist organization in the North to actively confront its implications. Beginning with the initial campaign against the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in the mid-1980s, NAC argued that women's work would be negatively affected by the trade agreement. But as the actual terms of the agreement became known, it became clear that much more was at stake and that the agreement itself would be a vanguard for further far-reaching international agreements. The ways in which public policy would be undermined, and the effect this would have on all kinds of initiatives women had worked to achieve, became the focus for our actions.

The women's movement understood that the whole point of public policy was to counter the market's failures and to bring about social goals that could not be fulfilled through the normal workings of that market. During the

---

The new institutions do not replace the market-controlling functions of nations, and shift power in the favour of international corporations.

past 150 years, feminists in western industrialized nations have challenged the idea of an unregulated market as the best and most efficient way to meet human needs. Women did not need lengthy analyses of economic theory to realize that the acts of buying and selling on the market were not sufficient to meet their needs: the market could not recognize the value of their work (paid and unpaid), eliminate discrimination and oppression, or overcome chronic unemployment and poverty. Women had experienced first-hand the power of the market to keep them in their place and knew that only attempts

to control the market could begin to rectify their circumstances of oppression. In fact, the great social projects of the twentieth-century occurred when people confronted the structures of power in society in order to make those societies more humane. While feminists have been dissatisfied with many of the results, the gains we have made are in great jeopardy with the form of globalization that is now taking shape.

The effects of the free-trade initiatives on labour, social programs, the environment, and the quality of our lives have been examined in other NAC publications. Specifically we have discussed the way in which globalization destabilizes existing social institutions and replaces them with impersonal market relationships and the ways it reduces the power of nations to regulate business, tax corporations, and provide for the needs of people. In doing this, we have been mindful that the effects of globalization are not homogeneous and that some groups of people are disproportionately affected as compared to others.

The focus in this paper is on two specific areas which feminists have not yet devoted significant attention to but are indicative of the direction in which globalization is taking us. The first section looks at the ways in which the new legal processes that are emerging as a result of globalization threaten our democratic institutions as they currently exist. The main point is that, at both the international and national levels, the legal processes that epitomize our notions of democracy are being shifted from those that are accessible, open, and public processes, to secret proceedings that exclude public scrutiny. The new institutions that are being established are not democratic, do not replace the market-controlling functions of nations, and shift power decidedly in the favour of international corporations.

The second section deepens this theme by specifically discussing changes in the International Labour Organization (ILO) and how its focus is shifting to accommodate the market-creating needs of international capital. While this section treats the attempts to restructure the ILO as a case study, it demonstrates how existing international institutions that have a specific function to support non-corporate groups, could, through the institutions of globalization, become part of the de-regulation framework. This analysis rests on examples of the changes in the ILO's position in two industries that are particularly significant for women's paid work.

# Strategies for Women

SWENARCHUK, AND LEAH VOSKO

Both of the sections show how the new so-called "standards" which are being created could be easily mistaken for international regulation designed to replace the regulations now imposed by nations. In fact, this is the impression perpetuated by proponents of the new "standards." However, in reality, the institutions are incorporating a de-regulation process that will lead to a serious weakening of national and international standards and regulations.

The final section gives a brief overview of the directions that could guide feminist activity in the future.

## The Legal Framework of Globalization

The legal framework used to facilitate globalization is found in the international trade agreements, particularly the World Trade Organization. For Canada, the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) are equally important.

Investment treaties have also been signed to prevent government "interference" in the daily movement of over one trillion dollars (\$us) around the world. These include the NAFTA investment chapter and over 1600 bilateral agreements around the world. Canada has signed or is currently negotiating 60 investment agreements with developing countries and Eastern European countries. The Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI), currently delayed but still alive, is designed to remove government investment regulations in the world's 29 richest countries.

The legal system in Canada has always been problematic. It is male-dominated, too expensive, and time-consuming for most citizens to use, and much more accessible to rich individuals and business than to average people. However, NAC and other social and environmental activists have continually fought for positive changes in laws and legal processes. Examples of these positive changes include measures to ensure equal pay, more protection for battered women, bans against cancer-causing chemicals and drugs like thalidomide, and laws against pollution of our air and water. The pillars of our democratic system are elected Members of Parliament who are accountable to the people for the enactment of laws, and an open, visible justice system that is charged with enforcement of those laws.

In the past ten years, Canadians have experienced fundamental changes in the laws that govern us, as well as

our access to those laws and to lawmakers. These changes have led to a deterioration in democratic processes and democratic rights.

## Secrecy of Trade Negotiations

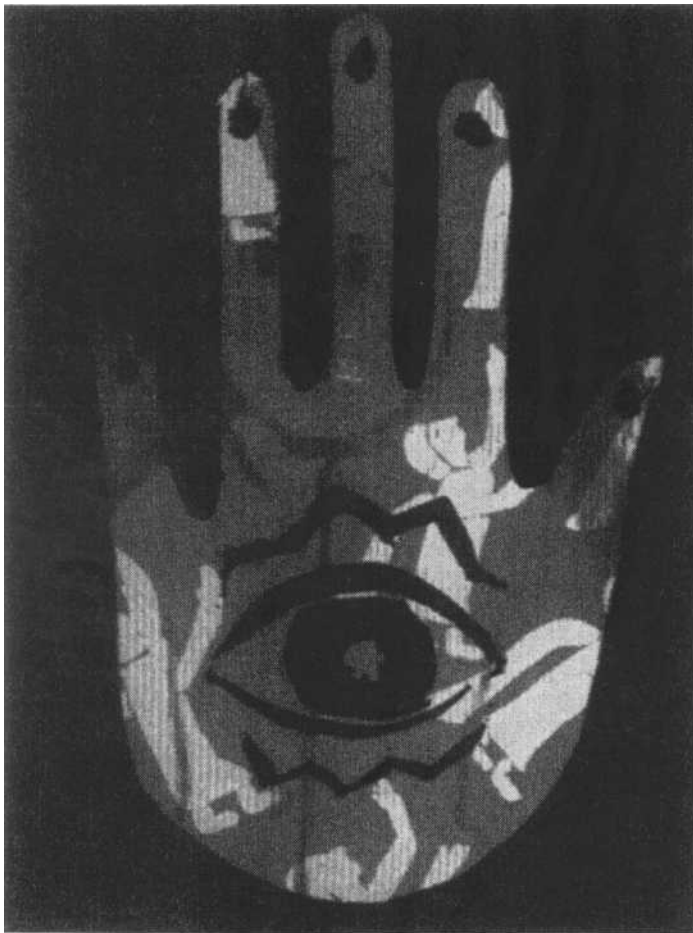
A key feature of trade agreement negotiations has been the way they have been pursued behind "closed doors," in entirely secret "diplomatic" processes. To justify this secrecy, the agreements have been described to the public as simple tariff agreements. In actuality, they are comprehensive international agreements that have far-reaching consequences. They bind governmental powers in all countries and are designed to prevent governments from using powers within their national constitutions to uphold the interests of citizens. They are said to concern only cross-border trade, but actually affect all areas of policy, including policy on health, education, employment, resource use, pollution control, and culture.

The trade and investment negotiations occur in cities all around the world, but particularly in Europe, away from the scrutiny of peoples affected.

Leaks of preliminary documents related to the FTA, NAFTA and MAI were invaluable to groups active in opposing them. While the negotiations in all three cases were already well advanced, the public scrutiny allowed people to understand what was happening and led to a debate over the social issues affected by these new agreements. Critics of these agreements, including NAC, were ridiculed when they demanded openness in trade negotiations, but they were proven right: the impact of public scrutiny and the resulting openness can be seen in the partial defeat of the MAI. This does not mean, however, that openness is an established principle. It is one that will need to be continuously placed at the forefront of demands by women, green, labour, and health activists in the future.

One difficulty confronting groups that want to challenge the current globalization process is the proliferation of simultaneous negotiations on critical issues. For example, at present,

**A key feature of trade agreement negotiations has been the way they have been pursued behind "closed doors," in entirely secret "diplomatic" processes.**



Roche/e Rub/nstein, *untitled*, mixed media, 2011

there are planned negotiations on agriculture and intellectual property at the WTO, comprehensive trade agreements being negotiated through the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), significant changes to the rules/regulations governing the operations of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the United Nations (UN), as well as attempts by states and international corporations to foster continued negotiations on the environment.

There are other practical difficulties for poorly funded groups trying to monitor these processes, much less to actually participate in discussions and negotiations. All these negotiations continue to occur behind closed doors in cities around the world.

The conduct of these negotiations provides clear evidence of the need for strong national and local governments close to those affected. Without such governments to represent the interests of people, there is no genuine possibility of democratic participation nor is there any way to ensure the accountability of the politicians and bureaucrats who negotiate the agreements.

International treaty negotiations could, of course, be conducted differently. The UN approach, for example, as seen in the Beijing women's conference, the Kyoto climate change conference, and the Copenhagen social summit,

requires sessions open to public scrutiny and attended by NGOs including women's groups. The precedent for more open trade negotiations already exists; under the UN system, negotiations for a trade and environment treaty covering international sales of genetically modified plants and animals are being conducted in public.

It is possible to work with our international contacts to ensure that all future negotiations are made public. This is critical. People must not be confronted with completed, signed deals that can't be significantly changed. Activist groups need to work together to require that all trade negotiations be conducted in public, especially as they affect so much more than trade and tariffs.

### Secrecy of Canadian Government

The growing dominance of corporate thinking and goals in government has led to an increased culture of secrecy within Canada. In particular, secrecy has accompanied the de-regulation process.

In 1996, the federal government tried to enact the *Regulatory Efficiency Act*, a sweeping law that would have allowed corporations to avoid compliance with existing regulations by signing private deals with government officials. In other words, they would write their own regulations and avoid, without limit, all public requirements. The sectors targeted for rapid de-regulation included health and therapeutic products, and various environmental laws. The bill would have also allowed the Canadian government to sign private agreements with foreign governments regarding the administration of Canadian laws. A vocal national campaign killed the bill. Had it been enacted, Canadians would have been stripped of any right to stop the decimation of public protections.

This failed Act was followed by a *Regulations Act*. It was passed by the House of Commons in 1997 but died because it had not passed the Senate prior to the federal election. The new bill would have given the government unlimited powers to refuse the publication of regulations—denying citizens their fundamental right to know the laws that govern them. Department of justice lawyers actually stated in testimony before a House of Commons committee that there was no need to publish regulations because affected companies usually knew of them in advance. No consideration was given to the rest of us, citizens and organizations, or our need to know the ways in which we are or are not protected. Their comments reveal what government officials now think of law making: it is a process that is planned secretly in concert with industry lobbyists, without citizens' rights of participation or any right to information.

The *Regulations Act* would have also authorized the replacement of binding Canadian environmental laws with the non-binding, voluntary approaches of certain international bodies, frequently corporate-dominated and inaccessible to citizens.

## Secrecy of Trade and Investment Dispute Panels

The sweeping limitations on governmental powers that are found in the trade agreements are enforced by dispute panels whose procedures are entirely confidential. No citizens or organizations have access to the process, although what is at stake is nothing less than the capacity of our national governments to maintain laws, often for the public's protection. These trade panels have now authorized the removal of-

Canadian law that required salmon and herring caught off the BC coast to be landed in Canada for biological sampling prior to export;

-American law that required tuna fishing that doesn't kill hundreds of thousands of dolphins;

Canadian law that prevented "split run" American magazines in Canada; and

-American laws to reduce air pollutants in gasoline.

Canada has also used international trade laws to eliminate citizen protections in other countries. In 1997, the Canadian government, acting for the beef industry, won a case against the European Union (EU); the EU was required to drop its ban on hormone-treated beef. This decision was modified on appeal, and the EU will now try to maintain the ban using a new assessment of risks. The fact remains that the hormone ban exists in Europe because citizens who were motivated by concerns about the health impacts of hormone residues spent ten years organizing for the ban. The Canadian government's instigation of this case is particularly offensive since it negates the wishes of European citizens and creates a precedent that can be used against Canadian food standards in the future.

This insidious and damaging use of secret mechanisms in international agreements can also work against Canada in direct ways. For example, a large U.S. company, Ethyl Corporation, has cited the secret investment panels of NAFTA in its claim for \$350 million from the Canadian government as compensation for a Canadian ban on the nerve-poison MMT, an additive in gasoline. This confidential process could result in an enormous government payout-to a corporate polluter-at a time when our public institutions are crumbling under the weight of government funding cuts. Canadians will have no opportunity to watch or participate in the process, a situation that would not be permitted under Canada's domestic laws. Other companies are attacking two Mexican bans on polluting waste dumps, using these same NAFTA provisions.

In contrast, lawsuits (in a legal system which is public) would permit citizens to see the documents, to know what position the government is arguing, and possibly, to intervene. The press can cover trials, and MPs and ministers can be held to account. The secret dispute panels used



*Roche/le Rubinstein, %n the Garden, "hand-co/cured /inocut print 1995*

in international trade organizations were obviously designed to evade these democratic rights and processes. Their considerable power now seriously undermines our democratic parliamentary system.

## Public Interest Standard-setting by Remote International Institutions

The Canadian government is an enthusiastic supporter of the attacks on so-called "non-tariff barriers to trade." These "barriers" are actually the laws and regulations countries have in place to control products and include health, safety, and environmental laws. With the Beef Hormone case, Canada and the WTO gave a boost to standard-setting by the Codex Alimentarius Commission, a Europe-based body whose standards, up to now, have been only advisory. With the trade agreements, its standards became mandatory. The dominant players in the Codex include the major agri-business corporations, and their government allies. Very few citizens or NGOs are able to participate.

Both NAFTA and the WTO promote the authority of international bodies to set standards, although some of these bodies have little experience and are not subject to any public accountability. Applying the same logic, trade

agreements are being cited by the federal government (and some provincial governments) to evade their responsibility to enact protective standards at home. Meanwhile, funding cuts to our health system and government regulatory agencies are eroding the enforcement of existing standards.

The following section describes one example of a standard-setting institution—the International Labour Organization (ILO). The ILO has been increasingly influenced by international capital, despite its explicit design as an institution that would take its direction from workers, employers and national governments—and be held accountable to all three parties.

### **Labour Standards: De-Regulation and Re-Regulation**

The International Labour Organization (ILO) was formed in 1919, in part as a post-World War peacekeeping measure—with the express goal of protecting workers' interests. With it came the adoption of "workers' clauses," the closest thing we have to a universal charter of labour rights. Over the years these clauses have enshrined the right of association, the eight-hour workday and weekly rest period, the abolition of child labour, equal remuneration for work of equal value, and the general principle that "labour is not a commodity." From its inception, the ILO was named the guardian of these principles.

Starting in the 1920s, the ILO became a forum where states gathered to discuss, debate and agree upon the content of labour legislation. Consequently, its Constitution provides for an annual conference to which each country sends a voting delegation composed of two government representatives, one employers' representative and one workers' representative.

The ILO has two formal functions: the setting of international labour standards through conventions and recommendations, and the provision of technical assistance to member states who request help with the design and implementation of labour legislation.

After World War II, participating countries ("Member States") expanded the ILO's mandate to embrace wider objectives related to economic security and social justice. Full employment, social security measures, comprehensive medical care, the provision of adequate nutrition and housing, the assurance of equality of educational and vocational opportunities, and provisions for child welfare and maternity protection—all have been central objectives.

The ILO's 1919 Constitution and the expanded mandate that it adopted in 1944 also established the ILO as a forum where organized labour could address labour issues at the international level.

The ILO itself is formally organized on a tripartite basis, a feature that makes it unique among the organizations that come under the auspices of the United Nations. This tripartite structure is intended to promote mutual understanding between workers, employers, and governments. The ILO likewise encourages tripartism within each member state and a "social dialogue" that involves trade unions and employers in the formulation and, where appropriate, implementation of national policy on social and economic affairs affecting labour. From its inception until quite recently, the ILO has operated fairly effectively with this tripartite model, while fulfilling its constitutional mandate.

Up until the 1980s, the function and role of the ILO was relatively straightforward: it provided its member states with models for new labour legislation and technical assistance in implementing international labour standards. In recent years, however, there has been a marked shift in the role of the ILO. This shift has been influenced by the adoption of international trade agreements including the GATT, NAFTA and the now stalled MAI, as well as the growing power of international institutions such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank and the World Trade Organization.

Since the late 1980s, there has been an observable deregulation agenda at the ILO. The ILO has backed off from its historic role in setting new international labour standards that protect workers' interests, and improving existing standards.

Even more recently, employer representatives have moved into a re-regulation mode. If fully implemented, their aggressive agenda would recast the existing enforceable standards that advance workers' rights and shape, instead, a set of new standards that promote corporate competitiveness and self-regulation. These patterns are emerging alongside the rapidly expanding business lobby inside the ILO itself and the growing ties with the World Bank and the WTO. Standards that have for so many years provided for basic workers' rights are now being replaced by business-friendly standards. The message seems clear: "it's our rules or no rules."

Two 1997 cases that support this observation are summarized below: the new Convention on Private Employment Agencies and the Tripartite Meeting of the Hotel, Catering and Tourism Sector.

### **The Private Employment Agencies Convention**

In June 1997, the ILO adopted a new international labour convention on Private Employment Agencies (No. 181) one that replaced an existing convention entitled Fee-

Standards that have for so many years provided for basic workers' rights are now being replaced by business-friendly standards. The message seems clear: "it's our rules or no rules."

Charging Employment Agencies, Revised (No. 96). The new standard is ,step backwards for workers, particularly women workers who represent the majority of those employed by temporary help agencies, one of the fastest growing types of employment agencies.

Historically, the ILO has taken a tough stand on private employment agents and agencies, promoting instead free public employment services under Conventions Nos. 84 and 88. Indeed, an overwhelming number of countries ratified these conventions. The ILO developed guidebooks and its officials were active in helping countries set up and deliver effective public employment services. When the ILO was founded, government and labour representatives called for an outright ban on private employment agencies and agents. The for-profit operators had a sorry record of exploiting workers (particularly in difficult economic times), making false representations, charging exorbitant fees and collusion with employers. In 1933, at the end of the Great Depression, the ILO adopted Convention No. 96, which aimed at the strict regulation and eventual prohibition of these actors. Although revised and weakened somewhat in 1949, the Convention stood until 1997.

In 1997, the International Labour Conference adopted a new Convention No. 181. It is a toothless convention. Although it still prohibits agencies from charging direct fees and requires protections for migrant workers, it has abandoned the bulk of existing regulations and, for the first time, legitimizes private for-profit employment agencies (temporary help agencies, staff-leasing firms, job shops, etc.).

The implications of this Convention are far-reaching. Most critically, it has the potential to undermine free national public employment services where they exist and provides an opening for predictable abuses by these intermediaries. It also subverts the principle that "labour is not a commodity," fundamental to the founding of the ILO.

The processes that gave birth to the revised convention reflect the larger shift in agenda at the ILO. When the 1997 Private Employment Agencies convention was being negotiated, the employers' group had a much louder voice in the negotiations than in the past. Labour representatives and many government representatives were largely unprepared for the employers' demands and, in the end, they had little success in tempering them. Gone were provisions designed to protect workers, to regulate and limit the private employment agencies' sphere of operation and to preserve a role for non-profit public employment agencies. But de-regulation is not the end of the story. New standards guaranteeing private employment agencies a recognized role in the labour market were substituted for the earlier measures.

#### The Tourism Sector Case:

Developments in the tourism sector reveal a similar shift in agenda. The sector's stance is important because tour-

ism-related industries are anticipated to become the world's largest employing sector by 2005. Women predominate in many of these jobs, particularly in industrialized countries.

Organized labour had been campaigning for governments to sign on to a 1991 ILO Convention covering working conditions in the sector but, by 1997, only six countries had ratified the Convention. Canada was not among them.

At the May 1997 Tripartite Technical Meeting On The Effects of New Technologies on Employment & Working Conditions in the Hotel, Catering and Tourism Sector workers' representatives were prepped for the radical tactics, including walkouts, which employers had been using of late to bring ILO sessions to a dead halt. They were cautioned that employers would do anything to make the sessions short and unworkable and that it would be a struggle to get ratification of ILO Conventions moved to the front burner. What no one properly anticipated was the sophisticated, two-pronged attack that became evident from the first day of business.

At the same time as employers did the "expected," that is they opposed any mandated role for labour in the introduction of new technologies in the workplace, a prerogative they held to be solely management's, the employers also came out fighting for new ILO standards-standards that would enshrine:

- \*team-based work organization
- "best practice menus" and "firm specific" standards (self-regulation)
- " multi-skilling" (multi-tasking)
- Competency-based training standards (undermines seniority, service-based pay)
- "flex time" arrangements (more part-time, split shift and overtime work).

As anticipated, employers wanted to defeat the labour standard-setting role of the ILO (reflecting the deregulation agenda) and, in particular, to ensure that no further countries ratified the 1991 Convention 172, Working Conditions In Hotels, Restaurants and Similar Establishments. Worker representatives were caught off guard however when employers presented their own resolutions on ILO standards-setting the terms for debate and paving the way for their re-regulation agenda.

#### Making the Links:

Both these developments threaten workers' rights on an international scale. In the case of the new conven-

**Strong, effective, and enforceable labour standards are vital in an era of proliferating free trade agreements, globalization, and undemocratic, supra-national governance.**

Lion on Private Employment Agencies, they threaten to undermine labour rights that have been in place since the inception of the ILO in 1919.

Given the growing power of international organizations such as the WRO and the OECD, the shift at the ILO has far-reaching implications. Surely, the need for strong, effective, and enforceable labour standards is vitally important in an era of proliferating free trade agreements, globalization, and a shift towards undemocratic, supranational governance. Most labour unions and social justice organizations like NAC would share this view.

Unfamiliar with the shifting terrain at the ILO, some of these same groups assume a labour-friendly or at least neutral ILO as a policing body for workers' rights if and when such rights are codified. Clearly, new developments and an uncertain balance of power at the ILO suggest we need to rethink our interventions and strategies. There is a need for international, market-controlling institutions but they need to be democratic, representative, and accountable to the people on whose behalf they are supposed to function. This will not be the case if international business is successful in its bid to hijack these institutions.

### What To Do?

Feminists are in the ideas business. It was not because of an internal logic in our social or economic systems, but by pursuing the ideas of women's rights that feminists have been able to reach some of their goals. These ideas about eliminating women's subordination have been advanced over long periods of time, in the face of extraordinary odds and against the self-interests of the most powerful in society. For this reason, that is, the ability to succeed despite overwhelming odds, feminists are well-placed to advance the ideas for egalitarian projects internationally in the twenty-first century.

The major issue to be understood and reversed is the ability of international institutions to insist on uniform

economic policies regardless of the historical, cultural, or geographical problems of any country. While differences in economic and political institutions were tolerated internationally in the past, now uniformity through the discipline of the market is required as a condition of international trade regulations. Uniform economic policies greatly aid the mobility of capital, but they also greatly undermine the power of people to shape societies in their own interests.

Women have struggled with the necessity of recognizing distinct conditions among different groups of women: we know that women's

experiences are not uniform and a single analysis reflecting women's conditions is inadequate. We know too that the notion of "one policy fits all" simply does not work, mainly because different cultural and political realities are at the heart of our experiences in the world.

This idea of tolerance for unique needs is one that we, as feminists, need to advance at the international level. Women's interests cannot be met as long as we cannot be part of the governing structures of our individual societies and we have everything to lose when power shifts away from people who are accountable to us. The shift in power in favour of corporations and capital mobility distorts ideas—our ideas—like freedom and equality, which tend to get defined in limited ways to reflect narrow notions of self-interest, efficiency, and productivity.

The following suggestions for the future recognize our need to be active in both the local and the international arenas as we confront globalization. Some of these ideas clearly are not short-term measures but will take long, concerted political action to achieve. The long-term nature of establishing international control of corporate behaviour does not mean that our only course of action need focus on the distant future.

### At the International Level

At the international level five main inter-related initiatives should be the focus for action of progressive groups. First, we need to continue to be strategic in order to push back the trade regime that is now in place. To do this we need to identify the sectors in which negotiations will take place, and concentrate on them with our international allies. For the next few years, the focus will be on "non-tariff barriers" (such as environmental, public health, the public sector itself, and food regulations), trade in services, agriculture, and patent laws (including those covering human genes, plants, and animals).

Second, there is a need to initiate actions and demands that lead to the creation of international institutions that can exercise some control over hyper-mobile capital. The current unwillingness or inability of nation states to assert the kind of control over capital that is necessary to minimize unemployment, protect the environment, and defend citizens' quality of life, reflects the unprecedented power that corporations now have to intimidate or otherwise gain the cooperation of national governments.

We must find ways to deal with international corporations at both the international and national level. It is simply not enough to focus on disciplining the nation state alone. The very rationale for capital mobility is to take advantage of the economic climate in countries that are either politically corrupt or too weak to protect their people or their environments. International institutions that disciplined corporations, rather than countries, would begin to replicate some of the work of national institutions that were effective when nations exerted more power over

**Women's  
interests cannot  
be met as long  
as we cannot  
be part of the  
governing  
structures of  
our individual  
societies,**

corporate behaviour. Virtually all of our regulatory regimes work through the nation state; they assume states are responsible for the discipline of corporations. Increasingly, however, corporations are able to escape these controls. While not an exclusive response, there is a need for an additional focus on international instruments to discipline corporate behaviour.

Third, in addition to designing international institutions to control capital, there is also a need to imitate the redistributive functions of the nation-state at the international level so that we can move towards a more equitable sharing of the world's wealth.

As long as the enormous disparities which exist worldwide continue, the corporate sector will be able to blackmail nations into submitting to their demands for a "favourable" climate for business. The recent interest in developing a tax on international financial speculation (the "Tobin Tax") in order to both discourage excessive speculation and to raise money could be one starting point for the new international vehicles we need for the control and redistribution of capital.

Fourth, there is an urgent need to begin what will be a long-term project to counter the very politically successful propaganda of the right with regard to the efficiency of the self-regulating market. This could begin with analyses that show the economic inefficiencies and real human misery that follows from imposing a uniform economic system around the world.

The call would be for recognition of economic, social, and environmental pluralism in international trade agreements. A tolerance for economic pluralism requires the recognition that different goals, conditions and cultures throughout the world require very different solutions to problems. One system, the western model based on a U.S.-style economic and social system, will not serve the needs of all people in all circumstances.

The attempt to use international trade agreements to impose uniform economic and social policy worldwide creates impossible positions for people in countries that have vastly different problems and resources, in addition to different values and goals. We in Canada have devised an economic and social system that is different from the U.S. because, in part, we have needed to accommodate the conditions of relatively few people living in a huge and often hostile geographical area. Canada is being forced to change many of these systems as a result of trade liberalization and, however difficult it will be for many groups in this country, the problems arising from conformity are infinitely more serious for poor countries with very different types of social and economic organizations.

In the process of demanding economic uniformity, corporate capital has taken away from poor countries any innovative ways in which they might be able to find unique solutions to their problems. Poor countries will never be able to escape poverty if they are required to abide by the employment and environmental standards of

wealthy countries while, at the same time, they are required to maintain a competitive, market-based economic system.

The case for economic pluralism would be a natural political position for feminists. In recent years, the political activism of minority and disadvantaged groups has made more visible the different circumstances of groups of people in our society. This has led to the demand for distinct social policy to recognize these different needs. This pluralistic approach to public policy is an important starting point for an analysis that recognizes the need for pluralism in social and economic systems.

Any attempt to change the international rules seems an Amazonian task, particularly because the power of the corporate sector has been so enhanced by the changes in the trading rules. However, the very real likelihood that these policies will fail to meet the needs of peoples around the world gives new approaches a chance to flourish. A project which begins to analyze the ways in which international institutions could be organized to allow for economic, social, and environmental pluralism will find a welcoming audience when the promises of the existing trade regimes are not fulfilled.

Fifth, it is essential for people in Canada to work with people in other countries that are negatively affected by the rule of international corporations. In this, feminists, trade unionists, environmentalists, and peace activists throughout the world are well-positioned to lead discussions for a future that would make a global economy socially viable. All of these groups have strong international connections that can be strengthened through attempts to control corporate power together.

As the trajectory of trade liberalization continues to unfold, the experiences of all of us in different parts of the world will be distinct, but the ability to learn from each other and to explore ideas for collective action could lead to significant political initiatives for change. In particular, we could unite in the demand for open trade negotiations, on the *UN* model, so that secret, far-reaching regimes, with secret dispute processes, can no longer be concluded without public intervention.

The political work involved in bringing about international institutions to control capital and to permit economic pluralism may appear overwhelming: this work not only requires long-term planning and concerted organizational efforts, but it will also need a strategy to confront the full might of corporate power. As with any long-term political strategy, there must also be ways for people to work toward similar goals at the local level. If there is nothing concrete that can be suggested for

**It is essential  
for people in  
Canada to work  
with people in  
other countries  
that are  
negatively  
affected by the  
rule of  
international  
corporations.**



action in the normal course of our daily lives, people will become discouraged and apathetic. Changing the world, or at least the current trajectory, is an important goal, but most people will be unable to respond to this long-term initiative if there is not some relationship between it and their immediate political concerns.

### At the National Level

It is critical that all progressive groups-feminists, trade unionists, and environmentalists-maintain actions that focus on supporting social welfare, equitable distribution systems, and making the state more democratic.

The overwhelming nature of the globalization process has forced us into a reactive posture, rather than a proactive one. As such, our actions have often been the target of criticism, both by our supporters and our detractors. But, as is frequently noted, there is no consensus in Canada about the vision of the future and public support for some of the central institutions of the social system continues to be strong; so, although resisting the dismantling of social programs is "reactive," it nonetheless can be successful.

While the new international structures supporting trade liberalization give the corporate sector a great deal of leverage over public policy within nations, there are sufficiently different possible courses of action so that the uniform "race to the bottom" can be resisted with credibility.

It is very important to point out that the social systems of all countries in the west are not uniform. The substantial national differences in social policies in countries within the European Community, despite free trade and the free movement of capital, indicates that the convergence of social welfare policy is not inevitable (despite what many of us argued during the anti-free trade campaign). Not all nations have such raw approaches to the well-being of their citizens as do the U.S. There are differences in social programs that can be tolerated, even within what appears to be a rapid process of economic homogenization. The main point is that we need not allow the existence of international trade agreements to prevent the defense of a decent social system.

Canada is a country that has never been wealthier. The argument must be made, continually, that we can afford to maintain and enhance our social programs. The decisions taken, for example, to reduce the number of people receiving unemployment insurance benefits; to slash federal funding for health and education; and to abandon promises to provide a national childcare scheme are political decisions based on ideological and cultural values. These are decisions that can be contested on moral and democratic bases-they have not been made "inevitable" because of globalization.

Some critics of trade liberalization tend to overstate the powerlessness of nations in the face of corporate power. The ability of nation states to stand up to the corporate

sector's demands, although constrained, is still strong-if there is a political will. Because government remains the primary avenue for people within a nation for addressing their interests, it is critical that political action focus on ensuring that government does act in people's interests. By maintaining the "watchdog" roles that are so familiar to feminists, we can focus on fighting increased secrecy and falling health and green standards.

At the international level, national governments are all that exist to represent the collective point of view of people of a nation. While it is important to recognize Quebec's right to self-determination, it is equally important that all of us work to resist the political fragmentation that is occurring in English Canada. This fragmentation accelerates as each region demands more and more autonomy over social and economic programs. While the Canadian government continues to be a champion of trade liberalization and, in some circumstances, is far more ardent than even the U.S. in pursuing new free trade deals, this does not mean that some time in the future Canada could not take a different lead in shaping international institutions. To encourage this shift, we not only need a strong federal government, but one that is truly democratic and represents the will of this nation at the international level. Democratic representation has not occurred with trade liberalization issues: people within Canada repeatedly have voiced their opposition to free trade, yet the government continues to support the interests of the corporate sector.

We are all aware that our world, as troubled as it is, can become even worse. We feel that the actions of people should be able to make a difference. They can, but only if we can devise ways to replicate, at the international level, those initiatives that have served to control corporate power within our country.

*Marjorie Griffin Cohen is an economist who is a professor of Women's Studies and Political Science at Simon Fraser University.*

*Laurell Ritchie is a labour representative and works for the Canadian Auto Workers.*

*Michelle Swenarchuk is an lawyer who works for the Canadian Environmental Law Association.*

*Leah Vosko holds a Canadian Research Chair in Women's Studies at York University.*

*All were active in NAAC served on is Employment and Economy Committee, and have written extensively on women and trade.*

*'This article was written in 1998 for the National Action Committee on the Status of Women and is reprinted with permission from the authors.*