

## 9<sup>th</sup> WAMM: Barbados: Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers' Meeting

Statement at Roundtable 2 on The Economic Crisis, Informal Work and Social Protection by Dr Marilyn Waring, 8 June 2010

The economic crisis with which we are concerned has become a public debt crisis of major proportions, with significant repercussions for social protection. What began as a financial crisis in the banking sector resulted in bailouts for those who already 'had' – investments, paid work, homes, and/or savings. The responses have included expansionary fiscal and monetary stimulus – for example, the one off payment in Australia to every family – well timed before the beginning of the school year, and neo liberal austerity responses – for example from Canada, New Zealand and the UK, much of this from the same ideological text books that brought the crisis.

In New Zealand the reaction has been to increase indirect taxes, a regressive step in which the poorest households pay more, and corporate tax rates have been cut at the same time as social protection measures have also been cut. To date there have been very shallow and limited responses to re regulation to prevent it from all happening again. The aim is to 'stabilize' the problem, to return to 'normal', not to question the paradigm and structure of that system and its' values. The current 'progress' measurements to which the patriarchs are wedded, does not count the single largest sector of the world's economy, the unpaid household sector, and thus it is left out of strategic policy making, . The GDP statistics also encourages and rewards the 'mining' of the planet in a way that is environmentally unsustainable, socially corrupting, and in a way which generates inequalities.

In 2009 the ILO reported that at the global level, the share of vulnerable employment in total female employment was 52.7%, (49.1% for men) and is estimated to grow to 54.7% in the economic crisis. This growth in informal work is mirrored by a rising number of adults in the so called developed world working non standard hours, partly in response to consumer demand for services in the evenings, weekends and holidays.

Canadian research shows that non standard work hours are associated with lower reported health, higher levels of stress, psychological stress, greater depressive symptoms, greater relationship conflict for dual income earners, and lower life satisfaction. Evening work in particular affects child development and security.

There has also been a rise in 'precarious' work, typically work with limited social benefits, job insecurity, short tenure and low wages. These positions are filled in particular by women, immigrants and ethnic minorities. Workers in precarious employment have poorer health, and experience higher levels of stress, mental illness and substance abuse. This work offers poorer access to paid holiday time, paid sick leave, employment insurance, pension and other fringe benefits, and poorer access to training.

We should note well that a ceiling or freeze in public service recruitment **always** increases the number of positions in precarious work, frequently filled by those who

have been displaced by 'restructuring'. The need to have the work done doesn't go away.

There was a crisis in 'care' work even before the public debt crisis, which has just increased this already growing problem. The crisis in care in poorer countries can be linked to many factors, but health emergencies are among this list. With Anita and Robert I have been engaged in work for the Commonwealth Secretariat, which has investigated those who care 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, for those with HIV/AIDS, the invisible factor in all HIV/AIDS plans and programmes. We have found that these are overwhelmingly women and girls, who do not choose to become carers, and do not thus choose to lose all their human rights, which is the outcome. We have found what we call 'capability servitude', and that the advent of HIV/AIDS in households is the beginning of a constant and dynamic diminution of the well being of the carer, and especially of children in the household. We hope this work will be published in the next few months. I think it will be shocking to all of you.

In developed countries with a large aging cohort in the population, this challenge is often 'solved' by employing a paid domestic worker – usually on low wages, with little or no social protection, and too many of these workers are exploited through long working days, little privacy and with sexual harassment. In this context, I want to record my profound apologies to this conference, at which my country has chosen not to be represented, for their vote yesterday at the ILO meeting in Geneva, against the establishment of an international standard of fundamental rights for domestic workers. I want to assure you that the men and women of New Zealand are ashamed, saddened and outraged that the principles which we hold dear, and try to live to, have been abrogated by the government of New Zealand. Research estimates that there are at least 20,000 home based care workers alone in New Zealand, and thousands more who would be covered by this convention. The overwhelming majority of these workers, who are very poorly paid, will be Pacific Islands' women, and other migrant and ethnic women. I want you to know that these workers are also excluded from the anti discrimination provisions of the New Zealand Human Rights Act. Fortunately there were enough votes in favour of the ILO standard for it to proceed. I am hopeful that the WAMM communiqué will be able to urge all Commonwealth countries to adopt this new Convention when promulgated next year.

I am very wary of the consequences of non adoption of this convention. Australia and New Zealand both engage in schemes with Pacific workers for temporary employment visas for agricultural workers, for example, seasonal pruning, picking harvesting of produce. There's an irony in that while Pacific women are overwhelmingly the farmers and gardeners of the region, those on the scheme are overwhelmingly men. However, there's a World Bank proposal floating around for transmigrating Pacific women on the same sort of temporary visa to do the elder care in New Zealand and Australia, in a situation where pay and working conditions in both Australia and New Zealand are so poor it is difficult to attract and retain staff. One of New Zealand's responses to social protection in the public debt crisis has been to cut the hours of entitlements for that care. I would be most concerned for any further consideration of that idea without the human rights of those workers being thoroughly protected.

I also want to raise other issues of social protection in a Pacific context. I work in some places where there is no monetary exchange, and where any forms of transfer payments are decades away. But social protection is found in other ways. Remittances are an element of this many countries share. The same commercial banking system that brought us the crisis has been robbing the remitters for decades, with astronomical fees well in advance of any reasonable profit. I know that DFID, and now AusAID and NZAID, have established websites which display all the rates on offer for remittances, and that some banks have found it possible to move the rates down more than 8%.

In the Pacific the denial of land rights for women is a major challenge for social protection. The land needs to be accessed and controlled for subsistence production, for food and for livelihoods. There are very diverse customary tenure systems for land in the Pacific, but there is one almost constant outcome: the widow is particularly disadvantaged under customary hereditary and tenure rules. In addition, in the courts, widows have been denied benefits of their husband's pension funds, claimed by, for example, the man's father. This has been upheld where Constitutions specifically exempt custom law from discriminatory provisions.

In the Pacific we are also faced with environmental damage undermining social protection. In the Pacific when the loggers are finished, islands no longer have access to the raw materials for subsistence transport, building and construction, wood fuel, the local chemist shop, and edible forest products. The consequences of the invisibility of subsistence production in some parts of the Pacific is to ignore most male, as well as most female, service and production work. Rising sea levels and climate change imperil whole countries. Over fishing by major fleets, the pollution of seas with shipping and recreational transport, affect the availability and quality of foodstuffs necessary for well being.

Too frequently income generation is seen as the only potential response to well being. Women have specific barriers to mobility within the labour market, which inhibits their access to income generation. I am sure I am not the only person here who has seen the income opportunities for mothers resulting, not in the payment of the fees for girls to attend school, but the withdrawal of very young girls from school to care for even younger siblings, so mum can earn her cash. I am thinking here, for example, of the work of mama los frut, in the palm oil plantations of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. Domestic violence is also a crisis facing many countries, and recent research in Samoa, Kiribati, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu is shocking in its data. There are parts of the Pacific which are matrilineal, and there are women with chiefly titles, but this is not often reflected in the treatment of women, who have a subordinate status in the family, exacerbated by neo colonial fundamentalist Christian churches using the Old Testament to justify this violence and treatment. It is vital in the deliberations of the 9<sup>th</sup> WAMM, that we remember that social protection is not just about budgetary redistribution, but much, much more.

In New Zealand and Canada, for example, the budget responses have cut back on the public provision of child care, on funding coalitions providing safe houses for victims of domestic violence. It's pretty difficult to be in steady paid work if you cannot get quality child care, or are regularly beaten.

I think one of the most important lessons – and opportunities – of the current economic situation, is to stop the silo approach to policy making. It begins with throwing out the growth paradigm as the central tenet of all policy making, to get it off its single minded and destructive pedestal, and to battle for an holistic approach to well being, where judgement has to be exercised across a range of qualitative and quantitative data, to make the best policies for the women we seek to serve here. As multi taskers, we know we can do that.