

Economic Alternatives for Gender and Social Justice: Voices and Visions from India and Latin America

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Introduction

With the dominant neoliberal model of the economy causing one crisis after another, the search for alternative development pathways has become an urgent necessity. By linking the macro and the micro economic levels, WIDE wants to facilitate and support processes which challenge mainstream economic thinking from a feminist perspective and start thinking outside the box. In many parts of the world women are developing conceptual and practical alternatives in a local context, in everyday life or on a macro level. By compiling experiences from different regions and countries, promoting transnational feminist dialogues and linking alternatives, WIDE wishes to contribute to the “fierce struggle to recreate the world” (Paolo Freire) and to the decolonisation of the mind.

This briefing paper is based on two earlier publications by WIDE: *In Search of Economic Alternatives for Gender and Social Justice: Voices from India* and *Economic Alternatives for Gender and Social Justice: Voices and Visions from Latin America*. These publications contain short articles collected from India and Latin America.ⁱ The essays not only suggest new and alternative ideas to achieve sustainable development, social and gender justice in the context of the globalised neoliberal model, at the same time they draft some general guiding principles and building blocks for identifying and shaping pathways towards an alternative micro- and macro-economic development agenda. Each of them proves that women are developing transformative agency on a conceptual and a practical level, demystifying the TINA ideology (“**T**here **I**s **N**o **A**lternative!”) and are on their way to make TATA a reality: “**T**here **A**re a **T**housand **A**lternatives”.

I. Narratives and Experiences from India



The 12 short essays from India explore economic structures and policies as well as grassroots projects and micro-level initiatives by women. They could be entry points for a transformation towards more gender-just macro-economic policies and for alternative development paths at the local and national level. Their reflections start from two different points: 1) the neoliberal paradigm of development and flawed economic policies or 2) women's micro-economic realities, their struggle for livelihood and food sovereignty, and their strategies to get access to employment, resources, rights and bargaining power. The perspectives for change are double-edged in the sense that they argue *within* and *against* the mainstream economic processes and neoliberal policies. Not all of them go *beyond* the existing system. Some focus entirely on particular improvements to be made for poor people, more gender equality and recognition for women's contribution to wealth and value creation within the market and dominant development model.

The 12 interventions predictably cover a broad range of political positions and perspectives, from Keynesianism to Marxism, from Gandhian to feminist and deconstructionist approaches. A guiding principle, however, is that each alternative economic practice or policy has to include and benefit the weakest economic actors: women, *dalits* and *adivasi*. In this intersecting approach gender is not tackled as an isolated issue. Alternative practices counter power imbalances and policies that work increasingly in favour of capital, the resource- and energy-intensive industrial model of production and the appropriation of community resources. They are based on cooperation instead of competition. The different perspectives and practices are at different formative stages. However, they have four cross-cutting concerns in common which can be considered building blocks for alternative economic paradigms:

1. Organising and Voice



Alternatives need voice and space. Organising and building a collective identity, self-representation and visibility are needed to challenge powerful stakeholders or vested interests and to apply pressure on governance regimes. Collective agency and empowerment is seen as a crucial tool to make a difference towards a democratisation of the economy which includes women informal workers, peasants and street vendors, *dalits* and *adivasi* in decision-making processes. The new social media could play an important role in these processes of claiming rights and accountability. SEWA is an outstanding example of how a community-based organisation developed a multitude of initiatives, collective support mechanisms and bargaining power from the bottom up to influence policymaking at local, national and international levels.

2. Reclaiming Commons and Community Control

Reclaiming commons such as water, land, seeds and knowledge is a strategic pillar towards livelihood rights and community control over resources and development paths. The *sanghams* of the Deccan Development Society in Andhra Pradesh have set up a self-reliant and food-sovereign agricultural system which is based on land and seeds as common community-managed resources. The collective management generates its own way of efficiency and productivity increasingly independent from outside markets, the central government and droughts. The locally controlled and community- or women-owned initiatives offer new perspectives different from global marketisation, industrialisation and privatisation. These are steps forward towards a democratisation of the economy and decentralised solutions that centre around people's needs, and are driven and managed by communities rather than by big corporations.



3. Challenging Policymaking

It is the State's responsibility to redistribute wealth, welfare and power, and to balance various interests and the growing economic and social inequalities. Government expenditure, public provision of services and State regulation of markets have a crucial role to play, instead of the State withdrawing from its economic, regulatory and social tasks within the neoliberal policy framework of the Washington Consensus. Public policies at local and national levels have to be both enabling and constructive; they have to assist building people's control over commons and vital public services, and to empower marginal groups in society. Legislation on local community rights as well as on women's economic rights are indispensable reference systems for the enforcement of women's empowerment, their entitlements to land, water and public services, and to improve their employment and income opportunities. Women's collective empowerment and tools of intervention such as gender budgets are needed to (re)gain public control.

4. Social and Economic Security

Security in a broader sense and in various dimensions – livelihood, food, income, social, and rights – is a precondition to overcome poverty, marginalisation and vulnerability. Two key elements for ensuring security are employment and access to commons. The focus is on women's labour (and its recognition) in the informal sector and precarious forms of women's employment that lack any security and render women poor and powerless. Again, the State has a significant role to play to enforce with policy and legal measures the multidimensional security as each citizen's right.



These four elements do not draft a coherent paradigm but mark transformative entry points and cornerstones on the way to a more socially equal, gender-just and democratic economy. They are a jigsaw puzzle in which a number of pieces are still missing. This is just the beginning of an exploratory journey to outline alternative models which offer space to the diversity of local initiatives and a transformative perspective on various heterodox economic concepts.

II. Voices and Visions from Latin America

The eight articles from Latin America bear witness to the transformative power of women's struggles on the ground. They showcase alternatives to the neoliberal economic model currently being designed and implemented by grassroots women in strategic alliance with scholars, researchers, members of national parliaments and activists committed to social and gender justice.

These alternatives aim to construct a paradigm based on the principles of redistributive justice and an equal share of the responsibilities associated with social reproduction. Women's transformative potential is determined by their power to design and implement holistic approaches that take full stock of the multidimensional nature of economic development, the power relations affecting economic policies and practices and the complex heterogeneity of women on the ground.

As a whole, the eight experiences offer the following insights which can be useful to strengthen alternative economic paradigms in the region and globally:

1. Transforming from Below: Solidarity Economy from the Perspective of Grassroots Women

The experiences expose the fissures of the capitalist system from below, unveiling the logics of domination at work in local spaces and their interconnection with power structures at the macro level. They tell us that the current neoliberal model is not only unsustainable; it is also eroding the very fabric of social relations. Most importantly, it is hampering women's right to a life free from economic, cultural and social violence.



In their struggle to transform the economy so that it reflects the complex reality of women's everyday existence, women propose to move *with* and *beyond* empowerment. Agency – or the power to subvert unjust policies – is a fundamental long-term political project. The goal is to redefine the economy so that it mirrors women's rights and aspirations as well as the broader social context in which economic relations are embedded. The transformative potential of women lies also in their power to transform social conflict into opportunities for gender and social justice. In some cases, they have effectively intervened and transformed the very structures of local markets and the mindset of those power agents shaping them.

2. Food Sovereignty from a Grassroots Women's Rights Perspective

Women not only reclaim their right to commons, they are also proposing reforms to the current agricultural model so that it incorporates the principles of food sovereignty on equal terms with food security. A key issue is that sustained collaboration towards the construction of just and sustainable development models is crucial to ensure resilient food systems and biodiversity. The claim is loud and clear: women have the right to produce according to their development priorities, and governments must enforce economic and development models to guarantee their entitlements, incorporate their knowledges and reflect their concern with solidarity.

From a rights-based perspective, women propose implementing models that ensure women's right to adequate food, health and water, as enshrined in UN conventions and protocols on economic, cultural and social rights. They also stress the urgent need for governments and international financial institutions to implement commitments made in the framework of women's social, cultural and economic rights (CEDAW and Beijing) and with conventions protecting the rights of indigenous and Afro-descendent women as people.

3. Decolonising and 'Depatriarchalising' the Nation-State and the Cultural Mindset of Latin America

The experiences reposition the State as the key regulator of the economy and the one that must ensure the equal distribution of wealth and resources. They also propose decolonising and 'depatriarchalising' the State and people's mindsets. By this they mean to dismantle the colonial legacies affecting the continent. They want to put an end to gender blindness, racism, class segmentation and the heteronormative patriarchal culture shaping discriminatory economic policymaking and practices.

Women argue that it is not enough to transform the economy; mindset-shifting is a crucial political goal, and it is tied to women's empowerment and their struggle to build a just and truly inclusive society. The proposals also emphasise the role of critical consciousness in processes of social transformation – in particular, in cases when hegemonic power structures must be dismantled.



4. Beyond Gender: the Intersectionality of Power in Mainstream Economic Thinking



Incorporating gender justice in economic thinking is not enough. Manifold discriminations impinge on women's everyday existence, in private spaces as well as in key sectors of the economy. The proposal is to incorporate more than one variable of inequality in economic analysis. The major argument is that in the current neoliberal economic model, class, racial, patriarchal and heterosexist discrimination collaborate under a common banner: profit maximisation at the lowest cost possible and regardless of its human consequences. Because of their constructed inferiority, black and indigenous women pay a heavy price: on the one hand, they must fight machismo within their own communities; on the other, they must contend with the structural racism affecting society at large.

5. Towards a New Pattern of Accumulation

Women and their strategic allies are also working to deconstruct the current pattern of capital accumulation. This transformative thinking situates the debate on economic alternatives in the framework of broad and intertwined social aspirations: social and gender justice, nature's rights and eradication of violence. Major elements of this new thinking are:

- A new approach to the relationship between capital and labour: this includes ensuring that men and women workers are the primary beneficiaries of their work and guaranteeing their right to invest the surplus in the social well-being of their families/communities.
- Production and social reproduction are two humps of the same camel.
- A two-fold ethic of care (caring for human life and nature): in this specific sense, the articles situate women's approach to the care economy in a conceptual and value frame that recalls the paradigm of the *buen vivir* ('good living' – caring for human life and nature).
- Policies must incorporate women's knowledges of sustainable solutions to the current food and climate crises.
- Patterns based upon local and national development agendas and people's rights.

The eight experiences show that in Latin America women are proposing transformative socio-economic development micro-models that can effectively enforce human rights – women's rights in particular. If scaled up to the macro level, these experiences can furnish new insights into sustainable ways out of the entanglement of crises affecting our world.

Commonalities	India	Latin America
Overall goal	An inclusive economy which benefits the weakest sections of society	Society of redistributive justice, freedom from violence –especially from structural violence – by the neoliberal economy which perpetuates social, cultural and racial privileges.
Empowerment	Collective power based on organising, to confront oppression, reclaim commons and struggle for women’s and workers’ rights	Power to transform discrimination and oppression: at the individual and collective level and in multiple spaces (private and public)
Agency	Women as political actors with collective identities, represent themselves, organise, are visible, exert pressure on policymakers and bargain for a fair deal	Women as agents of change, meaning personal and social transformation, especially transforming/reversing social injustices
Intersecting factors of discrimination and violence	Perspective of socially and economically deprived groups: women, <i>dalits</i> , <i>adivasi</i> ; gender is not tackled as an isolated issue	Focus on indigenous and Afro-descendent people, link between social justice and gender justice; cultural, political and economic aspects are intertwined
Resistance/critique of neoliberal paradigm	Challenge policymaking, pressure on the state, critique within and beyond, link micro- and macro-economics	Radical anti-capitalist, anti-racist critique among grassroots women and more progressive feminist scholars
Democratisation	Democratisation of the economy through empowerment, self-representation and organising of women, negotiation of collective rights; participatory, gender-responsive budgets are a democratic tool	Transformation of the economy according to women’s diversity; democracy is defined as women’s active citizenship, equality, freedom from violence, and the right to economic justice without depriving anyone of his her/her own right to it
Community control, commons	Reclaiming land, forests, water, local biodiversity and seeds; strong public sector and redistribution, public control and accountability of the State	The State (not the market) is repositioned as regulator of the economy
Autonomy and emancipatory knowledges	Food and seed sovereignty based on local knowledge, integrated resource use systems, adjusted to nature	Validation of the discredited knowledges of indigenous and Afro-descendent women (especially about sustainable food systems and biodiversity management)
Security	Social and economic security, livelihood rights, access to commons and public services, recognition and fair payment of work	Critique of austerity plans causing budgetary cuts needed for social investment
Entitlements	Land rights, access to commons such as water, forests and biodiversity, workers’ rights and minimum wages	Women’s political, cultural and productive rights: land tenure rights, control over assets and resources etc.
Value-based economy	Cooperation, solidarity, inclusiveness	Dignity, solidarity, inclusive justice, do-no-harm policies

Closing Remarks

The starting point for the essays from the two different regions is the prevailing development model which is governed by neoliberal policies and the rationale of global growth- and profit-driven markets. Against manifold constraints and despite the impediments generated by the global systemic crisis, women are empowering themselves and trying to build some counterforce against the overwhelming market forces. Most of those alternatives are born out of women's struggle for survival, the defence of livelihood resources or their painstaking search to improve their situation.

Responses to the dominant economic model vary: some of the authors construct alternatives of socio-economic improvement or emancipation from within the current model, others adopt hybrid models, and others, such as the Guatemalan experience in Latin America and the food sovereignty concept from Andhra Pradesh, propose alternative structures which are anti-systemic in that they reject the current pattern of capital accumulation engrained in the development model implemented by the State. At the same time, they are working towards the mindset-shifting required to ensure a culture of inclusive socio-economic well-being and gender and environmental justice.

WIDE believes that the insights and proposals presented by our allies from India and Latin America can energise global debates on alternatives to the neoliberal economic model while enhancing the political relevance of development and economic policymaking. We hope that this briefing provides a stepping stone on both paths.

ⁱ The first publication is a collection of 12 essays Indian authors edited by Christa Wichterich. The second publication contains eight articles by Latin American authors and an introductory chapter by Patricia Muñoz Cabrera. Full versions of both publications can be found at <http://www.wide-network.org/>.