



Women and Life on Earth: Voices of Women Series



Jean Grossholtz

„The Cotton Campaign“

**Brought to you by
Diverse Women for Diversity**

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Intro:

Diverse Women for Diversity activist Jean Grossholtz is Emeritus Professor of Political Science at Mt Holyoke College, Massachusetts.

[Diverse Women for Diversity](#), was born at my kitchen table in South Hadley, Massachusetts, in the Fall of 1996, during a conversation between Beth Burrows, of the Edmonds Institute in Washington and Vandana Shiva of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Ecology in New Delhi and myself.

We decided to create an international coalition of women to respond to globalization and its impacts, by creating diverse solutions at the local level and a common defense at the global level. Since this time and with other women at various international conferences, we have put together a global response to biodiversity protection, food security issues, health, and economic self-sufficiency, building on women's experiences and knowledge.

Women involved in environmental and anti- globalization struggles like Christine von Weiszacker and Maria Mies from Germany, Faridah Akhtar from Bangladesh, Elizabeth Bravo from Ecuador and Ursula Oswald Spring from Mexico, contributed to the ongoing creation of this global women's movement deeply connected to local women's organizing. Diverse Women for Diversity organized meetings for Eastern European women in Bratislava, in May 1998, for Latin American women in Seattle in 1999, and for African women in Nairobi in 2000. More recently we met with South Asian women in New Delhi. In January 2004, at the World Social Forum in Mumbai, we mounted a full program of activities and workshops in conjunction with other international activists on topics such as food security, genetic engineering, intellectual property rights, patenting of life forms, biodiversity, and biosafety.

As a result of our work and linking with women worldwide we have come to understand that the three material necessities of life, food, water and clothing can mobilize women locally and globally. In response we have opened up global campaigns around these issues. Our pamphlet on food emphasizing genetically modified corn and high fructose corn syrup was launched at the World Social Forum in Mumbai. Our pamphlet on Water privatization and Water as a Human Right is in press. This is the initial statement on Cotton. This campaign will be launched shortly.

The Cotton Campaign:

The piece gives something of the political history of cotton from wild plant to industrial commodity. It goes without saying that all our work targets the residual effects of European colonization. These in turn are amplified by the current global neo-liberal regime, and its patriarchal capitalist financial institutions - the World Bank and World Trade Organization (WTO).

Yet, as we saw, the mighty fortress of the WTO ministerial meeting in Cancun in September 2003 hit a major snag. It came not from world powers but from four of the 'least developed' African states that wanted only to sell their cotton to the world at a fair market price. United States and European intransigence on this issue is simply one more strand of a centuries-long piracy of northern industrialist piracy of the global south's cotton and related textile industry.

Cotton was a wild plant, a weed we would say, which has been cultivated and used for centuries by people all over the world. Historians seem to agree that India was the site of the first cultivation of cotton, but it was also known and used in Egypt and Peru. Shreds of cloth and written reference to cotton date back seven thousand years. Cotton material more than 7000 years old was found in a Mexican cave, and cloth fragments dating back to about 3000 B.C. were found in the Indus Valley. The beginnings of the global take-over of the world's resources by the industrialists and corporations of the north began not with the WTO, but with the tales of the great riches of the east carried by travelers from Marco Polo and the Crusaders. The possibility of profit drew them in; the need for control drove them to colonize, to build the political and military force to command obedience, to take control over local resources and labor, to realize the extraordinary profits. It is worth noting that empire-building and economic exploitation go hand in hand.

At the beginning of the age of colonization of the global south by the north, India was a leading producer and exporter of cotton to the world's markets. A vibrant trade in textiles-- silks from China, wools from Afghanistan and cotton from India-- created prosperous economies in South and East Asia. Spices drove many of the early economic entrepreneurs to Asia. But for the British, control over the European wool trade was of paramount interest and cotton's intrusion was a threat. At first they declared cotton production or use illegal, but when that did not work, they determined to take over the cotton industry. Control of cotton was no longer a trade issue; it necessitated a political and military take over.

The mechanization of textile manufacture was the leading technological transformation of the first industrial revolution. India, a leading producer and exporter of textiles in the world market, became the focus of British economic interest. By the early 19th century, when technological innovations in weaving and production had led to a mechanized British textile industry, England had gained full

political control over the resources and markets of its colonies, including India. The industrialization of England was based in part on the de-industrialization of India. But cotton was also independently grown and used in Africa. In 1827 explorers in the Ivory Coast region reported that cotton was being grown there, that women spun it and men wove it into cloth. Slave labor was often used. Louis Gustav Binger who explored the Ivory Coast between 1885-1887 reported:

The Mande-jula who are settled here have their slaves weave white bands of cotton streaked with blue similar to that of 'Fourou'. In the villages where I camped there were seventeen looms in operation. Cotton is harvested here. There are fields everywhere. But I did not see any indigo. The village also grows maize and different varieties of millet and sorghum and some peanuts and a lot of rice.¹

The French pressed their African colonies to provide more cotton for export. Peasant cotton production was a heavily labor intensive industry and made use of slave labor. Local communities had a viable economy based on cotton production for local trade, a diversified production that met local needs. Much of the labor was done by women, giving them an important economic status. But from the French view such a system diverted an exportable wealth-producing commodity away from their control. The production of cotton for export became the French goal for the African economies. French military and political control was required to achieve this. French insistence on cotton production for export reduced the amount of land and labor available for domestic food production. French control of cotton prices drove peasant farmers off their land and into the labor market. Small landholders, who previously used part of their land to grow their own food or crops to exchange with their neighbors, became dependent on commercial sources. Women thrown out of productive work were now forced to concentrate on finding food and water for their families. This is how the impoverishment of this region of Africa began.

In the United States cotton spread through the South as slavery provided cheap and intensive labor. In 1793 the American Eli Whitney, patented the first machine to separate the seed from the cotton fiber. The cotton gin sped up cotton production and in much of the world reduced the demand for women's labor. At first the American colonies with their ample supply of slave labor had produced cotton for the British mills. However when the Civil War curbed that supply, the British turned in force to India. The production of cotton in Africa and India increased, but that production and its use were now in the hands of European industrialists supported by colonial regimes. After the civil war the industrialization of the United States began and textile mills sprang up in New England where a constant supply of immigrants provided a labor force.

¹ Thomas J. Bassett. Peasant Cotton Revolution in West Africa Cote d'Ivoire, 1880-1995. Cambridge University Press, 2001. p 30.

Given the access to cheap cotton from India and Africa, the British textile industry expanded, creating technology to fully mechanize production and transferring the production from India to Britain. In the mid 19th century, native cotton traders in India and some other colonies imported the new textile technology and developed their own cotton industry. But this industry was always tied to the markets and prices created by the Northern industrial giants. This new group of powerful merchants turned mill owners competed with the handloom weavers for the common market and the raw material base. The establishment of textile mills in Lancashire and later in India deprived the Indian weaver both of the market and the raw material. The local handloom production was all but obliterated.

The often rapid and violent destruction of Indian and African technology and the skills of its growers and weavers were necessary to ensure the Europeans' virtual monopoly of the market. They had control over raw materials, and had destroyed the handloom industry and skilled labor of their most important competitors. This earlier history of the global north's version of "trade" with the global south is similar to that of the present World Trade Organization. Control of world trade, labor, markets and resources requires military force. For it was not trade but military force that converted the states of Asia and Africa into colonies. Political control of the state, and then of the country's markets and resources destroyed local industries, like textiles. Local institutions of law and the state were destroyed and replaced with what was, in effect, a military dictatorship masquerading as a civil state.

With much the same effect, the "Cold War" and the stand off between the super-powers provided the atmosphere of threat and control that brought the global south under the wing of the West's military machine. This situation was perfect for the continuation and expansion of northern industries' control over the south's economy. The mythology of "development" and Northern aid programs, bilaterally or through the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), masked the reality of Northern corporations' increased control over southern resources, labor and markets. After independence the cotton growers of the global South sought to reestablish their industry and enter into the world market. But instead they were rebuffed by trade controls in the European markets. Well-established cloth manufacturers and cotton growers in the North had developed strong unmovable ties with their governments. Protected by their governments domestically and internationally they continued to control the markets and resources of the global South.

In the United States the southern agricultural interests secured control of the local Democratic Party and were thus able to keep sending the same representatives to their Congressional seats for generations. This gave their Senators and Representatives seniority rights and thus control over the most important Congressional committees. Agricultural interests controlled U.S. trade policy and subsidies and government support for themselves. After World War II European states

and the United States imposed import duties and subsidies to protect their cotton industries. The newly rejuvenated cotton industry of the global South was effectively sealed out of world markets.

Free Markets and Forced Trade:

The experience of four of the least developed African countries was laid before the world at Cancun in September 2003. For these four Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali, cotton accounts for an average of 6.5% of Gross Domestic Product, 66% of agriculture earnings, and 33% of overall export revenues. Cotton was the source of their foreign exchange. But while output rose 14% cotton-related export earnings fell just under a third between 1999-2000 and 2001-2002.²

In the U.S. and European Union cotton is a small part of economic activity. But in West Africa it is critical.

Cotton from mechanized farms using pesticides, as in the United States, is of much poorer quality than West African cotton, provides few jobs and is harmful to the environment. Monsanto's genetically modified cotton with pesticide in it has had serious impacts on butterflies and other important insects. According to the International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC <http://www.icac.org/>) subsidies on cotton amounted to US\$5.8 billion for the 2001/2002 growing season. The US accounted for \$3.3 billion and the European Union for \$1 billion.³

During 2001, U.S. producers received subsidies worth more than the total GDP of Burkina Faso where 2 million people depend on cotton. In 2001 Mali received \$37 million in international aid. However, its export earnings from cotton dropped by \$43 million. Clearly these countries could be capable of self-development and economic growth if their cotton were sold on the world market at a fair price.⁴

According to the World Bank, 15 million growers of cotton in African countries are losing \$250 million each year because U.S. taxpayers subsidize American cotton so that it can be sold below the world market price. In 2001, the cost of cotton in U.S. was \$ 0.9313 a bushel, and the export price was \$ 0.3968 a bushel. American taxpayers made up the \$0.55 difference. From 1995 to 2001, the U.S. dumping of cotton rose from 17% to 57%.(5)

The price of cotton is being driven down by these subsidies, paid for by the citizens of the United States and Europe. In this way, taxpayers are co-opted into creating the impoverishment of African countries. Free trade had been sold as a policy producing a 'level playing field'. But the rules of the WTO were in fact rules of forced trade. Third World countries were forced to open their markets to dumping by removing trade barriers while rich countries' subsidies kept

² "The Doha Round: The WTO Under Fire". The Economist. September 18, 2003.

³ The International Cotton Advisory Committee. ICAC (<http://www.icac.org>)

⁴ Ibid.

increasing, artificially lowering prices and thus destroying the livelihoods of peasant cotton growers and local handloom artisans.

At end of April 2003 Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali and Chad formally submitted a negotiating proposal on cotton to the WTO with clear proposals for moving toward an agreement. As the African countries said at a press conference in Cancun “Africans came to Cancun hoping for solutions to the problems faced by some 15 million cotton producers. African cotton producers received good words. But 24 hours before the end of the Ministerial Conference, the countries that submitted the Cotton Initiative did not receive a response to their problems. Instead they were told to “diversify” their economies. The Collapse of the WTO ministerial meeting in September 2003 was a response to this form of imperial control of local resources and labor. The African delegations noted: “The cost of cotton production in Western and Central Africa is among the lowest in the world. But producers cannot anymore live with their earnings and they could be excluded from the world market to the benefit of producers with higher productions costs receiving massive subsidies⁵

The developing world generally says that the problem with the world trade agreements is the lack of transparency, the failure of the text-drafting process to respond to what the delegates want, and the sheer number of negotiating venues that are impossible to attend. Specifically they object to the chair of committees and working groups making decisions for the whole body. Until and unless these issues are confronted to the satisfaction of the governments of the global South countries, the only trade agreements will be bilateral concessions bullied out of the countries of the South on the threat of sanctions, loss of World Bank loans and IMF stabilization funds, etc.

Diversity and Sustainability:

As Vandana Shiva writes: it is no co-incidence that two symbols of India’s independence struggle were the ‘*Champanan Satyagraha*’ and the ‘*Charkh*’. The *Champanan Satyagraha* was a peaceful revolt against the forced cultivation of indigo as a dye for the British textile industry. The ‘*Charka*’ or spinning wheel was the technological alternative that created self-reliance instead of dependence, and generated livelihoods instead of destroying them. Gandhi’s critique of the industrialization of India on the Western model was based on his perception of the poverty, dispossession and destruction of livelihoods, which resulted from it.

Why must India become industrial in the western sense?’ Gandhi has asked ‘what is good for one nation situated in one condition is not necessarily good for another differently situated. One mans’ food is often another man’s poison... Mechanization is

⁵ Statement of African States at Cancun Ministerial.

good when hands are too few for the work intended to be accomplished. It is an evil where there are more hands than required for the work, as is the case in India.⁶

The spinning wheel symbolized a technology that conserves resources, people's livelihoods and people's control over their livelihoods. In contrast to the imperialism of the British textile industry, it is not labor displacing. It needed people's hands and minds, instead of treating them as surplus or as mere inputs into an industrial process. This critical mixture of decentralization, livelihood generation, resource conservation and strengthening of self-reliance were essential to undo the waste of centralization, destruction of livelihoods, resource depletion and creation of economic and political dependence that had been engendered by the industrialization associated with colonialism. Much the same concerns are apparent in Africa, where the production of cotton could be a local sustainable industry using local tools and labor. The colorful hand-loomed cottons of Africa have all but disappeared from world markets.

On the basis of this understanding, we invite women and men everywhere to support this Diverse Women for Diversity campaign. People can

- Join the movement to get Agriculture out of the WTO and create a fair trade agreement.
- Demand an end to cotton subsidies to U.S. agribusiness.
- Boycott Monsanto's BT cotton and clothing made from it.
- Demand GMO free, Monsanto free cotton from your clothing stores.
- Support the promotion of organic cotton in the Third World.
- Support fair trade in organic cotton.

Cancun demonstrated that the developing world would not remain hewers of wood and drawers of water for the colonial powers of the North. Those days are gone forever. Diverse Women for Diversity is committed to working with the cotton growers of Africa, Asia and Latin America and with the weavers and cotton mill workers to bring a just system of global trade to our clothing industry. Cotton is the world's most useful fabric. We need to regain control over the production and marketing of this critically important product.

⁶ Vandana Shiva communication, February 2004.