



*Alternatives  
for the  
Americas*

G E N D E R E Q U I T Y

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# Background

The globalization that characterizes the contemporary world is provoking significant changes occurring at an accelerated rate. Economic integration schemes in the American continent, arising from the regional and bilateral free trade agreements and the policies of the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), have brought with them processes of social exclusion and polarization. However, their effects have not been homogenous and acquire distinct depths, forms and meanings according to the contexts in which they are inserted. The American continent is a mosaic of cultures and races, indigenous peoples and African descendents, and economic, social and ecological realities, in which globalization takes on specific traits. This diversity is also expressed in gender relations, which are a fundamental component of the economic and social organization of the region's nations and peoples.

The changes which have occurred in the lives of women and men over the past twenty years are not the simple result of the free market economy. The decade of the 1990s and these first years of the new century have also been marked by social mobilization to defend the exercise of integral human rights: economic, social, labor, cultural and environmental, as well as political and civil rights, as the standard and framework which should guide development strategies. The social mobilization of female workers and *campesinas*, and indigenous and urban-popular women, together with the feminist movement, have achieved the placement of a broad range of proposals for the advancement of gender equity in the national and international political agendas.

The proposals to achieve social and gender equity are often built against the tide of growing inequalities characterizing the globalized world. The concentration of wealth and power, exacerbation of both public and private violence, imposition of cultural models promoting consumerism and aimed at standardizing lifestyles, increasing poverty, deterioration of natural resources and sustainable forms of production, and prevalence of discrimination (for motives of gender, race, age, sexual orientation, or indigenous or African-American ethnicity), coexist with the conviction of broad population sectors that "another America is possible." This obligates us to identify the effects of the neoliberal model which are common for all women and men, while also analyzing the specific forms acquired by gender inequities and building alternatives to eradicate them.



## *The repercussions of structural adjustment for women*

The structural adjustment policies of the 1980s and early 1990s paved the way for negotiation, signature and instrumentation of the free trade agreements and the intensification of foreign investments associated with those agreements. The adjustment programs were oriented to promote structural transformations in economies, including redefinition of the State role, modification of

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The negative balances that characterized the so-called “lost decade” work in detriment to the possibilities of greater empowerment and autonomy for women incorporating within the worst segments of the labor market. Their incorporation not only has not relieved their housework burden, but that work has actually increased due to the shrinking of the State.

legal frameworks in particular in reference to the regulation and control of strategic resources, and reorientation of production in developing countries toward the export sector. More concretely, the adjustment programs meant drastic reductions in price subsidies, especially of agricultural products and basic services, and a strong drop in public investments in infrastructure, education and health.

A greater proportion of the social costs of reproduction and maintenance of the workforce were transferred to the “private” sphere, with the consequence that the economic and social value of this contribution has become even more invisible. Women, who traditionally — and still — are responsible for a large part of social reproduction,<sup>1</sup> saw their labor burdens increase to replace a State which reduced and limited its functions. Women absorbed the impact of structural adjustment by working longer and harder both in and outside the home.

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<sup>1</sup> Social reproduction refers to the whole of activities, generally carried out in the home, which allow human beings to satisfy their daily needs such as food preparation, cleaning, healthcare, childcare, and care of the elderly.

## *The gender impacts of the free trade agreements*

The beginning of the 1990s was accompanied by the initiation of negotiations of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the first such agreement of the continent, which has been followed by several others within the same scheme. The promises of economic growth which would translate into better levels of social well-being, not only have not been fulfilled, but the negative effects of these agreements have been added to old problems such as the enormous external debt burden—in some countries transformed into or accompanied by heavy internal debt—with the exacerbation of the economic dependence of the majority of, if not all, Latin American and Caribbean countries. The populations of the United States and Canada have not enjoyed improvements from the free trade agreements either. More than 37 million people in the world's wealthiest country are officially classified as poor and this figure increases year after year. The well-paid jobs for low-qualified operators in heavy industry, which once elevated the level of the United States middle class, have virtually disappeared and continue to do so. Since 2001, the United States has lost more than 2.7 million jobs in the manufacturing sector (Reuter Noticias, 2005).

Latin America and the Caribbean grew from 620 billion dollars in 1995 to 752 billion in 2003. By that year, Brazil's debt reached 235 billion dollars, followed by Mexico with 149 billion and Argentina with 145 billion (CEPAL, 2004).

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Female labor participation went from 39% in 1990 to 44.7% in 1998 with an annual increase of almost 5%, while that of men during the same period remained stable at levels around 75% (ILO, 2005). In Canada and the United States, female economic participation rates are higher, at 57.5% and 59.2% respectively in 2004 (ILO, 2004).



## *Female employment and labor market*

One of the most important changes in women's participation in the economy is produced in this economic context: their massive and accelerated integration into the labor market, both formal and informal, and in both the urban and rural spheres.

**U**rban informal employment in Latin America and the Caribbean increased from 42.8% to 46.7% in 2003. By that year, female informal employment was 50.1%, while that of men reached 44.1%.

This intensification of women's integration to the labor market is combined with the increase of women's access to distinct levels of education and other advancements achieved in this period. Nevertheless, the advantages of obtaining their own incomes are limited or in fact reverted by the

quality of the jobs generated, characterized by their precarious and informal status. The labor flexibility implanted by the new production schemes make women's integration into the workforce possible, but in frankly exploitative conditions. Low wages, poorly-paid piecework or work out of the home, extra long workdays, and job instability and rotation, are some of the characteristics of a female labor force which is flexible and inclined to accept conditions which allow it to combine housework with that carried out outside the home. These conditions are repeated in micro-industries and are accentuated in the export-oriented *maquiladora* assembly-line manufacturing industry, which for many years was the primary source of formal employment for women in various countries, especially in Central America and Mexico.

Women's incomes are 75% lower than those of men. This percentage improves in the case of more highly educated women (Grynspar, 2003).

Furthermore, women continue to obtain wages inferior to those paid to men, and they are employed in traditionally female branches and sectors (Birgin, 2001). At the same time, education, health, and social security services are in



subject deterioration, or access to them has been significantly restricted, as in the reforms to the pension and retirement systems. This decline in social services is added to the attempts to privatize health, education, water, and other services to leave them subject to the free play of the market like any other “merchandise.”

### *Social inequalities and poverty*

Concentration of wealth and expansion of poverty have been the signs accompanying world-scale encroachment of the neoliberal model. Inequalities have been accentuated in our continent, considered the region with the greatest social disparities in the world. Poverty reaches its greatest proportions in rural areas, especially those inhabited by indigenous and Afro-mestizo populations. The urban poverty, including that present in the developed countries of North America, is also worrisome. There are more poor women than men, including a greater proportion of impoverished households headed by women.

**M**ore than 200 million people were poor in 1990 (48.3%), and according to CEPAL estimates this number reached 225 million in 2003 (43.9%) (CEPAL, 2003).

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### *Women in rural regions and their intellectual property rights*

Three out of ten persons in Latin America and the Caribbean live in rural areas and depend on agriculture, fishing, livestock, forestry, tourism, and other activities for their subsistence. The rules established for the free trade agreements, such as NAFTA and other bilateral agreements, have wrought havoc in the lives of women and men in the countryside, who have faced an accelerated increase in imported agricultural products and the opening of borders to the



**Levels of exchange and trade dependency of Latin American and Caribbean countries in relation with the United States.**

Percentage of total exports whose destination is the United States:

Mexico, Haiti and Honduras: *More than 50%*

Costa Rica, Venezuela, Colombia and the majority of the members of the Central American Common Market and the Caribbean Community: *Between 25 and 50%*

The countries of MERCOSUR, Chile, Panama and Peru: *Less than 25%.*

Fuente: Red Internacional de Género y Comercio. 2003.

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large agro-industrial and agro-trade companies. In the rural regions, it is common to find a dynamic agro-industrial sector linked to export crops, controlled by large national and transnational capitals, and a severely straggling traditional sector, resulting in lost food security. The intensification of female participation in field work and other rural tasks obeys a family poverty-relief strategy and the decrease of agricultural and fishing incomes. Some calculations indicate that the women of the continent contribute close to 40% of food production and their contribution to poverty alleviation is significant. Micro-enterprises and self-employment contribute continuously more income

sources, especially for poor women. However, the small projects have low possibilities for success because local, national and international markets are dominated by the giants who control the agro-food sectors, against which it is impossible to compete.

Women's right to land ownership, loan access, water source concessions, biodiversity, and access to other natural resources, lag far behind the rhythm of women's contribution to the rural economy. Programs promoting joint property titles to family land, so that ownership be officially shared by women and men, face legal, political and cultural obstacles that redound in a lack of economic and social recognition of women's productive role. That role, and women's traditional backyard activities and household work, are not taken into consideration in allocation of land ownership titles or usufructuary rights to water, forests and other resources. On the other hand, the rules imposed by



the free trade agreements on intellectual property rights open the doors for transnational companies to patent and appropriate the genetic resources and traditional knowledge of the indigenous communities.

### *Migration: new and old problems for women and men*

Migration is an escape valve amidst the decline of the agricultural sector that combines with the sustained demand for cheap and flexible labor in the United States. The flow of Latin American and Caribbean male and female workers to that country grows and maintains itself, despite reinforced security and border-control measures implemented in recent years. The money sent by Latin American and Caribbean migrants to their communities of origin reached 45.8 billion dollars in 2004 (IDB, 2005) and constitutes an important proportion of the national foreign exchanges and economies in El Salvador, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and other countries. The proportion of men who immigrate—especially without legal documents—continues to be higher than that of women, but many young women and even entire families move internally to work in the maquila industry, as export-crop agricultural field hands, or as domestic workers. The figures indicate that gender discrimination factors are reproduced in jobs occupied by Latin American and Caribbean female migrants in the United States (Gammage, 2004) who occupy the lowest-paid jobs, together with children. Employment conditions are also disadvantaged for women in agro-industrial companies in their countries of origin. The difficulties encountered for the return of male migrants often result in abandonment of their homes of origin, contributing to increase the number of rural homes headed by women who are forced to assume the responsibility to sustain their families in very precarious conditions.

**S**ome 25 million Latin American and Caribbean adults live outside their countries of origin. Two out of three of these regularly send money to their families (IDB, 2005).



The growing military presence, as an act of domination over our peoples, has contributed to the sexual abuse of women, girls and boys, and to increased incidence of prostitution and violence. Along the borders, trafficking of persons has intensified, with specific dangerous consequences for women.

In our America, feminicides increased following the establishment of neoliberal policies and with the tolerance of our governments. The State of Law in our countries is limited to the discourse, because the reality is characterized by impunity and lack of security in our homes, on the streets, and in women's lives in general.

It is clear that the current continental economic integration scheme is disadvantaged for women and does not contribute to reduce social and gender inequities. Alternatives must urgently be promoted which effectively lead toward profound cultural changes to eliminate the discrimination of women and contribute to the construction of a more dignified and equitable society.

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### *Guiding principles*

To advance toward economic integration schemes which are inclusive, democratic, and respectful of the social and cultural diversity of the countries of the Americas, guiding principles must be adopted to constitute a frame of reference for analysis, proposals, and action toward a new globalization. Some of the guiding principles oriented to diminish and eliminate the gender asymmetries are:

1. Gender equity is a crucial dimension of democracy, social justice, sustainability, and the eradication of social inequality. The gender equity approach stems from recognition of existing disparities between men and women, analyzing the differences between persons throughout their life cycle, and advocates for an equitable appreciation of the masculine and the feminine, vindicating a fair division of roles, tasks and responsibilities in the public and the household spheres, and aspiring to a balanced distribution of power between women and men.



2. Integral human rights should be placed at the center of development strategies and policies, understood as a fundamental framework for coexistence among people and as an ethical directive predominated by a vision which is humanistic, pacific, and respectful of nature. Full exercise of women's economic, political, civil, labor, cultural and environmental rights can only be achieved following eradication of discrimination, subordination, and gender violence.
3. The State has the fundamental role to rectify inequalities, for which its policies should be oriented to guarantee the conditions for equality of opportunities between men and women. A democratic State promotes society's participation in the formulation, execution and evaluation of public policies, and guarantees that this participation be representative of the different groups and persons integrating society.
4. Integration of economic, political and social aspects constitutes the fundamental basis of a new development paradigm. Inequalities arising from gender, race, indigenous or African ethnicity, or other motives, do not constitute separate social issues, but in fact link to a new concept of development in which the production of goods and services is oriented to the well-being of the people. In this way, the market and cooperation among nations constitute a means for satisfaction of human needs and are at their service.
5. Modification of the structural causes of inequality requires the implementation of profound economic reforms linked with social policies. Charity-type and focalized approaches must be replaced with programs and actions which focus on improving quality of life. Gender-sensitive budgets guarantee allocation of the necessary resources for those programs which address women's specific needs and to finance compensatory measures (affirmative actions) tending to promote equity between men and women.
6. The economic value of housework should be reflected in national accounts so that women's important contribution to the economy be made visible. Domestic relations should be restructured so that housework no longer fall exclusively within women's responsibilities, to allow women the free exercise of their citizenship.



7. At the same time, a new culture must be promoted in reference to women's and men's productive and reproductive roles in order to foment that all members of society and the family assume the co-responsibility of social reproduction.
8. Women's incorporation into the labor market makes it necessary to develop new forms of productive and union organization in which services linked to the denominated economy of care (childcare and education, care of the elderly and the ill, household cleaning tasks, etcetera) form a central part of worker benefits. The adjustment of union structures to respond to the new reality should include promotion of gender equity in negotiations of collective contracts and internal regulations and the adoption of a culture of cooperation to facilitate women's participation in decision-making and in leadership positions.
9. If people's well-being is considered the ultimate goal of economic and development policies, the international conventions and treaties which refer to the fulfillment of human rights, poverty reduction, elimination of inequalities, and the pursuit of sustainability, should prevail over the trade agreements. In reference to women's economic, political, labor, social and cultural rights, agreements such as the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Beijing Action Platform, and the Cairo and Copenhagen agreements, among others, should have preeminence in the resolution of trade and investment conflicts and controversies. At the same time, these international consensuses should regulate and be considered in the economic and trade collaboration agreements established between countries.

### • Objectives

The guiding principles toward a new model of relations among the countries of the continent must be accompanied by objectives which foster the generation of social mobilization capable of opening opportunities and spaces for society's participation—including women and men—in the design of the international trade agreements and treaties as well as the national public policies



which sustain them. The objectives enunciated below outline the action program of the Women's Committee of the Continental Social Alliance:<sup>2</sup>

1. Participate in the construction of the social subject woman and in campaigns and actions in opposition to the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA), the regional and bilateral agreements currently under negotiation primarily with the United States and the European Union, and the general services agreements of the World Trade Organization (WTO), in the measure in which they reproduce exclusionary and inequitable schemes.
2. In the cases of possible renegotiation of existing free trade and investment agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), promote incorporation of the gender perspective in concordance with the guiding principles. In particular, chapters referring to investments, agriculture, and services such as health, food, water, and education should be excluded from all agreements.
3. Actively participate in construction of an alternative integration model that radically modifies the current logic in which "free trade" agreements are negotiated and signed.
4. Democratize and reorient negotiation processes and practices in international trade relations so they be carried out in open and transparent manners, and demand that women and their organizations participate in proposals, negotiation, and decision-making on trade agreements.
5. Undertake and strengthen studies and research that analyze the social impacts of macroeconomic and trade policies from a gender perspective, to identify the needs of men and women in order to formulate inclusive alternative models. Prioritize the collection of information disaggregated by sex to facilitate the analysis and exchange of this information among countries of the continent.
6. Demand that the economic and trade ministries incorporate the theme of gender equity as a sphere of their competence. In turn, the institutions

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<sup>2</sup> These objectives have been adopted from various documents of the member organizations of the Women's Committee of the Continental Social Alliance.



and mechanisms responsible to promote gender equity at the national and international levels should address macroeconomic issues as part of the backbone of their policies and programs. For that purpose, the mechanism that guarantees the transversality of the gender equity focus must be raised to constitutional rank and be incorporated in all spheres, without being considered a segregated topic.

7. Promote labor reforms that guarantee women's human rights and their fulfillment. The central aspects of this issue are the prohibition and sanction of sexual harassment, pregnancy test requirements, child labor, and extended workdays. Social security benefits should be effective in the case of temporary contracts and flexible employment situations such as half-shifts and work carried out from the home. The right to equal wage for equal work should be effective and gender slants should be eliminated. In addition, occupational segmentation should be eradicated, especially in cases in which it propitiates that women be occupied in lower-paid and less-prestigious economic branches and sectors.
8. Identify the limitations and opportunities for women of the current economic structure to promote that their integration to remunerated activities be based on equality of opportunities and on non-discrimination.
9. Generate effective mechanisms for greater access for women to research, education, and technical, administrative and scientific training, so they may acquire knowledge and skills which facilitate their access to well-paid activities and leadership and decision-making positions.
10. Promote reforms to laws and agrarian and civil codes to remove the legal and cultural obstacles which limit women's land ownership rights. Said reforms should also guarantee equitable access to and control of other natural resources such as water, forests, biodiversity, and wild flora and fauna.
11. Promote sustainable productive and trade activities developed by women through the strengthening of local and regional markets and by facilitating their access to international markets. Reinforcement of productive chains gives economic and environmental viability to women's and mixed productive projects.



12. Recognize women's significant role in the production of food and other agricultural, fishing and livestock products, demanding State support for their access to loans, technical assistance, subsidies, and training.
13. Demand that countries which have not yet done so sign and ratify the international agreements that guarantee indigenous peoples' rights, and promote the promulgation of laws that guarantee the intellectual property rights of communities over biological and genetic resources, recognizing women's contribution to conservation of biodiversity.
14. Orient that social security system reforms guarantee their solidity, quality, universality, and intergenerational solidarity, in the understanding that social security is a responsibility of society, and therefore merits State intervention. A strong protection policy is required which socializes the costs of maternity, childcare, and care for the sick and the elderly.
15. Migration policies should guarantee respect for the integral human rights of migrants, regardless of their legal status, and should consider the specific conditions faced by women especially when they are accompanied by minor children. The labor and social benefit conditions of the countries which employ migrants should extend to them regardless of their legal condition.
16. Demand the de-militarization of borders and within countries, and the elimination of foreign military bases. Promote programs which facilitate the free transit of persons who provide their services in other countries. These policies should include programs for the eradication of gender violence, prostitution, and human trafficking. Apply pressure so that feminicides, tolerated by governments, do not remain unpunished and be eradicated from women's lives.
17. Carry out workshops, meetings and seminars and elaborate dissemination materials that promote social mobilization and reveal the links between the daily problems of men and women in rural and urban communities with the free trade and investment agreements, external and internal debt, and militarization.



18. Foment policies and projects that value, strengthen, and guarantee the culture, roots, and cosmovision of the diverse peoples of our continent, in particular from the sensitivity and expression of women. Favor appropriate media communication mechanisms through which the gender perspective is manifested and public opinion is influenced from this vision.
19. Weave a broad policy of alliances with social movements — including mixed, women's, feminist, and academic actors — in each country and at the continental and world scales, to generate solid mobilization toward the construction of a new continental pact.

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