

Quiet Revolution

Can Globalization Help Women out of Traditional Roles?

By Barbara Supp

Women are becoming high-level managers in Europe, entrepreneurs in Asia and mechanics in Africa. The more globalization changes the world, the more it liberates women from traditional roles. But what are they doing with the opportunity?

Sandra Aguebor fell in love with a black machine and oil, and for an entire week she dreamed of repairing cars. She woke up one morning at 4 o'clock and told her father and mother about her dream. They told her to forget about it. But even after she turned 14, Sandra continued to pester her father. She was born in Benin City, Nigeria, and there had never been a mechanic in the family, which supported itself by farming a small plot of land.

Sandra became the first woman to work as an auto mechanic in Nigeria, she says. She also learned to train other women to be mechanics, calling her project the "Lady Mechanic Initiative." Now she's come to Deauville to talk about it. Aguebor, a dynamic woman in jeans and a bright yellow T-shirt, stands out among the 1,100 women in Deauville. Not many look as though they had ever felt engine oil on their hands.

Late last year, a global conference called the Women's Forum for the Economy and Society met in Deauville, a resort town in northern France. There were businesswomen and politicians at the conference, which features women from 90 countries, some wearing Indian saris and others dressed in African robes. But most of attendees were dressed in business outfits, and for three full days they looked as if they had just come from the hairdresser.

The economic crisis was the focus of this year's conference, of course. But the topics on the agenda included globalization and progress, and the question of how globalization is changing women, and where women are changing the world.

Among those invited to tell their stories in Deauville were Sandra Aguebor, 34, from Nigeria, Sandrine Devillard, 38, from France, Diane von Fürstenberg, 63, from the United States, and Irene Khan, 52, from Bangladesh -- an auto mechanic, an executive at McKinsey & Company, a fashion designer and the head of Amnesty International, respectively. Their four stories, from four continents, were brought together in Deauville, and they provided a notion of the future of women in a globalized world.

The atmosphere was charged with ambition, a sense of concern, doubt and irritation. But the women here also seemed determined to benefit from the financial crisis, from this unheard-of moment in the world economy.

Shattering Gender Stereotypes

Globalization breaks through cultural barriers and transports images and ideas on television and the Internet. It means the expansion of knowledge, people, goods, money and values. It often runs up against archaic social ideas that cement drastic inequality between the sexes. Globalization attacks backward gender roles in Vietnam, encourages women in Yemen to shed their veils and gives European women economic power.

The faces of power around the globe are increasingly female -- think of Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko in Ukraine, Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Washington. Spain's current defense minister, Carme Chacón, was visibly pregnant when she made an appearance before Spanish troops. Anne Lauvergeon in France runs the nuclear power company Areva, US multinational PepsiCo has a female CEO, the United Arab Emirates has a female minister of economics and in Iceland, women were promoted to head two of the now-nationalized banks in the wake of that nation's financial crisis.

The presence of women in power carries a potent symbolism, but progress requires more than symbols. The question is whether these women are truly changing the world or whether their roles will remain largely symbolic.

With her dark curls and soft eyes, Irene Kahn is accustomed to spoiling the mood with hard facts. Born in Bangladesh, now living in London, Kahn runs Amnesty International. At the conference, she talked about the problems of tremendous growth and crushing poverty in her native Bangladesh, as well as in many other

freshly globalized countries. She's aware that three-fifths of the world's poorest people and two-thirds of the illiterate are women. Women perform two-thirds of all work if you include unpaid labor, but they receive only 10 percent of total wages paid worldwide. They own 1 percent of assets in all countries.

But Kahn also pointed to progress. "My grandmother could barely write her name," she said. "I studied at Harvard."

She glanced at the audience, which includes many women who benefit from globalization, as well as those who see the message they and their lives convey. *We embody progress.* But what does progress mean for the ladies of Deauville: a better career, or a better world?

It's difficult to measure real progress in numbers. For the last decade or so the United Nations has issued a Gender-Related Development Index (GDI), which specifies the degree of gender equality in a given country on a scale of 0 to 1. But instead of the distribution of political power, the UN index compares men and women based on such factors as life expectancy, education and income.

At the time of the conference in October, according to the UN's latest numbers, France was in seventh place -- behind Iceland, Australia, Norway, Canada, Sweden and the Netherlands. Germany ranked 20th, the United States 16th, the United Kingdom 10th. In both Germany and France the income gap between men and women was the main source of inequality.

Guinea Bissau and Sierra Leone were at the bottom of the list of 157 countries. War zones like Iraq and Afghanistan are not included in the statistics.

France had a value of 0.95 on the scale, while Bangladesh's was 0.539. One could say that women in Bangladesh had approximately half the rights of those in France. But Irene Khan's native country had improved in the last 10 years. It ranked 140th in 1998 -- 20 positions lower than today.

'Feminized' Immigration

The country that Irene Khan, a physician's daughter, left at 14, when she was sent to a boarding school in Europe, has since experienced the same convulsions, in a more aggravated form, that Karl Marx once predicted in his "Communist Manifesto." It's as if Marx had written the screenplay for countries like Bangladesh, for those "uninterrupted convulsions of all social conditions" caused by the global market, which seeks markets and shifts production.

Bangladesh is an Muslim nation, one of the poorest in the world, where some people believe that the dominance of men over women comes from Allah. The world market has transformed it into a production site, especially for the textile industry, because labor is so much cheaper there than in Europe -- especially when the workers are women. Work has also given women the opportunity to step outside their sheltered lives. This is often coupled with significant health risks and long workdays in poorly ventilated factories with few protections against fire. In other words, progress for women in Bangladesh can come at the risk of their lives.

Women in Bangladesh earn an average of \$1,300 (€1,000) a year, less than half as much as men. But if families must do without this \$1,300 because factories close in the economic crisis, there can be no progress.

The world market needs goods, and it provides work and money. It was in Bangladesh that Nobel Prize winner Muhammad Yunus developed the concept of helping women build businesses with microloans. The world market can introduce ideas. Travel doesn't belong to the traditional image of women, but in Bangladesh, as in many countries of Southeast Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe, growing numbers of women are emigrating to earn the money needed to support their families. Some social scientists have already noticed a "feminization of immigration."

Some women emigrate to work on assembly lines, but most do it to meet the growing demand for services in caring for the elderly and children. The money they earn abroad can provide them with freedom -- that is, if they earn anything at all, and if their work is remunerated and not simple slavery. The illegal economy benefits from globalization, too. The International Labor Organization estimates that human trafficking, mainly with women, is responsible for an annual profit of about \$30 billion (€23 billion).

Some emigrate and know that they will become prostitutes, because there are no other opportunities for them.

Globalization's Hopeful Face

This is the sort of migration that Sandra Aguebor is fighting. She wants people to talk about it -- and do something.

Aguebor's native Nigeria ranks 139th on the UN's index. Women there are far worse off than men when it comes to education and income. Life expectancy, at 46 and 47 years, respectively, for men and women, is horribly low for both sexes.

She says little at first, but she isn't shy. She meets us in the lobby of the Hotel Royal, sitting on a plush sofa surrounded by classical statues, an African scarf around her shoulders and a smile on her face. She was "very dirty and very happy" when she returned home after her first internship, after her father had finally given in. Someone had told him that there were female auto mechanics in other countries.

Sandra went to school in the morning, and worked on cars in the afternoon. She trained with a group of 33 boys. She found a job with a transport company and, later, a better job in Lagos. She wanted to go abroad, but she says God told her: wait a while, stay here. She built a repair shop -- four wooden posts and a roof overhead -- and the business became successful.

It was so successful that she needed employees, so she went out and talked to girls, to orphans or prostitutes or those about to emigrate and become prostitutes elsewhere. She said: Work for me, and I'll pay you a little money. You can do it. It isn't difficult. I can do it, and so can you. Her first crew consisted of three girls and a refugee boy. Then more girls began to contact her -- so many girls that she sent them to other repair shops.

About five years ago she described her initiative on the Internet. She attracted non-governmental organizations and sponsors from around the world, and suddenly Sandra was working as an intern at General Motors in the United States. Aguebor and her project became a global issue. Eventually even the Nigerian government became aware of her.

Now she wants to expand her model beyond Nigeria. She's asking for donations of used tools from Germany. She wants to complete an internship at Daimler. There are many Mercedes cars driving around in Africa, she says. She has already learned some German at the Goethe Institute in Lagos -- she may not know the German word for "Phillips screwdriver" yet, but she does know how to say hello.

Anyone listening to this woman cannot help but believe that globalization also has a hopeful face.

Too Little Globalization

But globalization has many faces, depending on the region and on such factors as levels of prosperity, education and development. It provides female consumers in Germany with inexpensive T-shirts, telephones and washing machines. On the other hand, production jobs disappear from places like Bochum, Nuremberg and Oberlausitz and end up in Romania, Poland or Bangladesh.

In those places where capital connects developing countries with the world market, globalization eliminates old economies and rural self-sufficiency, which was usually the domain of women. It shifts these women into employment situations which are at the mercy of the ups and downs of the world market -- mainly the downs, at the moment.

Women produce, but the land they produce on usually belongs to men. In many cases the very idea that things might be different hasn't even occurred to them. Not being in charge is perceived as normal. It has always been that way -- in the days of their mothers, their grandmothers and before. The powerlessness of women, according to the UN's most recent "State of World Population" report, is not only based on visible forms of coercion, but also on the self-images of women who believe this powerlessness is unalterable.

The UN report's findings are an example of too little globalization. Women are poorly served if only money and goods cross borders, while knowledge does not. When Irene Khan says globalization has been positive for women, she is referring to its potential to support them with role models and information. This idea stems from the conviction that where there is growing danger, the means of salvation can also thrive, provided they are nurtured. It is certainly possible.

Kenya is a case in point. Local initiatives joined forces with UN groups there to find a way to fight the horrific tradition of female genital mutilation. They introduced painless rituals to help the girls enter womanhood, and bloodless income for women who until now have performed the circumcisions.

Women in Saudi Arabia are not allowed to drive cars, and victims of rape face the prospect of being whipped for the crime of fornication. But knowledge is gathering behind the veils of women, who already represent half of all high-school graduates. The rulers of Saudi Arabia will soon have to realize that they must overcome their dependence on oil, and they will need the potential of these educated women to do so.

Values & Goals

The global flow of information can be useful. Irene Khan and Sandra Aguebor pinned their hopes on the

women who listened to them in Deauville, who can influence laws, contracts and investments. They have the ability to help, but do they want to?

There they sat, at their conference tables, and when the women at one of these tables were asked, on the first day of the meeting, about what matters most to them, better business or a better world, they surprisingly had little to say. "Networks," they eventually said. "Contacts."

There were very few German women here. When the talk turned to Germany, a note of pity slipped into their voices. Childcare? A disaster. They have a female chancellor, but women make up only 5.5 percent of senior management at major corporations. German women, more than women in other Western countries, are preoccupied with the question of whether to have children or a career. Germany is the country of after-alls. A woman, after all, is the chief federal public prosecutor. A woman, after all, is a member of the board of directors at the Siemens Corporation. A woman who rises to a position of prominence is considered a sensation by the German media. France is more advanced.

France, in this case, was represented by 38-year-old Sandrine Devillard. She's from a middle-class family, a blonde, determined senior manager at McKinsey and mother of three who battles angina and spends her lunch hours energetically typing away at her digital organizer. Devillard said she has never perceived her gender as a disadvantage in the business world. In fact, she sees it as an advantage. She's a member of the expanding group of educated, central European women who command high salaries, and who benefit from globalization as a matter of course.

In her presentation she discussed the advantages a firm can derive by including women in its decision-making bodies. McKinsey & Co. -- the management consulting firm -- is globalization from the top down, endeavoring to influence the economy worldwide. McKinsey actively recruits women.

A Growing Interest in Women

McKinsey, Cartier, Lancôme, Nespresso, Coca-Cola, Renault-Nissan, Barclays, Britain's Diamond Trading Company, Helena Rubinstein, PriceWaterhouseCoopers -- these are all sponsors of the women's forum, and they know men are not the only ones with money. The gap between rich and poor is growing, and women are also among the winners.

This explains the growing interest of companies in women, and representatives of the NGO community, like Irene Khan, say women must take advantage of this. They must work with the institutions and employ economic incentives to help ensure that globalization can truly be understood as an opportunity in developing countries. In some cases it seems to be working.

When financial backers like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank have prescribed reforms for developing countries, this has traditionally translated into cutbacks in the social arena, affecting women and children first. Now the IMF is in the process of adjusting its guidelines, especially since the financial crisis started. Its focus has moved away from austere savings programs and toward a stronger emphasis on day-to-day hardship. Now the World Bank wants to invest more heavily in women "to boost economic development." For 2007 to 2010, the bank has established a "Gender Action Plan," and it selected a quote from the *Economist* as its motto: "Forget China, India and the Internet: economic growth is driven by women."

Recently McKinsey, the World Bank and women's groups have argued in favor of an economic feminism far removed from what the women's movement considered to be feminism in the 1970s. In those days, feminists would have seen it as a betrayal, not progress, for a woman to head a nuclear power company or, as secretary of state, to lead her country to war.

Does this mean that the name of the game for women today is to join the world of economists and politicians, and simply do things better? Is it really a male crisis that is causing such turmoil in the economy, a crisis of "smart boys in gray suits," as the French regional newspaper *Ouest-France* wrote? Is this an opportunity for women?

To be sure, men dominate the world of bankers. But the derivative security that triggered the current crisis, was invented by a woman, Blythe Masters at JP Morgan. On the whole, however, women are more risk-averse when managing money, and they tend to be more conservative investors. Though ridiculed in the past, this approach is now considered the wiser choice, the choice of investors with vision and a concern for security. In a world that has learned to fear toying with risk, security is a valued attribute.

Aude Zieseniss de Thuin, the founder of the Women's Forum, is ambitious for both women's career and a moral orientation. She believes the current period of crisis "is the beginning of a new world, one that will be worse and more difficult for everyone, including women." And yet, she said, it is also a world in which

"women must finally take responsibility."

Another speaker is Ingrid Betancourt, the former hostage who was rescued in Colombia, and who regards this world with a degree of astonishment, a world that has become so much greedier in the six years she spent in the jungle. Betancourt was a slightly preoccupied observer, a woman who promotes spirituality and warns against the rat race.

And then there are those who have chosen the rat race as their way of life, young women who say: I want to make it to the top. I know the rules now. And I don't want them to suddenly change because of a financial crisis.

In elegant, gold-toned restaurant at the Hotel Royal, Diane von Fürstenberg is sitting on a sideboard, dangling her legs, smiling and looking relaxed. She knows the rules. She was successful decades ago, and now she is successful again. She has worked out her version of the role of women: "Dress nice and make this world a better place."

Von Fürstenberg, wearing tall boots and a surprisingly short skirt, is giving a luncheon. She is a businesswoman, born in Belgium and married for a short time to Egon von Fürstenberg, a German prince. She learned how to design material in Italy. In the United States she learned how to run a fashion house while at the same living the life of a New York socialite. Diane von Fürstenberg invented a special type of wrap dress, and there are certainly women attending her luncheon who were married or divorced in one of them.

For someone like von Fürstenberg, who was part of the inner circle at Studio 54 in the 1970s, which included Mick and Bianca Jagger, Andy Warhol, Liza Minnelli and Truman Capote, it is not difficult to benefit from globalization. She hardly knew what boundaries were.

Now von Fürstenberg says it's time to save the world. Some would say her words are too simple and naïve. But that would be too hasty a conclusion, especially when one considers this fashion icon's appearance on the previous evening, when she stood on a stage and told her audience about a Belgian girl named Lilly who was sent to a concentration camp for distributing anti-Nazi flyers and was liberated from the Ravensbrück camp in May 1945. This was mother. Nursed back to health -- from a weight of just 29 kilograms (64 pounds) -- she managed to track down her fiancé, but a doctor said she would never be able to have children. "And nine months later," says von Fürstenberg, "I was born."

Tears & Ambitions

A play was performed that evening, a documentary piece depicting the life stories of seven women from seven countries who had experienced horrible things and, each in her own way, had attempted to do something about the horror, in Russia, Guatemala, Ireland, Afghanistan, Nigeria and Cambodia. The woman from Pakistan is the best-known of the bunch. Her name is Mukhtaran Mai, and she was raped by a village clan. She had the courage to take her tormentors to court, unexpectedly won her case and used the monetary award to build a school for boys and girls. The first female student in that school was Mukhtaran herself, who was illiterate.

Diane von Fürstenberg promoted this human rights piece. Called "Seven," and produced by an organization known as "Vital Voices," its core message is that the most decisive form of globalization is that of values, of human rights, and that without the right to life, freedom and integrity, nothing else counts. The seven real-life women whose stories inspired the play were flown to the conference, where globalization at the top encountered globalization at the lower end of society, and when the seven women walked onto the stage, there were few dry eyes in the audience.

This is the hope -- that these tears will lead to something.

Pollsters from the French IFOP Institute spent three days walking the hallways of the convention center. Of the 1,100 Deauville women, 250 agreed to answer questions about the economy and the current crisis, voiced their criticisms and pondered changes. Ninety percent of the women polled believe that the causes of the crisis are structural. Three-quarters say that we must "create a more ethical economic model."

On the morning of the last day, the time had come to reinvent capitalism in a special workshop. One woman proposed that in the future, companies should no longer be assessed on the basis of profitability but, rather, on the extent to which they distribute their profits in a socially responsible way.

Another woman proposed that in the future executives be required to provide one year of social work, so they can learn about what happens in real life.

Finally, someone proposed that in the future, international investors should be required to invest a fixed

percentage of their investments in social programs abroad, including education and literacy programs.

Sixty spots were available for the workshop, and all 60 were reserved. But only 18 people showed up.

Perhaps the women had something better to do. Perhaps they felt the project was a little too ambitious after all. Or perhaps their absence was the result of the previous evening's Cartier reception, where Indian *hors d'oeuvres* and champagne were served until the wee hours of the morning.

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan

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