

Gender & Global Corporatization

Editor's Note: This article is excerpted from a working paper by Molly Morgan, Virginia Rasmussen and Mary Zepernick, members of the Challenging Corporate Power: Asserting the People's Rights campaign, with input from members of the U.S. and other WILPF sections.

While the power wielded by giant corporations and its resulting extremes of wealth and poverty are unprecedented in scale, the worldview that supports it reaches back between five and 10 millennia.

WILPF sponsor Starhawk, as well as Riane Eisler and others, describe the "power-over" model of society, which replaced more egalitarian cultures in the transition to large centers of population, with the accumulation of surplus and its accompanying rule-based structures.

As Starhawk puts it in *Dreaming the Dark*, "We like to tell ourselves that there once was a time when we were free, that power-over is a human invention, not an imperative of nature. The story of the rise of power-over is the story of the literal dismemberment of the world, the tearing apart of the fabric of living interrelationships that once governed human life."

The power-over model assigns unequal value to human difference, establishing dominant and subordinate categories and the political concept of "other" as the basis for discrimination and exploitation. Though rooted in male dominance, patriarchal behavior applies to all of us when we exercise power over others and the Earth. Global corporatization is a logical extension of the "dismemberment" that accompanied the development of "civilization." Far from being natural and inevitable, the transnational corporation, with its vast supporting infrastructure, is the most virulent manifestation of power-over to date.

The standard teaching of U.S. history emphasizes wars, land acquisition and industrial "progress" rather than the ongoing struggle of people of color, women, the working class and poor. As these oppressed groups slowly gained ground, the wealthy changed the nature of corporations, whose operations for the first century were restricted and enforced by state-issued charters. After the Supreme Court in 1886 declared the corporate form equivalent to a natural person under the law, people's already limited sovereignty was further subordinated to the large corporation. Thus, a major corporate achievement has been to convert the corporate form from that of a publicly defined institution to one that receives constitutional protection from effective public control.

The primary protection of markets and investments today is in the hands of international institutions that serve the interests of transnational corporations rather than people and planet. Out of the Uruguay Round of negotiations under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the profoundly anti-democratic World Trade Organization was established in 1995. Its authority on behalf of unlimited mobility for capital and production has the legislative, judicial and enforcement power to undermine, in the name of "free trade," national and even local laws passed to protect workers, communities and the environment.

What is the impact on women of so much power vested in a single institution?

Today, what author bell hooks calls the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" dominates not only its own people, but also the less developed nations of the global South. Within all countries, females are the most disadvantaged and exploited, particularly women of color, the poor,

and lesbians. The Women's Caucus of organizations from the South and North attending the Third Ministerial Meeting of the WTO in Seattle made this statement:

"(T)he majority of the world's women and girls are adversely affected by the unequal power

relations created at the national, regional and international levels by the new trade regime . . . We believe the WTO undermines major international agreements that women have worked hard to get their governments to commit to."

The corporate form and its national and international institutional protectors is especially damaging to the lives of women, who comprise the majority of the poor in every country. In the United States, many women work in low-wage categories that are particularly vulnerable to downsizing as corporations compete for "ideal" profit-yielding conditions.

