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WOMEN *and the* GLOBAL ECONOMY

PODCAST: Who's Bailing Out Whom?: A Conversation with the Union Organizer Meizhu Lui

On this podcast, originally recorded for I.M.O.W's online exhibition Women, Power and Politics, Meizhu Lui talks about the economic crisis and how it's affecting the lives of ordinary American women.

HOST: Welcome to the International Museum of Women and this monthly podcast for the exhibition, "Women, Power and Politics." Each month, we'll be talking to remarkable leaders from around the globe. This month's topic, "Women Organizing Internationally."

In the midst of today's global economic crisis, how does the international story affect individual women's lives?

MEIZHU LUI: *The economy is not this sort of giant machine. It's really about the day-to-day living of ordinary people, and what they face as they try to go to the grocery store, try to get a job, try to get a paycheck, take care of their kids.*

HOST: For more than 30 years, Meizhu Lui has been at the center of economic justice struggles for women, immigrants, people of color and the poor. When almost every economic pundit interviewed on TV seems to be a white man from Wall Street, Meizhu Lui stands out as one of the few women, and Asian Americans, whose expertise is tapped.

Meizhu has a long history of union organizing and has most recently served as the Executive Director of United for a Fair Economy in Boston, Massachusetts. She currently serves as the Director of the Closing the Racial Wealth Gap Initiative for the Insight Center for Community and Economic Development in Oakland, California.

Women, Power and Politics curator Masum Momaya spoke with Meizhu Lui by phone from Washington DC. She began by asking Meizhu how she came to do economic justice work.

LUI: Well, I grew up the daughter of Chinese immigrants, and like most daughters of

Chinese immigrants, I was expected to be quiet and studious, but that did not fit my personality very well. And really, though, I got my start in terms of thinking about the economy when I unexpectedly became a single mother when my son was seven and my marriage fell apart. I suppose it's always unexpected to become a single mother, but I found myself looking for a job in a difficult job market, and ended up in front of a Dunkin' Donuts and going in, because they had hours that were flexible, which I needed for my son. And the manager said to me, "Oh, you Chinese are good workers, aren't you?" So I said, "Ah so, very good," because I really needed a job. I was desperate.

So I got the job, but I remembered that that was the moment when a light bulb in my head went off and I said, "You know what? I'm really going to be asked to work harder than the white women who are in this job, and what my father had always said to me is true, which is that you have to work twice as hard to be equal if you're not white."

And I had never thought that it was going to apply to me, but here I was, and it just made me think, "I really want to do something about this. This is not fair."

MOMAYA: And were you treated in a specific way in addition to your race, also, because you were a single mother?

LUI: Well, I think there were gender issues as well, so that, for example, the people who made the donuts – this was in the mid-70's – the only people who could make donuts were men, and the women were only allowed to serve the donuts. We were called "counter girls." And that made me kind of wonder "What is the special equipment men have that makes them eligible to make donuts that we don't have." But luckily, there was a gender discrimination case later, and women became eligible for that job too.

MOMAYA: So how long did you work in the Dunkin' Donuts?

LUI: I worked in the Dunkin' Donuts for about six months. I came to a bad end. The cash register came up \$24 short. There were four counter girls working the register, and we were each fined six dollars. And that was kind of my breaking point. I said, "You know, I did not steal that money. I shouldn't be fined." And I found out that there was a labor law that made it illegal for them to dock us our pay if the manager had also had their hand in the till, which they had. So I went to the labor board and I sued and I got my six dollars back. Lost my job, but I got my six dollars back. But the main thing was that it felt really good to disenfranchise my boss of his idea that women would just take anything, particularly an Asian woman. He was not expecting me to fight back.

MOMAYA: So that was one of your first experiences of organizing?

LUI: Well, I didn't really organize. It was on my own behalf. I tried to get a couple of the other women to do it with me, but they did not want to do it, so I was actually the only one that was willing to fight it. But I think that experience got me my start because,

number one, there was an injustice that I could see that was not just applying to me, but obviously was applying everywhere. And I figured no matter what job I had, I would probably be running into this kind of thing.

But secondly, learning that there was a labor law that other people had fought before me to allow me to win my case was just a wonderful thing, 'cause just winning my case and knowing I was right was great. So it made me feel like things were possible, and I wanted to be part of a movement where people get together to pass these kinds of laws that make life easier for the next generation of workers, particularly women workers.

MOMAYA: So what were some of the things that you continued to do from there?

LUI: Well, from there, I, again, still looking for a job with hours that I needed. I ended up taking a food service hospital in Boston. And none of the hospitals, except the public hospital, were unionized.

I have to say that working in that cafeteria was another point of epiphany for me in terms of being Chinese and joining the working class. My father had gotten to the point where he was a researcher at a hospital back in Ann Arbor where I grew up. And if I had been around some of the people he knew in the cafeteria at the hospital where he worked, they would have treated me with some respect. But as a working class woman working at the cash register at this hospital, I was treated like an infant. You know, the doctors who I saw as respectable and respecting people were not so at all. They would kind of call me, like, "Cute little Chinese doll" kind of thing, and it was just really eye-opening and disgusting at how class makes a difference as well. So again, it was just an eye-opening experience in terms of gender and class.

MOMAYA: And were many of your fellow hospital workers also working-class women of color?

LUI: Most of them were, yes. At that level of job, kitchen workers, housekeepers, almost all were people of color. But it also taught me that when it comes to women's work, men of color are allowed to do women's work. So, for example, housekeepers and kitchen workers were also men of color, not white men. Most white men wouldn't be caught dead in those kinds of jobs, partly because they're considered women's work.

In fact, if you look at the history of the Chinese in the United States, it was Chinese men who started laundries, which are considered women's work. White men didn't want to do their own laundry, so Chinese men found that niche. So there's a real connection, too, between gender and race.

MOMAYA: And what was the experience like of trying to organize into a union?

LUI: Well, it was fascinating, partly because I had grown up as most children in the

United States, believing that we have certain kinds of rights: the right to free speech, the right to organize and so on. But what I found was that those rights stop at the door of the business, so we weren't allowed to talk about the union. People were really intimidated. I was just surprised at how much fear there was inside the workplace.

And, of course the management had the right to hire union busters, but we didn't have the right to talk to people about the union. I had a great job, because as the cashier in the cafeteria, I could surreptitiously hand out union literature, and so on.

But I think one of my big lessons, too, in terms of class issues, was from one of my fellow kitchen workers, Bessie, who was an older African-American woman. We were sitting down to our break one day and it was approaching lunchtime, and a doctor came up to the grill and started knocking on the counter to tell us that he was ready for his lunch.

And just the way I had been brought up, I thought, "Well, my goodness, we better get up and serve the guy because he's a doctor and he's really important and he's really in a hurry." And Bessie says to me, "You know, when I go to the doctor, they always make me wait. I'm on my break and he can wait for his lunch!"

It was just such a great...it was just a moment for me where I was like, "My God, you know, she's absolutely right! Nobody is that important or can't wait for a minute, you know. It's our right to take this break."

So I found that my worldview gradually shifted, so while I had been before sort of looking at things from a more middle-class point of view and really kind of trying to identify that way, over time, my perspective shifted and I really didn't care what they thought anymore of me, I didn't get insulted by them, by what they said, because what was important to me was my friends and co-workers.

And again, I think when I started, I had gotten those jobs partly out of necessity, but I really stayed by choice, because I found that working with this group of people and trying to figure out ways to uplift all of us was really where I wanted to be.

I started reading, and one of the people that I admired was Eugene Debs. He was a Socialist candidate for president at one point, but he said, "I don't want to rise from the masses. I want to rise with the masses." And I really took that as my motto. But I think at that time, there was just a lot of radical activity going on, and I did become a socialist. I joined a socialist organization, and I think that also kind of helped support me to keep doing what I was doing.

MOMAYA: Could you comment on some of the differences that you see now in terms of the union movement and kind of the trends that have occurred in the last few decades?

LUI: Yes, for one thing, it's not necessarily the fault of the unions, but it's the fault of the way the economy has gone in that so many companies have figured out how to move a lot of their operations abroad. So whereas even in the 70's, you still had people that were lifetime employees of one, one business or one institution like the hospital, there were people who were hired there right out of high school and they were going to retire from there. You don't see that anymore.

So stability, job stability, people's attachments to their jobs, both in reality, like the length of time they're going to be there, but therefore, psychologically as well, makes it harder, I think, for people to feel like, "I'm going to improve things where I am."

The other thing is that, because of the politics of that time, a lot of us felt that it was important to organize from the ranks, like putting yourself together with the people that you're organizing among, so that your lot is really thrown in with theirs. Whereas today, I see younger people who want to do union organizing, for example, not going into the workplace, but getting jobs as union organizers and doing it more from above. And I don't think that's a good trend.

But I think that there are some changes going on that are positive as well, certainly in terms of women. I mean, I know when I started doing union work my own image of a union activist was a white construction worker in a hard-hat. So I didn't really think of a Chinese woman in a dietary food service uniform as a union activist.

And actually, as I went on, I became president of my local, and I really enjoyed sort of breaking that stereotype. I guess maybe that's a theme of my life. You know, I keep feeling like it's part of my job to show that, especially Chinese or Asian women are not only, you know, suitable for certain kinds of jobs or certain roles, but that we can really do anything. So I like to kind of try to break that mold.

But I think that today, you see so much organizing going on among women of color, still, in the garment industry. In some cases, many of these are immigrant women. Some of the farm worker organizing is women. So, think that women have a leadership role to play in a revitalized union movement.

MOMAYA: So I want to pick up on this theme of breaking stereotypes, and also women's leadership within the economy. One of the things that I've noticed in trying to gather information about the current economic crisis is that most of the talking heads and the people who are cited as experts are white men who work on Wall Street. And it's been really hard to find women, women of color, immigrant women in particular, who are being asked about their analysis of what's going on. And I'm wondering if you have thoughts on that.

LUI: Well, certainly, in whatever arena of life in the United States, there's a white boys' network. Those are the voices that are heard. I mean, just take a picture of Congress,

you know, and see who's in charge. Or look at the people who are in charge of these banks and financial institutions. And while a few, you know, just a minor percent, just an odd duck here and there that's a woman or a person of color, it's still, after all of these years, it's still a white man's society.

I think there are efforts to break into that. So for example, in the project that I'm working on now, which is closing the racial wealth gap, one of the things that the Insight Center for Community Economic Development has done is to compile a clearinghouse, a list of experts of color in the economic field, in the asset-building field in particular, and post them on our website, so that for those who are looking for an expert can't say, "Well, I don't know where one is. I can't find one."

However, we're finding that people don't automatically go to those sites. They're not really looking. They don't really see it as a problem that their talking heads all look the same and all come from the same backgrounds. So we're thinking of ways to more proactively get those voices into the media and to become sort of opinion leaders. But that has not happened yet, and it's not easy to break that old-boy network thing.

MOMAYA: Well, one of the many reasons we were interested in speaking with you is to feature your voice as part of the conversation that's going on, especially in terms of the current economic crisis.

LUI: I think part of the thing is that women's style is different from men's, so that often, while we do use data, we always start with stories, and we tell our own stories, so I guess, even just thinking about this interview, you know, I started with telling you my story about how I got interested in the economy.

We didn't start with, you know, just some data or some class I took, you know? It's really about our personal lives, and I think that we have to break the mold and we have to break into the style, the methods of how things are done. And to, you know, there's a more human way that we approach all of this, so the economy is not this sort of giant machine. It's really about the day-to-day living of ordinary people, and what they face as they try to go to the grocery store, try to get a job, try to get a paycheck, take care of their kids. I mean, that's really what it is, and women are more likely to emphasize that, but it's not what is marketed by the mainstream media.

MOMAYA: So I want to ask you the first question that's being asked of everyone that's interviewed on the topic. And that is, how bad is the current economic crisis?

LUI: Well, first of all, the crisis, at the bottom, has been going on for quite a while. So it wasn't really named as a big crisis until it just started to hit the pocketbooks of wealthy investors. So, you know, job loss has been going on for a number of years. A real income has not increased for a long time, so that people have been living on less and therefore borrowing more, and they've been encouraged to borrow more and more so that the

savings rate in the United States is zero, or a little bit less than zero. So people have no cushion.

But that has been encouraged by both the government and the financial sector, so the dirty little secret of our economy is that it has really been built on the debt of ordinary folks. So if we think about how do we measure the success of our economy, it's by gross domestic product, which is how much money is circulating in the economy. So if you're buying stuff on credit, that looks good for the economy, even though you totally can't afford it and it will come back to haunt you, as it has in this foreclosure crisis.

It also looks good for the economy if you are a wealthy investor and you're buying stocks and bonds, even though that doesn't create any new value, doesn't create any new jobs. It's just gambling, but it shows up on the books as positive for the GDP. So I think really, as we think about this economy, we really have to think about restructuring pretty basically, and thinking, again, more clearly about how can we measure success so that it really reflects what is going on for ordinary people so that often, we read the paper and it says, "Oh, the GDP is, is up. The economy's doing well." So then you're then you're sitting there thinking, "Well, what's wrong with me?" And you sort of go into a self-blame thing. "Well, everybody must be doing great. What's up with that, you know?"

So part of, I think, my job, too, is to help people understand that it's not their own fault that there are forces larger than them. And yeah, this crisis has now hit the wealthy, and they're freaking out.

MOMAYA: One of the questions, the follow-up question, actually, that I had to ask you was that, if you listen to the news, you'd think the crisis is at this moment in time, but the precipitating factors have been going on for a while and have been in place for a while.

And I imagine that the things that you've named have been hitting groups in different ways, have been hitting women, specifically, women who are single heads of households, have been hitting immigrants, have been affecting people of color in ways that are very different from the investors on Wall Street.

LUI: Yes, absolutely. And I mean, there's still just discrimination. I heard of a case of mortgage brokers who read the obituary pages to see who was been widowed. So elderly women, particularly in communities of color, who they suspect don't know a lot about the housing market, go to those houses and tell the widow that who may in fact need some money, that she can get out a loan and get a lot of money based on her home equity. The house is paid for, but once she takes out that loan, she owes it to the bank, and then the next thing you know, she's out of a house and out on the street.

So it's just a really cruel situation, but yes, women of color have been hard-hit, always at the bottom of the economic ladder, and the first to get knocked off.

MOMAYA: And have you, in your research, encountered trends on whether there are similar patterns happening in other places around the world?

LUI: Well, I think in many or most countries, there are more social safety nets. So, for example, health insurance might be provided for. Some countries have much better unemployment benefits, so those are things that can really mitigate an economic crisis for a family. I think, though, that in terms of people of color all around the world, unfortunately those are the groups that are still the hardest hit if we just look at whole nations, just the policies that we have toward them really sort of suck the wealth and resources out of those countries and leave them with not much.

So if you look at Haiti, for example, and the recent natural disasters. The natural disaster was exacerbated by unnatural disasters caused by just the impoverishment of the whole country by, especially by foreign investors who've sort of sucked everything out of it so that people have had to resort to cutting down the forests in order to cook their food or to heat their homes. And they just really don't have a choice, but with all of that, families have been completely wiped out, have been crushed into mudslides and so on. So I think we have some pretty explicit examples around the world of how people of color have been really hurt by global economic policies.

I think the hopeful signs are really at the local level, where people have gathered together. There's some women's economic development projects in Africa, for example, where women who are widows because of the wars have banded together to have their own flocks of cows and things like that, and have started their own cooperative economic systems, or local ideas, where people really focus on their own community and get the trade resources or get the money to flow within their own community rather than getting a little bit of income and spending it at Wal-Mart and lining the pockets of the Walton brothers and sisters, who each have \$15 billion apiece.

So, you know, I think some of the answers lie in our making sure that our money stays within our communities, that it transfers from hand to hand, that it adds value like a snowball rolling around in the community.

MOMAYA: And do you see that happening in the U.S. as well?

LUI: I think there are some small examples of innovative ideas but we need much more of it. For example, in the Mission District in San Diego, there's a project in which there's a shopping mall being developed, but shares have been sold to the people who live in the neighborhood. So rather than money flowing out, the success and the people shopping at that shopping mall will accrue to them in terms of their own shares and their own assets in that project. So it also will stop them from being displaced, as often

happens with that kind of development. So there are some newer ideas that are being tried out, and I think there are some successes.

MOMAYA: Why are we challenged on that front, if we see sort of local economic development and community economic development taking route, for example, in Africa or in Asia, and we know that that, piece by piece, has sort of helped to alleviate some larger economic impacts. Is there something different about the United States?

LUI: Well, I think it's just a much more complex society. Like, to start a business here, you can't just roll out your blanket and start to sell things. There's all this licensing. There's capital needs. So it's really much more complicated.

So I think, too, that, you know, the answer is not so much in those smaller ideas, although they are good ones, and I would like to see them grow. But the biggest changes have always been made by public policies, and I just think that we need to be empowered to understand that the economy is not so complicated that we can't intervene, that we can't use our vote, that we can't use our activism to change some of those policies at the top.

So even in thinking about this crisis right now, rather than allowing all of our tax dollars— which, as we always say, it is our money – rather than allowing our politicians to use it to bail out those at the top, we really need to demand that our own dollars be used to invest in our own communities.

MOMAYA: How did you feel about the bailout, the most recent \$700 billion bailout?

LUI: I didn't think it was good, because it did not address the problems at the base, and, sure, people might need to borrow money and all that, but why don't we just put it into the hands of people directly? Why can't there be more direct methods?

After the Depression, there was a government home ownership loan corporation that was started, and people could go directly to that institution to get money to help them last out the storm, that particular financial storm.

Of course, unfortunately, it did not apply as much to the families of color. Very few of those loans went to families of color, so we have to be careful this time around that they would be equitably distributed. If anything, they should be targeted toward communities of color, because that's where the home ownership loss is centralized.

But that's just an example of where the government could help people at the base rather than going through this intermediary bailing out the banks and then thinking that they're going to help the people. Why not just go directly to helping the people?

MOMAYA: Yeah, it sounds like trickle-down economics yet again.

LUI: Yet again, which has been discredited several times already, and yet we keep going back to the same old thing.

MOMAYA: And what are some recommendations that you would have either for policy or for organizing?

LUI: Well, one of the key things I'm working on right now is of the issue of assets. So for a long time, our country has focused mostly on income. When we think about lifting people up out of poverty, how do we give them some income supports, whether that be welfare or transitional assistance, as it, as it has morphed into today, or employment benefits, or things like that. We need to, not to say that we should stop those things, because people do need income, but we have to make sure that they are allowed to accumulate assets as well.

If you think about it, like, even if you have an income support for awhile, and then all of a sudden, you do get a job by some stroke of great fortune, that lifts you above the line in which you can collect transitional assistance, for example, the guidelines right now don't allow you to have more than \$2,000 worth of assets.

So you get that slightly higher-paying job, but you lose your Medicaid benefits. You lose your childcare support. You know, you lose your housing voucher. So your expenses skyrocket while your income has only gone up a little bit, and because of the eligibility for getting transitional assistance, you only have \$2,000 in the bank or less.

So that's not going to get you through, so we really need to think about how do we help people build assets. And I think that that's going to be something that we really have to address in the future. And right now, the racial gap is enormous. Families of color only have fifteen cents to the dollar of assets held by whites, so we need to figure out ways to really close that gap.

When you think about it, it's a matter of intergenerational, success and wellbeing. If your parents don't have any savings or assets, then they can't send you to college. They can't help you with a down payment on a home. So you're basically starting from scratch all over again. But if you can have some of those kinds of assets, which most white families do, then you can give your kids a head start. So, you know, we will continue to see this racial divide if we don't address the issues of wealth and assets.

MOMAYA: And do you think the changes, are public policy-specific?

LUI: Yes, that's right, and there are states that are working on this, so there are people that are definitely thinking about all of this. A lot could be done with our tax code too, because right now, we give incentives to those who already have money to save more and to accumulate more. So for example, the capital gains tax decrease that has already

happened under President Bush, and that McCain would like to actually increase, I mean, it's only wealthy people that get any income from capital gains, and if we say we value work so much, why don't we, you know, cut taxes on income from work instead of income from wealth.

So there's ways in which we can look at our tax code. Home mortgage interest deduction. I mean, you could have a million dollar home and claim that deduction but you can be a renter and there's no incentive. There's no deduction for a renter.

So we need to kind of reverse things and do what really should be done in a democratic country is to figure out not how to make the rich richer, but how to create a pipeline so that everyone can be lifted up.

In the United States, the top tax rate after World War II was 91%. And nobody said "Boo!" I mean, it was considered fair if you have \$1 million, even if 90% is taxed away, you still have \$100,000, which is a lot more, at that time, than most other people. You were still wealthy in comparison to everyone else, so I think that over time, though, now the tax rate is something like, what, 36% or somewhere in there.

So we really cut that a lot, so our taxes are much less progressive than they used to be. And as we see the growth of billionaires and the growth of income at the top, we certainly need to start taxing some of that away and plowing it back in as an investment for other people to be able to rise up.

I think right now, people need to be informed more. I think the economy has been so mystified. It has become this thing that even though you're a part of it and you should have a lot of say in it, they pretend that it's so complicated that you really have nothing to say about it, and if you do try to make your voice heard, you're just crazy and uneducated, and so, for example, all of the anger on the part of the people that said, "No, we don't want the \$700 billion bailout," was immediately shouted down by the folks at the top saying, "Oh, you people don't know what you're talking about. If you keep up with this, you're really going to be in trouble." And people kind of got intimidated by that.

So I think there is a need for a lot of education about how the economy works and to get people to understand that sometimes, their common sense is actually more correct than what the so-called experts are saying.

MOMAYA: And is there anything else that you would like to add?

LUI: I guess, just in terms of women's leadership and women of color leadership, it's still a real struggle, and I think just my own experience is that, even when you are put in a leadership role, you still don't get the same respect and credit that white men get. So

that we still have a long way to go, but it's really critical that we continue to try to get those positions of leadership, that we speak out and that we speak in our own voices.

I think, sometimes I feel like, “Okay, if I say it this way, if I say it in the way that I want to say it, everybody's just going to look at me like I didn't say anything.” You know how often it says that you are invisible, even when you're talking. But then I always try to keep myself to, not just trying to fit in into the mold, but to break the mold and to, hopefully that we will set a different mold.

Another person that I always had looked up to was Bella Abzug, who said, “Will, women change the nature of power, or will power change the nature of women?” And I think, too often, the answer is the latter, so that I think all of us need to keep remembering that we need to change the nature of power, and if we do so and exercise power in a different way, take power, then we can remake our society in a different mold.

HOST: You've been listening Meizhu Lui, Director of the Closing the Racial Wealth Gap Initiative for the Insight Center for Community and Economic Development in Oakland, California. She was in conversation with Masum Momaya, curator for *Women, Power and Politics*, at the International Museum of Women in San Francisco.

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