

Research Proposal

Name of research project: Feminist activists in global policy organisations

Submitted by (researcher(s) and hub): Rosalind Eyben, global hub

RPC Theme: Building constituencies

Summary of project This is a two year participatory action research project involving a group of feminist activists working from inside international development organisations (bilateral, multilateral and INGO). The aim is to explore how they are seeking to shape international practice and global policies so as to open pathways for women's empowerment and to block or render harmless those practices and policies that you judge as potential obstacles to these pathways. It is an ethnographic research project in that it is concerned with every day practice. After a recent meeting of the DAC Gender Net, one of those present emailed me with the comment that despite the utility of the meeting, she still felt that members were not getting enough support in knowing what "they should do differently tomorrow". This project aims to help answer that question.

1. Justification

Effective reflective practice and reflexivity are transgressive of stable and controlling orders; they lead cogs to decide to change shape, change place, even reconfigure whole systems (Bolton 2006:204)

This quotation expresses the change the project is seeking to bring about. It is Quixotic in making an enormous leap of faith about the power of agency but is underpinned by a theory of change based on complexity theory which posits that small actions can be highly disruptive in an inherently unstable system.

It is expected that additional research questions will be developed during the course of the research by those engaging in it but some initial questions identified in the scoping report and with the advisory group include:

- How do feminists in global policy spaces discern their room for manoeuvre and what are their strategies and day to day tactics of engagement?
- How does power discipline their autonomy in terms of their capacity for reflexive learning and their choices concerning the kinds of knowledge they use in internal advocacy?

- How do they define success and the conditions required for making a difference?
- What is the professional self-identity of feminists working within global organisations and policy spaces and how does that interact with their concept of risk taking for securing change in favour of women's empowerment?
- How and to what extent are 'femocrats' part of informal and formal transnational feminist networks and how does such engagement shape their capacity to influence policy processes?
- Is there anything specifically 'feminist' about working for change in these organizations, as distinct from other policy themes? Does this influence the choices made in terms of strategies and pathways?
- Reflecting on whether they are themselves obstacles to change. Whether they have a level of power to control how their organisation works on gender and the different forms of power that they have access to.

True enumerates the number of ways 'femocrats' have made a difference in shaping policy formations while suggesting that there is a need to extend research efforts to study what impact do they have in global policy institutions since there have been "no studies to date that investigate changes in the institutional culture of international organizations as a result of the presence of feminist-oriented women." (True 2003:) Little research appears to have been undertaken since Razavi and Miller (1998).

At the scoping workshop and at a scoping meeting with DAC Gendernet, a number of femocrats expressed enthusiastic interest in researching their own experiences and struggles within such bureaucracies. Since then, approximately 15-20 staff in the target organisations have confirmed their interest in participating.

2. Methods

The research will be facilitated by Rosalind Eyben who will recruit a self-selecting panel of between 12-15 feminist activists (men as well as women) professionally employed within international development organisations to work on GE/WE policies and based both in headquarters as well as country offices. The primary research methods will be those commonly used for reflective practice research, namely first and second person enquiry. Because of the multiple demands on the time of those involved in the research, the methodology must be inherently flexible and responsive so as to facilitate the continuing participation and interest of those who have accepted the invitation to be involved in the project.

First person inquiry means panel members undertaking participant observation of their own daily professional experience, both seeking to address the research questions listed above (and others that the panel may collectively identify) and more specifically seeking to record and critically reflect and seek to explain instances of both unexpected pathways through the system that appear to be making a positive difference, as well as those that run into the sand or encounter active resistance. Panellists will be encouraged to open an archive to keep email messages and other documentation, as well as maintain some kind of fieldwork journal for recording positive and negative 'ah ha' moments. Bearing in mind they will all be over-worked and likely to be weary of having to write even more than what they have to do

anyway, they will be encouraged to keep audio or video diaries, with appropriate training provided.

Second person inquiry involves collective setting of questions and sharing of findings among the members of the panel. This can take place in two ways (a) through a meeting at the start of the research period, a further one some 12 months later and a final one at the conclusion of the research (b) through informal emailing and telephone conversations as well as chance encounters in global policy spaces. In addition, Eyben will organise one-to-one dialogues with each of the co-researchers to encourage even further a process of reflective inquiry and to help organise the recording and archiving process. I also plan to attend a number of meetings in global policy spaces where I might expect to have the opportunity on the margins of providing support and assistance to a number of panellists who might be present.

3. Communications

The audiences for this research are first of all the panel of researchers themselves and secondly all those engaged in trying to change the international development system in favour of women's empowerment. There is however, a major challenge in communicating research findings without breaching confidentiality and the safety of the shared space created through the co-enquiry process. How, when, what and with whom to share is an agenda item for the first meeting to be held at the CSW on 25th February. The conclusions from this meeting will allow a more detailed communications plan to be developed.

The wider audience is others who are working in these global spaces and looking for alternative pathways that can potentially trigger wider processes of organisational and systemic change. One possibility is to organise an international workshop on policy processes that would include both some of the co-researchers and a wider group of staff working in global spaces for women's empowerment. This proposal will be put to those participating in the CSW meeting to test the extent of interest.

Another possibility is to write up the individual findings in terms of fictional stories – or even strip cartoons (?) that could be widely distributed at international events such as the meetings of the CSW, DAC Gendernet etc and also perhaps brought together to be published for example in a special issue of *Development in* or the *IDS Bulletin*. One of the co-researchers has already suggested a co-authored collection of auto-ethnographic experience to be published as a book and if there were sufficient interest in this, I could organise a write shop towards the end of the project.

I am also discussing with Open Democracy how we can liaise with them in supporting feminist action for change within global spaces while bearing in mind the confidentiality of the details of the research findings that panel members will be collecting.

It is hoped that findings would also be presented more formally in terms of general conclusions and discussed at the UN interagency group, at the DAC Gendernet and other similar meetings.

4. Capacity Building

Through the research methodology and communication plans it is expected to build the capacity of feminist activists to be more effective at shaping their organisations and the wider international development system by enabling them to better identify pathways of change within the bureaucratic and political maze.

The methods developed and tested in this project will be shared more widely within the RPC in support of an interest expressed by the other hubs to initiate subsequently similar projects with feminist activists working in national policy spaces

5. Collaboration

In terms of collaboration within the RPC staff from UNIFEM have volunteered to be panel members and it is hoped that this will include at least one or two staff working in countries where the regional hubs are active and where cross-learning and sharing could take place.

A researcher from one of the regional hubs will be invited to attend the second meeting of co-enquirers (for at least part of the time) and to play the role of critical friend from another non-global reality. The research process and emerging findings will also be shared with regional hub researchers with a view to the possibilities of replicating this project with feminist activists working in government and non-government organisations at the national level. The South Asia hub has already expressed an interest in taking this forward.

6. Learning and Accountability

This is a learning project. There are however some accountability issues in relation to the extent to which some of the pathways of change the research identifies are likely to be subversive from the point of view of the powers that be. There may be an understandable reluctance among activists to disseminate more widely what they have learnt because of risk of institutional backlash and methods for tackling this will need to be identified.

I will keep my own research diary in relation to the process, including recording and reflecting on the effects of the research process itself.

