

# Crafting a "Glocal" Education: Focusing on Food, Women, and Globalization

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## ABSTRACT

Beginning from an awareness of food as the "intimate commodity," this paper sets out to understand how low income women, in particular, understand the relationship between their own role as food providers for their families and the increasing globalisation of food production and distribution. Drawing on work with the Toronto-based Foodshare Focus on Food programme, the article describes a new approach, called "glocal education," which aims to help women understand the way their local practices connect with global forces.

## RÉSUMÉ

En commençant par la présentation de la nourriture en tant qu'un produit universel qui relie différents domaines, cet exposé propose de comprendre comment les femmes à faible revenu, en particulier, comprennent le lien entre leur rôle en tant que soutient de leurs familles et la mondialisation croissante de la production et de la distribution de la nourriture. En se basant sur le programme du Foodshare Focus basé à Toronto, l'article décrit une nouvelle approche, nommée 'éducation glocale' (globale et locale), qui a pour but d'aider les femmes à comprendre comment leurs pratiques locales sont liées aux forces globales.

## WOMEN AND FOOD STORIES

Food is the connector, the "intimate commodity" (Winson, 1993), which ultimately affects us all: our bodies, our health, our environment. Women are at "the centre of the food crisis" (Dankelman and Davidson, 1991) whether as consumers struggling to feed our families or as producers, the major source of labour for agribusiness plantations, food processing plants, retail supermarket sales, and fast food preparation and service. Women's struggles around food -- at home, at work, in their communities--are reflections of the broader process of "globalization".<sup>1</sup> In the struggle to regain control of our daily lives, the connections that women have to food--as producers and consumers -- can be a source of knowledge and a catalyst for action, linking local survival strategies with broader movements for global justice.

My recent work with women in the Focus on Food program of FoodShare in Toronto has prompted me to ask a number of questions in order to understand women, food and the local-global connection. I will explore some of these questions in this article.

How do low-income women understand their own experiences with food in relation to the globalized production of food, and as creators of local food alternatives? How can their stories be told, collectivized, and exchanged across borders?

Through a series of educational workshops, we have been crafting what I call a "glocal" (merging "global" and "local") education, a process of learning/acting which links women's daily practices as producers and consumers with the broader process of so-called "globalization."

Susantha Goonatilake speaks about a "dialectic of globalization and localization," describing these "two contradictory though intertwined historical processes that are operating simultaneously: a globalizing tendency, where the economies and cultures around the world are being embedded increasingly in more and more pervasive global webs; and a localizing tendency, expressed in its extreme form by a number of insurgencies on the basis of ethnic, religious and other local identities." (Goonatilake, 1995) Thus the homogenizing influence of global systems of production that threaten both cultural and biodiversity is being countered by a reclaiming of

differences and an encouraging of local initiatives.

Another paradox is that the process of globalization has also served to familiarize us with greater diversity and to appreciate an extensive range of local cultures. (Featherstone, 1993: 169) The increasing movement (of capital, of technology, of information, of people) has created more interchanges and forced northern countries (and cities like Toronto) to accept "a greater diversity within their boundaries, manifest in greater multiculturalism and polyethnicity." (Featherstone, 1993:174)

The educational process described here focuses on low-income women in Ontario who, until the Harris-led Tories came to power in 1995, were able to survive on social assistance, albeit with difficulty. Many of them are immigrants to Canada, reflecting the migration north of both economic and political refugees from the "Third World," that has characterized the post-World War II period. They are thus part of a more multicultural north, though they have roots in the South. As immigrants, as low-skilled workers, as women--they are among those hardest hit by the decline of the welfare state and dismantling of the social safety net. Like women everywhere, they are bearing the brunt of social services cutbacks (the "structural adjustment" of the north). This model depends on women's unpaid labour, assuming that women will take on the roles of community support that the state abandons. They are, like many other women, often single mothers, struggling for survival, and food is one of the major battlegrounds.

#### **FOODSHARE: BEYOND RESISTANCE AND SURVIVAL**

FoodShare began in 1985 as a local organization aimed at "working with communities to end hunger and improve access to affordable, nutritious food." For more than a decade it has initiated healthy alternatives to food banks such as community kitchens, community gardens, student nutrition programs, community shared agriculture, and bulk buying programs. Field to Table, a major project of FoodShare, has worked to link local producers and urban consumers by creating alternative distribution systems, most notably

through the Good Food Box, which now reaches over 4,200 homes monthly. FoodShare's long term goal is to ensure that everyone has the "food security" they need. This includes the income to buy food, as well as access to safe food and the skills to prepare and grow food that promotes health and that makes us feel personally good, strengthens our families, and builds our communities.

In early 1995, just prior to the conservatives' victory, FoodShare was funded by jobs Ontario to initiate Focus on Food, an 18-month training program in food services for 25 isolated women on social assistance.<sup>2</sup> The purpose was to offer skill training and education about food production. Focus on Food shaped its program around basic life skills training (language, computers, group work, job search) and the development of food-related skills in gardening, cooking, and catering which could translate to either jobs or to personal and community actions.

I was invited to develop a participatory process of documenting the new program, training the women participants to trace its development with photographs. Along with several graduate students, we also facilitated a workshop on the "hidden costs of food production," showed films on women and food, and videotaped women's food stories.

#### **THEORETICAL ROOTS OF A "GLOCAL" EDUCATION**

These workshops drew upon a theory and practice of "popular education," a process in which people "collectively develop the critical awareness of their social situation and strengthen their ability to change it." (Barndt, 1991) In another article, I have suggested that popular education engages at least five creative tensions: personal/ social-political, critical / creative, nature / culture, reflection / action, and local / global. (Barndt, 1996) The local/global tension was central to our popular education work with the (mostly) immigrant women in our workshops.

In crafting a "glocal" education, we also drew upon a rich tradition of "development education" (Christie, 1983) in this country initiated

in the 60s and 70s by Canadians returning from work overseas to raise awareness of global issues and Canadian complicity in the underdevelopment of the "Third World". In the past two decades, public schools in western societies, challenged by increasingly multicultural student bodies, have also encouraged the integration of "multicultural education" and "global education" (Pike, 1988).

Although institutionalized multicultural education often remains superficial, there are some who have used global education to challenge the underlying epistemology of the western model of development (and thus market-driven globalization), suggesting that at the root of the current ecological and cultural crisis is a mechanistic paradigm promulgated by modern science and exemplified by the Cartesian separation of the human mind from the human body. Pike and Selby note that this mechanistic world view also divorces humanity from nature (in our minds) and cerebral thinking from emotion; this dualism is reflected in education, which divides knowledge into subjects and disciplines. The challenge to the mind/body and nature/culture splits has also been raised by feminist pedagogies (hooks, 1994) and ecofeminist philosophies (Griffin, 1995). They propose, in contrast, a "systemic or holistic paradigm," which re-integrates the dualities of the mechanistic worldview, bringing "into interplay the parts which Descartes divorced (subject/object, value/fact, mind/body) and derivatives such as intuition/reason, spirit/matter, feeling/thought, synthesis/analysis)." (Sterling, 1985) Among the sources to draw upon in educating toward a holistic paradigm are the multicultural populations which most of us are now part of.<sup>3</sup>

Glocal education sees the local-global tension not as a dichotomy but as a complex and dynamic relationship. Education which honours peoples' daily lives and personal histories will draw upon and feed a local reality; while education that recognizes the global in the local, and the world itself as a locality (in the sense of its ecological wholeness), will always locate personal stories in the larger picture of multiple social histories. Within the multicultural Focus on Food group lies the potential for uncovering invisible histories and for revaluing the knowledge gained by people

through their daily struggles - both here and there.

A "glocal education," then, reconceptualizes knowledge; it does not dismiss "scientific knowledge" but rather contextualizes it and questions its claims to objectivity and "truth." It considers as equally valid "subsistence knowledge" that honours the interconnections between nature and culture, between the material and the spiritual. Mies and Shiva propose ecofeminism as a "subsistence perspective," suggesting that "women in the South working and living, fighting for their immediate survival are nearer to it than urban, middle-class women and men in the North."<sup>4</sup> I would suggest, however, that in northern cosmopolitan centres such as Toronto, there are now many "southern" women struggling to survive in their new urban environments who are storehouses of knowledge and experiences derived from their southern homelands.

### CRAFTING <sup>5</sup> "GLOCAL" EDUCATION

I want to highlight four aspects of the educational workshops that help shape the praxis of glocal education: 1) using food as an "entree," 2) making women's experience visible, 3) reclaiming indigenous knowledge, and 4) exchanging video conversations across borders:

#### 1) Food as an "entree"

In catalyzing a "glocal" education, food is an entree: the "main course," or content, of the educational process as well as an "entry point" into both the intimate experience of eating and the globalized process of food production, which has so distanced us (Kneen, 1993) from the source of much of what we eat. The device of using objects of daily consumption starts the learning process at a concrete level, from which one can branch out to understand the macro processes related to globalization.<sup>6</sup> Food is clearly an "intimate commodity:" we imbibe, digest and transform it, it becomes a part of us; "you are what you eat," the adage goes. It taps another way of knowing, body knowledge (Griffin, 1995); our responses to food are physical and emotional as well as social and analytical. Food also represents the "fruit of the earth," a direct connection between our bodies and

non-human nature, a link with the land; in indigenous and many peasant cultures, this is a sacred relationship.<sup>7</sup>

Food is also central to women's work, both the daily domestic labour of reproducing the population and managing the household as well as women's predominant role in both subsistence and industrial agriculture. Food stories are easily shared among women in particular, and those stories reveal both the commonalities as well as the differences among women.<sup>8</sup>

One of our collaborative efforts with FoodShare, for example, was a workshop involving 15 graduate students and an equal number of women from the Focus on Food program, with limited formal educational background. Two activities allowed us to make use of some of those differences. A group of students presented a skit called "True Confessions of Tomasita, the Abused Tomato,"<sup>9</sup> a dramatized version of the globalized journey of the tomato which spun an ecofeminist tale around a personified tomato. This was a catalyst for a collective discussion that traced the concomitant journeys of women workers in the various stages of tomato production (from the women planters, pickers, sorters, packers in the plantation to the choppers, packagers, processors in the maquilas to the wholesalers, retailers, cooks and waitresses in Toronto).

The ensuing discussion drew upon the different knowledges represented in the room. Immigrant women offered insight (from their homelands) into the process of the industrialization of agriculture, the pressure to move from subsistence to cash crop production, the impact of pesticide use on the workers. A Colombian woman, for example, recounted the "banana wars" in her country; a Jamaican woman talked about how they now have to import basic foods they used to grow. This "experiential knowledge" was complemented by the scientific and technical knowledge some university students brought to the discussion, by those, for example, who were studying the impact of biotechnological intervention and corporate control of intellectual property rights of seeds representing indigenous knowledge. (Shiva, 1993) While it would be too simplistic to apply the scientific vs. experiential knowledge divide to these

two groups of women, we were able to construct a richer and fuller picture than either group would have been able to construct alone.

We also critically examined our own consumptive practices. Working in groups, we explored three questions: *What foods have you bought recently and how much did they cost? What do you think were the hidden costs in the production of those foods? What alternatives do you have to buying those foods?* This story-telling revealed some interesting commonalities: many students, for example, may endure a temporary poverty, as they live on limited funds, often don't take time to prepare meals, and seek out the quickest and cheapest of foods. The hidden costs identified ranged from food wastes and relocation of workers to advertising and debt repayment, again reflecting a blending of different kinds of knowledge. The alternatives suggested by the mixed groups of 30 women also inspired hope, moving from the more personal kinds of actions one could take (like balcony and rooftop gardening or critical viewing of ads) to more social or political actions (like boycotts and community shared agriculture).

This participatory research process which started with women's daily lives and moved outward to a critical examination of the social/economic/political forces that shaped their practices, was empowering. It affirmed what people knew, the power of collective analysis, and their capacity to understand larger processes; and it led to proposals for concrete and feasible actions that they could take individually and collectively. As part of an educational strategy, food is a connector across differences, an analytical device for sharing different kinds of knowledge, and a base for action.

## 2) Making women's experience visible

One of the ways that peoples' daily lives become affirmed as sources of knowledge is when they are re-presented in visual form, literally "made visible." Photographs can catalyze the telling of peoples' stories as well as engage them in visualizing their lives themselves, from the other side of the camera. In the photography module with Focus on Food, "Photographing Our Lives," we trained all participants to take pictures and put them

together into stories in poster or booklet form. The first assignment involved teams of women photographing their own neighbourhoods around the theme of "healthy communities." Both the content and the process were owned by them; their images and their communities became the focus of the learning. In a society where most images promote official stories of the dominant culture, the very act of claiming the camera as a tool for making visible one's daily life was a political process (Spence, 1995).

The keenest photographers in the group became the documenters of the Focus on Food program over the next eight months. The month before the program ended, I worked with them again to produce photo collages on different aspects of the training. These posters were on display for FoodShare's AGM, reflecting not only what they had learned about food but also what they had learned about visually documenting their lives.

### 3) Reclaiming indigenous knowledge

In a third workshop series, called "Women to Women: Connecting Across Borders," we used food films as catalysts for tapping the women's histories with food production and consumption in their countries of origin. Two of the films focused on agricultural workers in Central America: "Dirty Business" showed the Green Giant plant laying off workers in California and moving to Mexico where the labour is cheaper and environmental standards lower; "Jungleburger" showed Costa Rican peasants who used to survive off rich agricultural land now working in cattle grazing and meat processing to supply northern fast food restaurants with beef. The film follows a cow from the time it is killed to the packaging of beef for export. This upset several women not because of the killing of animals for consumption but rather because of the cruel way they were shot. The film tapped the memory of Carmen, a Jamaican, who recalled the more humane way her father killed a cow on Christmas Day.

These comments revealed a fading memory of a time and place where the relationship with animals was not one of mere commodity, reflecting a knowledge of both more humane and more healthy treatment of animals. This

precipitated a lively debate about the impact on our health of the blood in beef as well as the hormones in the cow.

Such subsistence knowledge was also tapped when the women grew greenhouse plants in the basement of Focus on Food facilities. Arcelia recalled her mother in Mexico using plants for their medicinal qualities:

Before, when we used to get sick, she gave us camomile tea. We got away from those basics when we came here, and people said "Take Tums or take Aspirin". But you don't have to take this stuff, because the plants are better, they're more natural, with no chemicals.

The program affirmed the indigenous practices and motivated these women to find alternatives in their adopted country.

### 4) Video conversations across borders: the "other globalization"

The films also opened up a potential dialogue between the Focus on Food women and women in other countries, involved in various aspects of food production, from the tomato pickers and sorters in Irapuato, Mexico, to the women deep frying chicken at fast food restaurants in Kentucky. At the third and final workshop, we filmed the participants' responses to the women linked to them in other parts of the food chain.<sup>10</sup> We are now editing this material into a "video letter" that can be shared with women in the south represented in the films.

The film "Dirty Business" perhaps best illustrated the corporate practice of moving south for cheaper labour, and its adverse effects on Mexican and Chicano communities and the environment. The responses of the women to the Mexicans reflected their own "global" and increasingly "glocal" consciousness. Nadine articulated where the power lay in the present globalized food system:

The food chain has gotten to the point that now there's just a few big companies who produce everything that they think you

need. What needs to happen is people have to realize for themselves that food isn't a commodity, it's something that's needed for all. So you have to stop seeing it as a commodity, and see it as something that everybody needs, that everybody has to put in so everybody can take out. They distance you from food; I think that's what it is, they distance you.

Her consciousness of how we've been disconnected from the sources of food is accompanied by a sense of the environmental damage caused by such market-driven production:

Look at the erosion of the land. It takes 100-400 years to get proper soil.... These people are being programmed to believe that it's OK to destroy their land for a few bucks now. But what about their children? What about their children's children?

Arcelia, of Mexican origin, understands the ecological connections that are being both obscured and ignored by corporate production:

A lot of these drugs or pesticides are illegal in the U.S., so they move to Mexico; DDT and those pesticides are legal over there. But once they bring all the food here, with all the government cuts, we just want to find what is cheap. And very soon, give us 10-20 years, we're going to be in the same situation as Mexico.

In these cases, southern women immigrants who have come north because of the dynamic forces of globalization offer "wake up calls" to northerners about the human impact of this efficiency-driven and exploitive globalizing process. They offer responses on video which recognize their own links to what's happening to the Mexicans who grow our food. Erica, a Canadian-born woman who lived in the Caribbean, suggests actions we can take:

I like Field to Table's support of all the organic farmers here in Ontario. It's hard to afford, but it's important to buy organic and refuse to participate in the giant corporations.

The actions that these women are taking and are promoting in their families and communities are also seen as one way to counter corporate power. They see the potential of many people joining forces in such actions; Arcelia expresses it poignantly:

Now with NAFTA...., we are connected with Canada, the United States, and Mexico. Sometimes we feel like we don't have much power because we are down here (pointing to the ground). But down here are more people (than up there), and we have more power if we stick together. If we really want to do something about it, we can do it. But it has to be together.

Such hopeful voices resonate with the notion of "globalization from below" (Brecher, 1993), a term referring to the potential of the globalizing of social movements and the cumulative effect of many small local efforts. People are becoming more conscious of their common interests across borders through other globalizing processes like the use of telecommunications. The video letters are one example, using an accessible and effective technology, of how stories are being shared. (Riano, 1994) Six months later we had the opportunity to show some of the same films in the homes of tomato workers in Mexico. They were powerful catalysts, reminding Mexican women that they are not alone in this massive global food system. One woman expressed their interest in a cross-border dialogue: "I wonder if they (the northern consumers) realize the work we do so they can eat tomatoes. I'd like to know what they think."<sup>11</sup>

In this account, I have tried to convey the power of these stories and of the women speaking for themselves, struggling to make the connections through their daily lives as women (mothers, workers, welfare recipients, gardeners, caterers,

community organizers, educators) with the stories of women in other stages of the food journey. Food is the centrepiece, the catalyst, the connector, that can bring low-income women to this table, to this conversation, to this challenge of becoming resistors rather than victims of a globalized food system that degrades people and land alike. Narrative, or storytelling, in spoken or visual form, offers a way of concretizing and connecting the experiences of women, producers and consumers alike, and sharing their knowledge drawn from multiple sources. Let the cameras roll, let the stories flow, may the conversations continue.....

### **GLOCAL EDUCATION - ITS LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES**

The Focus on Food experience offered a place and space for further honing a new concept and practice of "glocal education." As one aspect or branch of popular education (that addresses all forms of oppression and is linked to social movement building), glocal education can be characterized by these principles:

- \* it challenges the dichotomies of body/mind, nature/culture, and local/global central to western scientific thought that's dualistic and disengaged;
- \* it honours the subsistence and body knowledge of all participants--what we have learned through our social and personal experiences;
- \* it recognizes the local grounding of all global phenomena and the global connections present in all local contexts;
- \* it promotes structural systemic analysis, challenging rigid understandings of macro-structures with a (postmodern) sense of the complex and shifting dynamics of local manifestations of global processes;
- \* it links people across borders to give them all a more personal sense of the bigger picture, and, rather than overwhelming them, empowers them to act.

The women whose stories were told, shared, and discussed through the Focus on Food project finished the program with a stronger understanding of themselves as actors in this system, who were not mere victims, but potential change agents. They realized that the smallest of actions, the most personal and local, can have some effect, at least in offering women a sense of their own initiative, connection to food, and potential power. Arcelia sums it up:

I never did gardening before, but when I buy something like watermelon or green peppers, I save the seeds. That's what I'm going to be planting, because as much as I can I'm going to avoid buying my vegetables. I'm going to plant them in my garden, even if it's just on the balcony of my apartment. Because...the corporations ...are controlling everything, and we're just making the rich richer. We don't help by buying the stuff. We have to start taking the matters into our hands...

This could be considered "glocal" thinking and acting.

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## ENDNOTES

1. I tend to concur with Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva that "the 'global' in the global order means simply the global domination of local and particular interests, by means of subsuming the multiple diversities of economies, cultures, and of nature under the control of a few multinational corporations and the superpowers that assist them in their global reach..." In *Ecofeminism*, (New Jersey: ZED Books, 1993) p.9
2. The program ended in August, 1996 and started up again in July, 1997. Three of the graduates of the 1997 program are currently working with the Field to Table catering service.
3. By "most of us" I refer to populations of the growing number of "global cities", and not to increasingly shrinking rural populations which tend to be more homogenous; whenever I leave Toronto I am reminded that my twenty years of living in a cosmopolitan centre has made me feel that multiethnicity is normal, while it is not necessarily the case outside of the big southern Canadian cities.
4. M. Mies and V. Shiva, Op. cit, p. 20. I would also argue that there are women of the "south" in the "north", and that these constructions need to be problematized at several levels.
5. I have deliberately chosen the word "crafting" because it implies, for me, a creative putting together, out of existing materials, i.e., working with "what is". It is both an artistic and an artesanal practice, i.e. it requires imagination and hope as well as a commitment to the everyday, to what can be useful for survival.
6. In a larger project, I am tracing the tomato from Mexican field to Canadian table. See D. Barndt, "Bio/Cultural Diversity and Equity in Post-NAFTA Mexico (Or Tomasita Comes North While Big Mac Goes South)", J. Drdyk and P. Penz, eds, *Global Justice, Global Democracy*, (Halifax: Fernwood Books, 1997)
7. Consider, for example, the way that corn permeates the culture and religion of indigenous peoples of the Americas.
8. My own interest in food, for example, has been deepened by my personal frustration with my double day as a single mother, both bread earner and food preparer, squeezed by the pressures of time and energy as well as by my son's desires for food that have been shaped by the slick advertising of the fast food industry. I easily shared these stories with other mothers in the Focus on Food program. Yet the stories also revealed our differences, across race, class, ethnicity. My concessions to the Kraft dinners that my son craves, for example, are not primarily caused by limited income. With a professor's salary, I can afford better food; not all women have the choice.
9. This drama was initially developed and presented by popular educators from Mexico, the United States and Canada meeting in Alberta in 1994 at the founding assembly of the North American Alliance for Popular and Adult Education.
10. I have explored some of the tensions of women's experiences in the globalized food system in "Women in the Food Chain: Bound, Freed or Connected?", presented to the Sustainable Urban Food Systems Conference, Ryerson Polytechnical University, May 22-25, 1997.
11. Personal interview, Gomez Farias, Mexico, April 1997.

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