

THE GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT AGENDA IN THE UK: A STOCKTAKING MEETING

NOTES FROM MEETING HELD ON FEBRUARY 19TH 2007
AT THE INSTITUTE OF COMMONWEALTH STUDIES, LONDON

Background

A meeting was held in October 2006 at Queen Elisabeth House hosted by Barbara Harris White and organised by Tina Wallace (International Gender Studies at QEH) under the auspices of the Women's Study Group of the DSA. The intention was to stand back and look at where gender is in the development agenda with a group of people committed to and concerned about what has happened to gender in the past few years. The list of participants is at the end of this note.

A number of separate ideas and initiatives are being taken forward as a result of that meeting; one of these was to organise a follow up meeting to focus on the potential for broad-based external pressure and lobbying to help sustain and strengthen the recent apparent resurgence of interest from both some big international NGOs as well as European official development agencies (including DFID) in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.

It was suggested that such a meeting could be organised in the New Year and hosted by the new international Research Programme Consortium (RPC) on Pathways of Women's Empowerment jointly with the Gender and Development Network (GADN) and the Women's Study's Group of the DSA.

The RCP took the initiative because of a specific element of the RPC that is concerned with the actors, norms, beliefs, ideas, networks and institutions associated with global policy processes that impact on women's empowerment. This element is convened by Rosalind Eyben at IDS, Sussex. For this 'global' element of the RPC the primary communication aim is to work with and support those feminists active in global arenas – in civil society networks, inside governments, in international development agencies, academia or in the media – to explore how new ideas and knowledge can help them make more informed decisions as to where and how to invest their energies and thus through their actions be more fruitful in supporting the construction of pathways of women's empowerment.

The **purpose of this February meeting** was, by linking activists, practitioners, researchers and theorists, to:

- explore and learn from our collective knowledge of the history of lobbying on gender and development in the UK; and
- assess the current state of gender equality and women's empowerment policy and practice in international aid and to determine what common practical steps could usefully be taken for a revitalised lobbying agenda.

The morning session, facilitated by Rosalind Eyben from the Pathways Research Programme Consortium **concerned collective reflections and enquiry about the history of the last 20 years** of the gender and development work in the UK: *how, why, what, who*.

A quick straw poll showed that about one-third of those present were already engaged in the GAD lobby in 1987 and another third were active by 1997. We started by asking for reflections from those with the longest memory and then moved forward to the last decade.

The decade started very hopefully with the Copenhagen women's conference that promised to be extraordinarily influential with a report from DAWN that set out a radical agenda based on global solidarity. Organisations such as Women Working World Wide were established at this time. The DAWN report, was an exemplar of how voices from the South had become more significant than in the previous decade, as part of a wider academic trend in post-colonial studies and challenges to hegemonic Northern discourse. Oxfam, for example, was collecting and publishing experiences from all over the world as women themselves represented them. Although later, much of this was lost as NGOs became more corporate and switched to glossy and carefully crafted publications, this tradition is maintained through the Oxfam journal, Gender and Development. Yet, while certain emerging issues, such as HIV and Aids were recognised and responded to, others such as growing religious fundamentalism were over-looked.

The Nairobi Women's Conference (1985) was significant for African women's organisations that mushroomed at that time with African women claiming their own space and voice. Yet, overall the women's movement remained insensitive to fundamental issues of race and power that were shaping development agendas.

Meanwhile both the Copenhagen (1980) and Nairobi agendas were being lost because of the debt crisis and the predominance of structural adjustment

policies. Yet, within Europe it was a moment of progressive change with the EU taking the initiative on women's rights and an equal opportunities agenda emerging that began to influence views on women and development. 'Even the old left started to take women's rights seriously.'

At this time, there was an active – although sometimes challenging - interface between scholars and practitioners and feminist theory was being absorbed, albeit in sometimes distorted ways into mainstream development thinking. By 1987 there was a lot of creative energy and excitement about the opportunities opening up, for example by Chris Patten, then Minister for Overseas Development, encouraging advocacy and lobbying. There were regular meetings with staff from all sections of the Ministry on themes such as women in rural life, microfinance, the environment etc. The lobby met in advance and agreed their agenda. This relatively small group of people from NGOs and academic institutions worked well together. The mix was really valuable and it carried on right through to the early 1990's without losing its edge. The interface between academia and practice was exemplified in the establishment of WOMANKIND Worldwide.

Yet the 1980's was also the decade when gender became less political and more technical. Ground was lost to more technical analysis about the impact of structural adjustment policies. Yet, as it became more technical, so it became more acceptable and consultants were increasingly being hired to 'inject gender' into projects such as those in health or agriculture that previously were designed never to take gender analysis into account. Thus, there was a steady drift from a feminist discourse to one of gender reflecting the connections and disconnections between those who came to gender and development work through the route of social movements (including those in the UK such as Greenham Common) and those who came to it through a more instrumental approach that led to a more, diluted, acceptable face of feminism.

In the late 1980's there still prevailed a considerable amount of quite explicit and sometimes aggressive resistance by international development organisations. 'Culture' served as the excuse for the Ministry and big NGOs not to listen to advocates for women's rights: "We can't go there and tell them what to do with their women". The lobby was discouraged from placing violence against women on the agenda because of the strong backlash this would create within the Ministry. Even in religious-based organisations such as Christian Aid and Quaker Peace and Service advocacy for women's rights was very difficult. Much of the impetus for working on women's rights and gender issues came from the field so that over time women working in NGOs

abandoned the effort to change their organisations at the centre and focused on gender sensitive practice overseas, which perhaps eventually also led to a dilution of the lobby itself here in the UK. This was further diluted by the growing poverty agenda and the danger of only working with/seeing women in relation to poverty reduction, and the growing diversity agenda which listed gender as only one criterion for exclusion and subordination.

Preparing for Beijing created its own energy but at the forum itself there was clear evidence of different agendas. The concern of women from Europe about sexual rights was very different from those from Africa who were concerned with women's rights to livelihoods, peace and security. Democratisation, first in Latin America and then in Africa led to a political engagement by the grassroots and a contestation for political space that is strikingly absent in Europe. Despite this energy and creativity, African women's movements and writing were however still largely ignored by gender and development specialists in Europe. One significant change at a global level occurred in relation to speaking out about violence against women: from the 80s, where violence against women could not be discussed in government and was largely absent in public life in the form of legislation and/or debate both in the UK and internationally, to the 90s and particularly after Beijing and the past 10 years which has seen a significant recognition by a large number of countries of the need to address violence against women publicly.

Meanwhile, the gender and development lobby, for the first time part of the official delegation at Beijing, began to lose some of its dynamism in the years after 1995 when this trend established at Beijing of co-opting the lobby was reinforced through the open door policy of the Labour Government: the clarity of issues one could lobby for evaporated. By Beijing + 5, the lobby's energy was dwindling. Yet, the favourable policy rhetoric of the current government has not been translated into action on the ground. Meanwhile, the gender planning training approach institutionalised in DFID from the early '90's had run its course but was not replaced by anything else equally comprehensive.

At the same time, the organisations that had been so resistant to change in the 1980's, continued to resist in the 1990s, although in less obvious ways. In NGOs, the marketing people became more dominant and squeezed out women's own experiences when they found these did not raise money. Organisation intransigence in turn led to a gradual decline in funding women's organisations that has in the last five years or so become a major issue.

The discussion highlighted the shifts that did take place during the 1970's, 80's and 90's and the changing challenges facing feminists: while gender increasingly became an accepted part of development discourse it appears that the more widely gender rhetoric was used the more instrumental and less radical and transforming it became. While a few individuals, academics and practitioners, and organisations kept their radical edge, for many gender became increasingly an activity of checklists, focal points, and cascading training rather than a prism through which to challenge and change the existing power imbalances so detrimental to women's lives. The growing interest in masculinities, while potentially emancipating in fact often refocused energy and work on to men, sometimes to the detriment of the women.

The afternoon session, facilitated by Brita Fernandez Schmidt, Chair of the GADN and Tina Wallace looked **at what we can learn from some of this history and explored the key issues we are currently facing.** It also started a discussion about where to go in future and how to coordinate our efforts better.

1. Some of the key issues that were identified include: The round-up of current events/activities from the group showed a wide range of work around March 8th but a real lack of co-ordination and shared working. The focus seems fragmented and largely locked up in each organisation. GADN tries to ensure co-ordination, with some successes.
2. The current lobbying with DFID around the White Paper and the gender equality plan lacks energy. It is not concrete or strategic enough. Not enough access to key people is available and work is not always well directed; there was a sense of disappointment with recent meetings around the gender plan. Are feminists clear enough what they are lobbying for? Are they too responsive to DFID initiatives rather than trying to change the terms of the debate about development and rights?
3. There are many other networks, e.g. on trade, HIV and AIDS – how can feminist organisations link better to these?
4. There is room to influence research more widely, e.g. around climate change
5. Is there one big campaign that everyone could focus on because each organisation has a small voice? Next year is the year of rights. Can we think innovatively and bring key subjects together, linking them in creative ways, e.g. environment and women's rights? How can we work together more supportively and effectively, and strengthen collaborative systems? How to ensure activists are included and we bridge the academic/practitioner divide. We need to recognise the heavy workloads of everyone though and keep expectations real.

6. Is there such a thing as a feminist approach to partnership? Has this been explored?
7. The role and potential of GADN : the GADN can share information and use its email updates and newsletter to link academics, practitioners and activists. The GADN can bring new issues on the agenda and support discussion. The GADN can talk about the impact of policies on real women's lives based on the fact that the majority of its members are NGOs working with partners in the global South. But it is also important to acknowledge that the GADN can only be as active as its members and with gender being less of a priority for many NGOs this is impacting on the GADN's ability to be more active.
8. The need to translate research into practice
9. The need for building pressure within UK for change- no-one is really hassling DFID about gender anymore, no parliamentary questions or pressure from the public

Discussion on the ways forward

The afternoon ended with a quick round up of what might happen next.

GADN will continue to do information sharing, build membership, try and include academics, co-ordinate around policy work on gender issues.

BRIDGE at IDS works on information sharing and getting research out to practitioners, through website, newsletter, packs and SIYANDA

IDS RPC will be working on research and dissemination of findings, as will the RPC hosted in Hong Kong and the that International Gender Studies at QEH, Oxford is involved with.. These programmes will be a good source of rich field research in the coming period and will have websites for dissemination.

DFID offered one meeting a year to discuss gender issues- this is something GADN would be well placed to follow-up and ensure that it happens with DFID.

The areas of work for a new DSA women's sub-group, to complement the wider group headed by Haleh Afshar, were;

1. Providing reflective spaces for women from activists, academics, practitioners, students, to come together to think through critical issues, such a revisioning feminism, is there a feminist approach to partnership,

how to reclaim a feminist agenda in the gender and development work. One suggestion was for two meetings a year to provide this space for sharing, thinking, and structured discussions and decision making.

2. Running a panel at the next DSA conference, particularly focusing on the issues of gender from 'the ground'. ICW would like to present their research with positive women and Transform Africa would like to present on African perspectives on the current gender paradigms. Other people may have research/practice from their fieldwork that they would also like to present. Tina Wallace is willing to explore this idea further in the coming weeks.

Feedback on these tentative proposals are welcome.

These notes were written by Rosalind Eyben, Brita Fernandez Schmidt and Tina Wallace who were the co-organisers of the meeting.

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