

Dame Nita Barrow Lecture

Women's Leadership: Catalysts for Change

Toronto, October 1998

Peggy Antrobus

Founder, Women and Development Programme (WAND)

University of the West Indies

Co-Founder, DAWN Network

INTRODUCTION:

I would like to start by saying how proud I am to have been chosen as this year's Dame Nita Barrow Distinguished Visitor. My presentation this evening is my own tribute to a woman whose values and style illustrate the kind of leadership that will move us toward :

A world where inequality based on class, gender, and race is absent from every country, and from the relationships among countries...a world where basic needs become basic rights and where poverty and all forms of violence are eliminated.
(DAWN's vision. Sen & Grown 1987.p.80)

Today our world is further from this vision than when this statement was written as part of the DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era) Platform for the NGO Forum at the Third World Conference on Women held in Nairobi, Kenya, eleven years ago. Nita Barrow was the Convenor of this Forum and left an indelible mark on the international women's movement, setting the standard of leadership by which we are guided today.

CONTEXT: Violence and its Resistance

The context for this presentation is the globalisation of violence and its resistance. This violence, which began with the African slave trade, established a set of colonial relationships which today have grown into a crisis in reproduction: a crisis brought about by the struggle for human survival against a powerful global political economic system.

Michael Chossudovsky in his recent speech in Toronto entitled "Financial Warfare" (September 28, 1998) has described this economic crisis as one "of unprecedented scale leading to the rapid impoverishment of large sectors of the world's population." The current financial chaos is a manifestation of violence. The inability of the International Financial Institutions and governments to find solutions is a manifestation of poor leadership.

Headlines this Thanksgiving week-end illustrate my point. They speak of:

- ▶ **The dire poverty of people living on First Nation reservations in this country: According to a study by the Department of Indian Affairs, the quality of life for on-reserve natives – about 380,000 people – is on a par with Brazil and countries considered to have only a medium level of human development, although Canada has ranked first among 173 countries in the UNDP Human Development Reports for the past 6 years. It draws attention to increasing poverty and the widening gap between rich and poor between and within countries.**

- ▶ **Homelessness:** Toronto is considering the erection of tent cities and trailer parks for the growing number of homeless: in the face of unregulated 20-30% rent increases the numbers of the homeless are expected to grow. “I tried staying in the park but it’s just too cold” said one man being interviewed.
- ▶ **In Russia,** in the wake of the devaluation of the rouble by 250% since August it is now admitted that up to 1.2 million people might have to be evacuated from the northern part of the country as winter approaches.
- ▶ **Violence:** In Bosnia the remains of about 250 victims of the 1992-93 war were found in a mass grave.

These crises are all linked to an economic model which places the interests of capital and profits before those of people. It is a model which, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, has had no serious challenge: throughout the world – even in the most desperate situations in Africa - you hear the mantra “There Is No Alternative”. In Africa it is called the TINA syndrome.

And underlying this model – and the Socialist Alternative – is a pattern of gender relations (relations between men and women based on the way we are socialized) in which everything associated with women is accorded, by society, a lesser value than that which is associated with men. In this model women have the primary responsibility for the care of people but no power to guarantee that this would be given priority in policy-making.

Consider the dominant values underlying what we are offered as the resolution to problems created by this model. In a movie entitled *The Mission*, made some years ago, we see clearly the inadequacy of the alternatives offered by patriarchy. In this film two priests choose different paths to resist an assault by slave traders on native communities in the interior of Brazil. One leads the men of the community in armed resistance. The other leads the women and children in prayer. Both attempts are futile. Neither the sword nor the cross prevented the massacre. What would women have done if they had had the power? If they had not been conditioned to believe that they had to look to these men for their salvation?

Today the same inadequate solutions are imposed: the decision to bomb the Serbs or the decision to hide behind the theology of the market while whole countries collapse and people’s lives are sacrificed by the high-priests of neo-liberalism. What should women do today as they watch their children’s future placed in jeopardy by men who use their power and wealth in the interest of the powerful and the wealthy?

Every day millions of women have to make that choice, however limited or personal this might be, of how to use their power to resist violence. A woman may be highly educated and live in a city; or she may be illiterate and live in a village in Asia or North America. Women’s resistance expresses itself in thousands of small acts: actions which may not be evident, or lend themselves to documentation, but which effectively secure for themselves and those they love the space to be. This is not to be confused with passive resignation. What we see on the surface is not necessarily what is going on. The inner life of women is often a place of steel-strong resistance, a space for developing spiritual strength. As our chairperson this evening, Dr. Yvonne Bobb-Smith, has pointed out in her own research, (1998) the patriarchal family is often the space in which women learn the myriad ways of resistance.

I know two women, both mothers: one works outside the home – breaking the tradition, the other, a traditional housewife, works in the home. On the surface you would say that the career woman is

liberated, her sister the housewife not. The career woman has the education and training to earn a good living; her sister has no formal education but in any event the money she saves her family by sewing their clothes, cooking and cleaning is more than she would earn outside the home. In addition she knits baby clothes and bakes bread for sale.

The wage-earner appears to be completely dominated by her husband: she seems to offer no resistance to his philandering, his excessive drinking, his lavish entertaining. The family is always in debt; but she secures their survival by strengthening her faith. The housewife also appears to acquiesce to the same excesses, but in fact she cultivates a life of her own, an independence of spirit expressed through the relationships she builds in her community: people seek her advice in their dilemmas; her solace in their grief; her guarantee when they need loans. Her respect for people is in inverse relation to their status: she does not hesitate to reprimand her doctor, her priest, her Prime Minister. She reserves her deepest respect for children. Everyone calls her 'tante', 'aunt'. When she dies, hundreds of people come to her funeral but the greatest tribute is paid by a young man in clothes too ragged to join the funeral procession. He stands outside her house and simply says "she was my friend". Both women practiced resistance: one in the cultivation of her faith, the other in the cultivation of her relationship with her community.

Sometimes however, women place their own lives in jeopardy when they resist. In my own family, twenty-five years ago two sisters are murdered in New York because one decides to end an abusive relationship; three weeks ago a daughter-in-law is murdered by a stranger on a beach on a paradise island because she refuses to be raped. Patriarchy does not allow women the right to own their lives.

Violence against women is so much a part of our patriarchal society that it is hardly noticed, except when expressed to the point of death. But it is pervasive: it starts with the devaluation of those attributes of women – nurturing, caring, compassion – it is expressed in the neglect of children and the lack of respect for their mothers. It is reinforced in a thousand ways each day in the privacy of households, and in the public domain through the media, the laws, the schools, the church.

The exploitation of women's time, labour and sexuality lies at the foundation of systems which are exploitative of people who are different from those who wield power. It is expressed in the unwaged work of women in the home; the low wages paid to women in export processing zones and in the use of women's sexuality to extract from women compliance in their own exploitation: it is revealed in the formulation of macroeconomic policies which privilege economic production over social reproduction, and in development strategies predicated on the use of cheap labour and a reserve labour force.

Women's reality reveals the crisis in all its dimensions. Women's reality is relational. It is inextricably linked to the well-being of others. This well-being is related to the economic system (the basis of exchange), to the ecological system (the source of health and livelihood), and to the political system (the foundation of social justice). If the systemic crisis - economic, social, political and environmental - described above is linked to and associated with our gender relations then a change in these relations is central to finding solutions to the crisis. Women's leadership is central to finding solutions not only because it is the exploitation of women that is at the base of our economic system, but because "women stand at the crossroads of production and reproduction, the market and human development, and have the most at stake when these are in conflict with each other" (DAWN, *Markers*, 1995).

But to encourage this leadership we must confront the issue of violence: as I heard Rosemary Brown say many years ago "even the threat of violence is enough to keep women in line".

HOW DO WE PROCEED?

For the first time in history we are approaching the point where women's leadership can make a difference in the promotion of economic justice on a global scale. In earlier historic periods the conditions and the means for women to make this kind of contribution had not evolved. Confined to the private sphere of the household, unable to exercise control over their sexuality or resources, lacking the education and the skills for operating in the public domain, women may have exercised leadership within their households and/or communities but seemed powerless to change the conditions of their lives.

Even as women moved into the public sphere, their perspectives, attitudes and values were often no different from those of the men of their class/race/culture/nationality. Indeed, if they achieved leadership in their field they were most likely to be the strongest upholders of patriarchy: this was often a condition for their success. More often than not, even when women have power it is seldom used to assert or affirm the values associated with their gender roles. Too many women buy into patriarchal values of hierarchy, domination and control.

THE GLOBAL WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

But, over the past 20 years women's resistance has taken on the dimensions of a global movement for change. In the past 15 years we have witnessed the emergence of a women's movement of global proportions. Stimulated by the focus given to the role and status of women within the framework of the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985) women of every age and education, from every country and location, race and ethnicity, class and culture came together on a sustained and consistent basis to focus on their own situation and position. I doubt that the United Nations realised, when they designated 1975 International Women's Year and launched a Decade for Women, that they were unleashing a movement which would change the world!

In the course of those 10 years women from all walks of life, through their activities – action programmes, research, analysis, advocacy, the creative arts and organizing - developed the confidence and the skills which have moved them beyond a concern with their immediate situation to explore the links between their experience and the larger issues of the day – poverty, food security, violence, human rights, debt, macroeconomic policy, environmental degradation. In the process they have redefined concepts and the terms of the debates on these issues.

NEW FRAMEWORKS AND AGENDAS

In 1993, Women from North and South, East and West worked together in the Vienna Conference on Human Rights, and later in Cairo at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and in Beijing at the Fourth World Conference on Women to expand the concept of Human Rights by the inclusion of women's rights, sexual and reproductive rights with the other categories of human rights. A Women's Human Rights agenda gives us an overarching framework for advancing the universal, inalienable and indivisible rights which can help us to resist violence in all its forms.

Similarly, in 1995 in Beijing Noeleen Heyzer the head of UNIFEM (the United Nations Fund for Women) proposed a Women's Development Agenda for the 21st Century. This Agenda, *based on the principle of social justice that addresses women's livelihood needs in terms of their access to and control of resources... seeks to engender new development thinking*

and practice, a new ethics of governance, and new processes of leadership. (It) looks forward to the creation of new institutions, new social values and new community structures. (It) aims to empower women to reorient and reshape the policies and decisions visited on them. (Commitment to the World's Women. Ed. Noeleen Heyzer. UNIFEM 1995:5).

Above all, women working at the grassroots level and those working at the global level, have built links and alliances between themselves and with other organisations and social movements that share their concerns. Today women recognise that in a globalised economy, economic, social and ecological justice cannot be achieved solely by operating at a local level: many of the problems faced at the local level have their origins in global realities and trends. Our work over the past 15 years has given us the experience of how this might be done. Today there are networks of women working on economic issues – issues of debt, structural adjustment and trade, and the international financial institutions that promote the global economic structures. Women are working on issues of environmental degradation and sustainable livelihoods; on issues of population and reproduction; on issues of human rights and violence; on issues of governance and participation. All of this has given us

- ▶ the vision of the kind of world we seek
- ▶ the conceptual framework for on-going analysis and advocacy
- ▶ the organizations and links, and
- ▶ the strategies for mobilization from local to global, and from global to local.

Today, through the Internet, we also have access to the technologies for linking the on-going research, analysis and advocacy from local to global and vice versa in a way which can make a difference. The recent successful mobilization of Non-Governmental Organisations in the North, particularly by Canadians, to counter the proposed Multilateral Agreement on Investments (MAI) demonstrates the potential for this kind of action.

Women are clear about what needs changing – Poverty, Violence and Environmental Degradation. We know what we want – we want the power to guarantee the implementation of our agendas.

WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO GET THERE?

A new kind of leadership and support for its nurture. First, what kind of support? Leadership is a process. It evolves as people become conscious of injustice and commit themselves to doing something about it. It can be encouraged through financial and institutional support for their projects; through opportunities for deepening their analysis and their politics; through meeting and working with others like themselves. As Nelson Mandela said to thousands of school children in Toronto recently, “ordinary people like me and you can make a difference!” Ordinary people can do extraordinary things if they are noticed and encouraged.

On the same occasion Mandela recognised the centrality of women’s leadership. The Nita Barrow Visitorship at OISE is one place in which women’s leadership can be nurtured.

WHAT KIND OF LEADERSHIP?

Transformational feminist leadership. This kind of leadership is based on a consciousness of all the sources of women’s oppression, grounded in ‘a passion for justice’ (Carter Heyward, 1984) and driven by a commitment to the personal and institutional changes that will take us toward our goals of a more

equitable, humane and sustainable world: leadership whose well-spring is the spirit. Nita Barrow was such a leader.

As far as I know, Dame Nita never identified herself as a feminist, but her values, beliefs and actions were undoubtedly drawn from her experience as a woman and her leadership was grounded in her formation as a woman with a consciousness of the injustices meted out to people because of their sex, race or class. Nita led “from the margins”: she rejected the marginalization of women and their values by making them central to her work, and she shared a profound solidarity with women everywhere. She was a person who affirmed the beauty and dignity in the ordinary. Her leadership was informed by moral, ethical and spiritual values. Nita Barrow’s leadership is a model of the kind of leadership which women can provide.

Born to a Barbadian family in November 1916, nearly 82 years ago, Nita chose a traditional women’s career in nursing. It became the context in which this young woman grew to become someone widely respected by world leaders and a role model for women everywhere. Nita was a pioneer *par excellence*. She has a list of Firsts to her name. She was the first President of the Jamaica Nurses Association which she helped to found. The first matron of the University College Hospital in Jamaica. The first World Health Organisation-appointed nurse for the Caribbean. The first woman to head the Medical Commission of the World Council of Churches.

- ▶ **As the first Third World person to head an international women’s organisation she changed the YWCA into an organisation with a concern for socioeconomic development.**
- ▶ **As the first woman to head the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) she introduced new visions of the role of adult education in participatory development.**
- ▶ **As her country’s ambassador to the UN she strengthened that institution’s links with NGOs.**

All of this made her a natural choice as Convenor of the NGO Forum at the 3rd World Conference on Women held in Nairobi in 1985, and earned her the respect of the women of the world as she negotiated space and respect for the more than 15,000 women who converged on that city to mark, not just the end of a Decade for Women but the beginning of a new presence of women on the stage of international debates. In the international women’s movement and beyond Nita’s name has become synonymous with wise and effective leadership.

From negotiator for the women of the world she was selected, the only woman, to be one of the Commonwealth Group of Eminent Persons chosen to negotiate rapprochement with the racist government of South Africa before Mandela’s release. In that position she was the person who insisted in meeting with the people of the townships, commandeering the driver to take her there. This was not part of the official programme.

Finally, as her country’s first female Governor-General she remained accessible to her friends around the world and turned that post from one that was largely ceremonial with little substance to one to which people looked for leadership. When Nita died some Barbadians even suggested that Barbados become a republic rather than risk the devaluation of the position by anyone who would succeed her! Through all the pomp and circumstance of her high offices Nita remained a warm and simple person... a person with considerable power who was without pretentiousness. The only ambassador who cooked for her own dinner parties, as Michele Landsberg has pointed out.

Nita demonstrated that you could hold the highest office in the land and be humble; that power and prestige could be used to empower and give recognition to those who had neither; that women's leadership is to be found in the spaces traditionally associated with women – nursing, teaching community service – and that one could combine a woman's compassion and concern for others with the firmness and skills required to lead.

Nita brought us one step closer to our vision of a more equitable and humane world. Without wishing to fall into the trap of essentialism, it is arguable that her leadership was essentially that of a woman: leadership from the margins to challenge and change all forms of exclusion and injustice wherever they are found. In her beliefs and values, her intellect and style, Nita was a catalyst for change.

On the eve of the millennium it is my belief that women can contribute this kind of leadership as we work, at all levels, with men of goodwill toward a more equitable, humane and sustainable world.

REFERENCES

Eudine Barriteau. “The Challenge of Innovative Leadership of a Traditional Women’s Organisation: The World YWCA and Ruth Nita Barrow”, forthcoming in *Stronger, Surer, Bolder: Ruth Nita Barrow Social Change and International Development*. Eudine Barriteau and Alan Cobley (Eds). Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers. 1998.

Alison Bernstein. “Women’s Leadership” Address at the Annual Conference of the National Council for Research on Women, Washington, October 2, 1998.

Yvonne Bobb-Smith. *I Know Who I Am. A Caribbean woman’s Identity in Canada: Agency and Resistance in Community Organizing*. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Toronto. 1998.

Carter Heyward. *Our passion for Justice: Images of Poser, Sexuality and Liberation*. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984.

Noeleen Heyzer (Ed.) *A commitment to the World’s Women: Perspectives on Development for Beijing and Beyond*. New York: UNIFEM. 1995.

Gita Sen & Caren Grown. *Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions: Third World Women’s Perspectives*. New York: Monthly Review Press. 1987.