Reducing Welfare and Sacrificing Women and Children

Mercy Amba Oduyoye

**Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture,
Ghana**

You have threshed the earth with sledges of iron
You have delivered entire communities into slavery and into refugee camps
You have not remembered the covenant of kinship
You have pursued other people with a sword
You have cast off pity and maintained our anger and wrath in perpetuity
You have ripped open pregnant women in order to enlarge your territory
You have set villages on fire to rout your siblings, those you now call enemies
You have sold the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals
You have the trampled the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and pushed the afflicted out of the way

Then we shall look at one another and cry out, 'When did we participate in all these atrocities?' And our common humanity will respond, 'In as much as you have passed the struggling women and children without seeing them, you have displayed callousness towards our common humanity.'

(from Amos 1:3, 9, 11, 13; 2:2, 6 & 7).

The statistics are overwhelming. The actual day to day experiences can be even more overpowering and depressing. Since market forces have been given free range and profit has become the new idol, it has been the blood of women and children that has constituted the sacrifice to keep the all-consuming desire fed. More children will be driven into the streets. Women will continue to work the skin off their knees, elbows and hands on the rubbish heaps of globalised economies.

By globalisation I mean the political, economical and cultural development, structures and policies that pulled Africa into the Euro-American world. One could almost say that globalisation means the exploitation of the weak with impunity, wearing the veneer of free and equal participation in what Chinua Achebe describes as the partnership of the horse and rider. It does not allow for the possibility of alternatives. Those who benefited from the trade in human beings and the colonial dictatorship and expropriation of the land and wealth of Africa, the Americas, Australia, Aotearoa-New Zealand, and the Caribbean, are the strong forces in globalisation. Those who have reaped abundantly from the unjust trade practices surrounding so called raw materials continue to direct the affairs of the globalised world economy. They remain the key beneficiaries while others are kept at subsistence level to play the role of workers in a colony of ants. **/end p. 102/**

Globalisation means that human beings have to pass the test of viability before they are accorded the right to food, clothing and shelter. Those not accounted worthy of upholding and nourishing are clothed in the discarded wardrobes of the wealthy. They are fed the leftovers, and make their dwelling places from the cartons that held the precious goods meant for the rich. Unfortunately for most of Africa, and especially South Africa, 'the poor' is equated with skin colour. But we know that even for virtually non-segregated populations, the under privileged exist side-by-side with those enjoying loads of privileges.

It had been the case that women deemed to be 'helpers' only and children not on the labour market were not counted as productive people contributing to the economy of their nations. Trouble is that they have to live and move too. And their being human does not depend on their economic viability. Whether or not they generate wealth, their health should be the concern of the whole community. The discards of the economic system, especially those of the labour market, land by the hearth of their mothers, wives and sisters. The sick and aged who cannot afford health care crawl home to seek refuge under the roofs of women who nurse them even when they themselves are hungry, naked and exhausted.

The economic Structural Adjustment Programmes foisted on the debtor countries by the financial instruments of the owners of the world's wealth, has forced many governments to abandon the ideals and practices of state-care for the welfare of all its citizens. To

keep consciences at peace, 'civil society' was praised for taking care of the responsibilities shed by governments. Most of these structures belong to women's organisations, some of which now find themselves overloaded and underfunded.

The situation of women and children under globalisation has been like that of Hagar and Ishmael, driven into the wilderness so that they may not share in the wealth of Abraham, which they helped to create. What role have women played in the sacrificing of children to market forces? When Abraham was marching his young son to the altar did he consult the mother? Did she know? We are not told. What we know is that when our governments are selling our countries and manufacturing conflicts to immolate our sons and rape our daughters they do not consult the women. Few women have the benefit of economic literacy, geo-politics, monetary forces or have a knowledge of what their governments are planning to be able to cry 'enough is enough'. In this way the most vulnerable of the human community are sacrificed.

Globalisation wears the cloak of liberalisation and openness. However, the doors have laser beams that are sensitive to wealth and human types. Visa requirements are structured to keep the poor out of the very regions where they could have had a chance to transform their situations. On the other hand, nations and people with economic clout can march into those areas with 'primary resources' (land, forests, fresh water, human labour) and invest. Nobody invests where they are not going to reap a hundred fold. Most people from countries labelled 'poor' cannot do the same as the rich countries. Thus globalisation is one-way liberalisation that expands the opportunities of the rich to ensure that their posterity will never want.

A *few* people from the South who squeeze the visa net and get economically viable positions in the North, often have to leave family behind because what they earn cannot support the whole family in the northern economy. Many are the economic widows and orphans who are being created by the poverty enhancing syndrome of globalisation. Africa has known many traumatic displacements of her population. When southern African men left women and children to serve in the mines of Egoli, they began a trend which continues to this day. Women and children who are expecting fathers and sons to return, to bring wealth or send a contribution for the management of the family, have been regularly disappointed. These women and children have worked the land and themselves dry, trying to survive. Whatever potential they had to nurture themselves had to be turned towards survival. **/end p. 103/**

Inventiveness and creativity have been part of the struggle to survive. This however does not belie the fact that they had been led by hunger and privation onto the altar of globalisation. The globalisation of militarism that brings profit to those who manufacture and sell arms and mines, is an idol fed with the limbs and stomachs of women and children. Childhood is sacrificed and women are left to mourn the death of their children.

This is I believe the reason why we are invited to participate in ME99: we are invited to examine globalisation and to observe its role in poverty enhancement. We are invited to see how it causes welfare sources to dry up and to see the inevitable sacrifice of the women and children. But this event is not for mourning. We need to seek a way out of the negative fall-out of globalisation; to appropriate its benefits for the enhancement of our lives together and to accept its challenges to stimulate our creativity. A victim mentality will not empower women and children. Yet the sacrifice of human potential cannot continue. There are no easy solutions. Suffice to say that where profit is enthroned, welfare is trampled under foot. And where welfare is hurt, the weak turn towards religion, hoping for some solace.

Religion attracts women striving to hold on to the one treasure they have: life, their own life and the lives of those around them. Indeed with women it is always others first. Religion is also a two edged sword. How will religion act as a life-giving force in the lives of women and children battling to live with globalisation? What practical acts of solidarity and support will religious bodies undertake? Can religious people become advocates for women and children within the policy-making corridors?

Under globalisation the centrality and preciousness of human life has been shaken. Profit and wealth have replaced people. The African writer, Ama Ata Aidoo said, 'Time was when all people had was people'. Now it seems that what people care about is the profit that will enable them to have 'all that money can buy'. Religion has to help people to find and reclaim their dignity and sense of worthiness. Society has to be called back to the principle of being the other's keeper and of building a caring community. Religion should call people's attention to the God who constantly reminds us, 'I made you better than you are living'. Faith communities have to live out the image of the Transcendent they claim to reach out to. They have to point to the Sacred as undergirding the sacredness of human life.

'To whom much is given, much is expected'. Those who have benefited from globalisation must be made to realise the need to create safety nets for those who have become the victims, while at the same time seeking alternatives to the negative fall-out of globalisation. Globalisation must become a *partnership* in which all can contribute and from which all can reap what it takes to live a quality of life that deserves the label 'human'. It must be a group photo in which each person appears in all dignity.

The under-utilisation of Africans, even in global projects in Africa, adds to the sacrificing of the population. As we allow parts of the global community to utilise our non-renewable and extractive resources to enhance their own development and to leave us wearing the label 'Debtor' around our necks, we allow the sacrifice of the self-esteem of Africa's growing generation. Even the cancellation of

debts without the establishment of economic justice and the love of compassion will be healing our hurts lightly and crying ‘peace, peace’ without ensuring enduring welfare. **/end p. 104/**

In sum, the Divine economy according to Christianity does not expect any human sacrifice. It asks that people should make themselves a living sacrifice. The means living lives that produce well-being for all and for self as well as upholding the ecology that God has put in place. To avoid the current human sacrifice, those who plan the globalisation of the world’s structures and systems must put women and children at the centre.

Opening national gates has meant in some places a sex industry employing mostly women and children who are struggling to survive in the globalised forms of economic exploitation and the continued imbalance in terms of trade. These are not the conditions for the fullness of life that John 10:10 speaks of. Rather they have produced for many the conditions described in Isaiah 61:12; the oppressed, the broken-hearted, the captives and the prisoners of today grovel under the weight of globalisation. We are challenged by Luke 4:18-19 and the prophecies of Amos. We need to hear Isaiah’s cry, ‘The whole body is sick’—and for women and children, there is a semblance of sickness unto death.

Healing can come if religious communities can get into dialogue with economic planners and with governments who in the present situation bow to those who give them loans, and pander to every bid of those with the where with all for investment. Only when this occurs can we say with Isaiah, ‘they shall not labour in vain or bear children for calamity. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my Holy Mountain’. They shall not hurt nor destroy—not children, not women, not men and certainly not this earth which for now is our only home. **/end p. 105/**