

Intellectuals and Intellect Workers: The Role of the Educator in Today's Fierce World

The following is excerpted from the keynote speech of Gita Sen, DAWN's founding and Executive Committee member, delivered at the ICAE VIII World Assembly, held last 15-16 June 2011 in Malmö, Sweden. In her speech, Gita shares the scholarly life of an educator by the name of Paul Baran, suggesting that it is in the courage to question the "normalized" and delve into the "unknown" where we can successfully face the challenges posed by today's fierce world.

As someone who has been involved in education practically all my life, I'm very aware of how easy it is to fall into a dichotomy of those who know and those who need to know -- us versus them. The value of ICAE's commitment in breaking those kinds of boundaries is something that over the years, ICAE has been bringing to the discussion of not only adult learning but learning in general. Breaking away from these boundaries is not an easy task. Apart from our own engrained tendencies, becoming a lifelong learner means venturing into unknown territory, where certainties are shaky. Lifelong learning, therefore, is challenging because it involves engaging with those shaky certainties, those dark corners that push us beyond where our comfort zones lie.

As the title of my presentation suggests, we now find ourselves in a fierce world that is dominated by the reconfiguration of economic, political and military might, coupled with uncertainties linked to the financial and economic crisis, climate change, food security etc. As history has shown, these types of rearrangements are not new. We ask ourselves, is our sense of crisis today worse than the 1950s when we were sitting in the middle of Cold War rhetoric and the aftermath of the atomic bomb? I'm not so sure. If any, what is for certain is that the serious challenges we face require for deepening our ways of interrogation -- a type of interrogation that goes beyond what many of us have been employing so far.

This brings me to the role of the intellectual. Almost 50 years ago, a gentleman by the name of Paul Baran made the distinction between intellect workers and intellectuals. A Stanford University professor who wrote a short essay called "The Commitment of the Intellectual" in 1961, Baran also wrote essays about the political economy of backwardness. Baran was, and Gunder Frank sort of saw him that way, a sort of precursor of the Dependencia School in Latin America.

By the time that Baran was writing



his essay in 1961, he felt overwhelmingly frustrated with his fellow economists in Stanford and what he called the intellect workers -- defined by Baran as those who believe in the narrowness of one disciplinary expertise as opposed to searching for a more holistic and integrated approach to understanding the world. He got fed up with the persistent rationalization and justification of the social order that surrounded him in 1961. He grew tired of what he called the practice of "ethical neutrality" in research that kept intellect workers from making value judgments in the name of rigor and objectivity. He argued that we have more intellect workers in today's world thanks to the divide between mental and manual labor with which we have been living throughout the 20th century.

Following Baran, the fierce new world requires for the educator to be an intellectual, not an intellect worker. We need the educator to cross boundaries, to recognize, as many of us do, that values do not drop from the sky, but are built into society. We know that the truth is difficult to ascertain. The scientist, the educator has to be persistent in his/her search for the truth, and in challenging what is constructed as truth where needed.

Baran was a Marxist, but he was a humanist above all. The tradition of humanism, of reason and the possibility of moving beyond the crisis that we are

confront with, requires a level of courage, of integrity and ability that rests not in big places but quite often in small ones. There are many perennial questions. And while the answers keep changing, the stance of the intellectual, the true educator is also perennial. The true educator is grounded on openness and humanism, has the willingness to cross boundaries, and is able to take a stand on the basis of the best current knowledge available.

Educators will need to take a stand. Ecology's Precautionary Principle and the Do No Harm Principle applied in public health must not completely restrict us from searching for answers and most importantly, taking the stand of the voiceless. The role of the educator is to interrogate what has been normalized as the advocates in gender justice have been doing for a long time, and, more importantly, to leave behind the hubris of the educator.

Discomfort is a great tool for self-learning. It is in exactly at the moment wherein we are uncomfortable when we should ask ourselves, "What is there for me to learn in this?" It's a challenge that has to be met anew in each generation, in each historical moment.

This moment is ours to be true intellectuals and educators!

Gita Sen's keynote speech at the ICAE VIII World Assembly is available for viewing [HERE](#).

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Securing our rights, protecting our gains

Women have historically borne the brunt of economic crises. In the absence of or failing social insurance systems, women's unpaid and undervalued labor acts have consistently served as stabilizers from deep economic shocks. The multiple burdens carried by women have serious consequences on women's health and must be redressed appropriately.

A human rights-based approach to policy making is therefore essential. Such would also monitor, regulate and hold corporations accountable for their ecologically and socially unsustainable practices. This means protecting small farmers from financial speculation and land grabbing (including those for large scale agrofuel plantations); banning technologies such as geo-engineering and GMOs, and subjecting all new technologies to comprehensive assessments that elucidate their environmental health implications; phasing out nuclear energy and in place of this, seeking fresh and up-scaled financial resources to provide essential energy access to women in developing countries; shifting the world to an era of renewable energy.

Finally, a disturbing return to neo-Malthusian arguments linking population with the food and climate crisis is observed. Based on two examples drawn from contributions to the Zero Draft for Rio+20, some UN agencies have claimed that the "early stabilization of world population would make a crucial contribution to realizing sustainable development."⁴ Demographers on the other hand have written that "slowing population growth makes many environmental problems easier to solve and development easier to achieve."⁵ These arguments represent a serious regression from and misinterpretation of the Rio, Cairo and Beijing agendas.

Sources:

¹ Pickett and Wilkinson's *Capitalism and the Future Class Warfare*

² Social Watch *report*

³ *Social protection floor: for a fair and inclusive globalisation from the Social Protection Advisory Group* chaired by USG Michelle Bachelet

⁴ Joint Submission by UNFPA and the Population Division

⁵ The *Luxemburg Declaration on Population and Sustainable Development*

⁶ Agenda 21

THIRD CALL

Create and implement a universal social protection floor³ that will entail basic social security, health care and comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services. This is critical especially for women living in poverty who are undertaking precarious reproductive work and in many places, are deprived of their bodily, reproductive and sexual rights. The world simply must respond to the demands of the "99%" and pursue policies that favor human rights and social provisioning over profit.

FOURTH CALL

Bring to a halt the process of privatization and commodification of people's commons and protect women's rights to land, water, energy and other resources, including food, health, education and employment. This will be to the benefit of all humankind.

FIFTH CALL

Recover previous global consensus that "the major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable patterns of consumption and production, particularly in industrialized countries, which are a matter of grave concern and aggravate poverty and imbalances."⁶ Policy responses to population in Rio+20 must align with the Cairo principles of not instrumentalizing women's bodies, rather prioritizing women's and girls' sexual and reproductive rights and health in the context of fulfilling their sustainable livelihoods, meeting basic needs, protecting their rights, and creating an enabling environment for their empowerment, leadership and political participation.