

# *Feminisms in Development: Contradictions, Contestations and Challenges*

Andrea Cornwall, Elizabeth Harrison and Ann Whitehead (eds.),  
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## **Elisabeth Porter**

The contributors to this book are from the North and South and include trainers on development issues, a filmmaker, policy-makers, advisers to large international NGOs (INGOs) and United Nations programmes, as well as academics. In acknowledgement of the frequently uneasy relationship between feminism and development, this book is an attempt to reposition feminism within development studies.

Its central argument is that many development institutions function through bureaucratic structures and unequal power differentials that undermine feminist intentions. Maxine Molyneux's powerful concluding chapter challenges the myth, as she sees it, 'that gender has been so successfully mainstreamed into development policy that there is now little need for women's projects and programmes, or indeed for women's policy units' (p. 227). Certainly, there has been significant progress with female literacy, longevity, health and access to political life. [1] Yet Molyneux is concerned about the 'globalization of feminism,' that is, a process in which 'the transformative agenda has been captured by power, co-opted and instrumentalized, and its political vision has been neutralized, where not excised' (p. 234). Many of the 18 essays explore aspects of this process of neutralization and seek to resist it.

Many authors are concerned to reopen questions seen as settled. The book's subtitle, 'contradictions, contestations and challenges' is a testament to the contributors' scrutiny of assumptions concerning gender and development. The editors affirm the pluralist nature of feminism, and argue also that "development" covers a multitude of theoretical and political stances and a wide diversity of practices' (p. 1). They reflect on the fact that despite the engagement within gender and development (GAD) research and the abundant literature on gender mainstreaming, the project of social transformation that is at the height of feminists' activism and engagement

has not led to widespread gender equality, justice and enjoyment of women's human rights. Indeed, in some areas, women's quality of life has worsened; legislative reform does not translate to practical gains, women have to struggle to have their voices heard, and many feminist arguments are depoliticized when utilized unreflectively by development institutions. For the editors, 'What were once critical insights, the results of detailed research, have now become "gender myths": essentialisms and generalizations, simplifying frameworks and simplistic slogans' (p. 1).

### **Struggle over interpretation**

Part one sets the groundwork for striving to interpret how feminists might engage with development. In particular, it explores how many of the gender orthodoxies became embedded in GAD thinking and programming. That is, when 'sloganezed generalities' are tossed around, with phrases like 'women are the poorest of the poor' or 'women do most of the work in African agriculture' or 'educating girls leads to economic development' (p. 4) they become part of development agencies' language. Certainly, they have a strong element of truth, but they often are expressed as simplified slogans that present women as victims needing development's assistance. Such slogans might be useful to ensure that gender is actually placed on the development agenda and can kick-start new debates; however, they also are limiting and readily generate preconceptions about what is needed to further women's equality.

The slogans are discussed in the book as 'myths' or fables about women that are bolstered by selective statistics, case studies and quotes from women. The editors are keen to point out that they are not intent on myth-busting, but rather, on exposing how narratives about gender that draw on feminist research may be maladapted, used partially or end up in ways that are quite dissonant to the original intentions of the feminist research. A good example is the way in which "empowerment" has been reduced from a complex process of self-realization, self-actualization and mobilization to demand change, to a simple act of transformation bestowed by a transfer of money and/or information' (p. 7). The provision of economic resources and skills in education and literacy are crucial, but alone do not guarantee empowerment or equality. The book seeks to show why this is so.

The book tackles many myths, fables and GAD assumptions about 'poor women.' Srilatha Batliwala and Deepa Dhanraj explore the argument that both religious fundamentalism and neo-liberal reforms are causing poor grassroots women in

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India to become agents of their own disempowerment. Take for example the idea that 'giving poor women access to economic resources – such as credit – leads to their overall empowerment' (p. 21). On face value, it seems reasonable to assume that giving credit will help poor women. Indeed, the feminist intention to transfer economic funds into women's hands to support leadership in local development is soundly rooted in empirical data on economic power that demonstrates that access to practical resources weakens patriarchal restrictions on women's everyday lives in ways that are enabling. However, the development mantra that poor women are a sound economic 'investment' (p. 22) is not only reductionist, but it readily builds on gendered stereotypes that take for granted that women will work selflessly for their families. Hence, in India, financial initiatives directed towards training women in income generation and financial skills, left many rural women with debt burdens which could only be repaid through inhumane workloads.

There are wonderful global examples of the successes of micro-credit for women who when adequately trained in income-generation become successful women entrepreneurs. There are also many more examples where women's struggle for economic survival to sustain families renders them willing to accept loans whatever the conditions. This often leads to situations where the need to earn an income to repay loans whilst still maintaining heavy domestic and childrearing loads leaves women heavily overworked and not further empowered.

In continuing the theme, Sylvia Chant examines the 'feminization of poverty' and interventions to invest in women's capabilities particularly through education, health and vocational training. Cecélia Sardenberg then explores tensions between scholarship and political activism around women and gender in Brazil. Everjoice Win's chapter is vividly titled, 'not very poor, powerless or pregnant: the African woman forgotten by development' (p. 79) and she challenges the appeal of the myth to pull in financial funding as if it solves all problems. In challenging this myth, she shows how resource poverty is not the only form of poverty; others include 'violence, denial of personhood, silencing, marginalization, denial of choice and other freedoms' (p. 84). Nandinee Bandyopadhyay and colleagues challenge the automatic association between poverty and trafficking and suggest controversially that a recognition of sex work as legitimate permits agency and action against exploitation.

Another common myth asserts that when women gain access to political power they will promote policies that further gender equality. This does not always occur

as memories of Margaret Thatcher remind us. In fact, 'in South Asia there has been a mass mobilization of women by religious fundamentalists' (p. 28) that sustain patriarchal stereotypes that limit women's equality. This includes training camps for young Hindu women in India, the mobilization of Muslim fundamentalists in Pakistan and Bangladesh to muster support and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka calling on women to raise militant children to fight the cause. In India where there are strong patronage networks, women elected to government often struggle with inexperience and pressures of expediency. It is a sobering but important reminder that women too are subject to corruption and cooption and sometimes are 'proponents of reactionary, sexist, racist, elitist or fundamentalist ideologies' (p. 32).

### **Institutionalizing gender in development**

Part two scrutinizes how development institutions work to undermine feminism, particularly through bureaucratic resistance. Anne-Marie Goetz and Joanne Sandler suggest that feminists have made an error in accepting 'mainstreaming' as the way to promote women's rights because they have underestimated the ways in which bureaucratic logic often neutralizes important claims. For example, a typical organizational or programmatic response to gender equality might be to formalize some type of 'gender focal point' (p. 11) where this might mean a one-day workshop, or a checklist to tick for gender concerns or occasionally one person who's 'it' for gender without realizing 'there is much more to being an advocate for gender equality' (p. 11).

What exactly is gender mainstreaming? While it emerged in the late 1980s, it was officially adopted by the United Nations at the significant 1995 World Conference on Women held in Beijing. It came about because of the need to integrate women more fully into development policy and practice and to make organizations more aware of the need to remove gender-based prejudices and injustices. In trying to influence the 'mainstream,' its agenda seeks to alter public policies that directly benefit men and women through targets and specific strategies. Gender mainstreaming has made more men knowledgeable of the need to consider gender-specific needs and it has made states more aware of international expectations to respond to gender analysis. However, gender mainstreaming often leads to institutionalized or technical solutions that miss the spirit of feminist activism and the intent of holistic advocacy that struggles for women's equality, justice, rights, capacities and empowerment. Organizationally, mainstreaming becomes nebulous,

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with uncertainty about actual goals, and in simplifying concepts like inequality and injustice it dilutes the essential political message of feminism.

Hillary Standing explores the perils of mainstreaming, noting that ‘all the apparatus which sustains gender mainstreaming’ including training, research degrees, institutional mechanisms and consultants came about because of ‘a commitment to gender as a transformative project’ but somehow there is a radical disparity ‘between the passion for social justice which fed the debates, and the reality in many countries’ (p. 103) where professional practices have not translated into actual equality. Practically, many projects too readily adopt a “tick the box” management of the gender requirements’ (p. 104). She suggests it is a myth ‘that the empowerment language of politics and advocacy can be transferred into bureaucratic mainstreaming without its meaning being changed’ (p. 105). As an academic, I note her concluding recommendations that students need skills not only in theoretically rigorous feminist theory, but also in advocacy, knowledge of institutional workings and skills in how ‘to develop contextually-based strategies’ that will assist the creation of workable alliances in constrained settings (p. 109).

Ramya Subrahmanian suggests that rather than discarding mainstreaming, we liberate it by breaking it into its component parts of ‘policy reform, administrative reform, analytical and conceptual strengthening, [and] political advocacy’ (p. 119). This is a useful practical idea. Prudence Woodford-Berger writes as an African American immigrant in Sweden to advocate for a strategic use of gender mainstreaming. She draws on her experiences of research on kinship and reproduction in the Dormaa district in Ghana where motherhood is idealized, female-ness is associated with hard physical work, where women and children do the bulk of farming that is the basis of livelihoods and domestic living arrangements are dispersed over different residences for children. Typical Western models of household labour fail to capture the complexity of gendered life in Dormaa. The author thus asks for more attention to nuance and to different ideas on gender rather than a one-size-fits-all notion of mainstreaming. Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay gives examples of how organizations tend to respond to donor pressure on NGOs to abide by conditions such as a consideration of gender by a mechanistic checklist approach in technological projects on the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, programmes and projects. The boxes can be too quickly ticked but what often remain intact are the prevailing unequal power relations that the new policies were supposed to address. This is not inevitable. Organizations can become more responsive to women’s interests through political engagement

of 'the messy business of creating voice, articulating demands, carving out rights, insisting on participation and mobilizing women's constituencies to demand accountability' (p. 146). Amina Mama writes of the 'travelling circus of experts – gender technocrats' (p. 150).

Anne-Marie Goetz and Joanne Sandler's chapter is a very important one. When writing this chapter, Goetz was Chief Adviser for Governance, Peace and Security at United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and Sandler was Deputy Executive Director for Programmes at UNIFEM. They ask why there aren't any large INGOs specifically focused on women. UNIFEM has one of the smallest UN budgets. They suggest two main deficits that afflict the project of gender mainstreaming. First, there is 'fragmentation, and the lack of emphasis on building on the strengths of women's organizing and women's entities' (p. 163). The second deficit is complex, where despite clear evidence of gender-related violence, [2] 'women's suffering is too routine, too normalized to generate shame and outrage' (p. 163). Again, Goetz and Sandler reiterate the message of other contributors that within a bureaucracy, rank determines what is prioritized and typically, attending to gender equality and women's rights is not viewed as urgent but as something that can be mainstreamed. They talk of the underestimation of technical expertise that is needed to build gender equality, the indifference and hostility that leads to resistance and the bureaucratic logic that disarms change agents. In large organizations, we are familiar with the way that procedure often is valued more than process. Those striving for change often face obstacles like rigid rules that are hard to thrust aside. Disillusionment can set in when it's easier to conform or comply than to radically challenge conventions. Instead, they advocate the 'need to engage head-on with bureaucratic logic' (p. 168), to seek investments in sector-wide approaches that coordinate health and educational services and to respond to different political contexts to further the mutually-reinforcing goals of gender equality, women's empowerment, gender justice and women's human rights.

### **Challenges for feminist engagement**

Part three explores the challenges of repoliticizing feminist notions of rights, citizenship, inclusion and democratization within GAD through developing solidarity across difference. Links between feminists are now easier to forge, particularly with advances in technology like emails, blogs and the use of the internet. The editors affirm the importance of working as feminists with our multiple differences of nationality, ethnicity, material privilege or disadvantage to

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create alliances that can bridge old ideological divides and confront the remaining development challenges of poverty, illiteracy, disempowerment, inequality, injustice and human rights abuse.

Islah Jad looks at the proliferation of Arab women's NGOs, and Deniz Kandiyoti explores attempts to procure women's rights in conflict and post-conflict situations. Looking particularly at Afghanistan and Iraq, Kandiyoti notes how in the absence of security and law, formal rights don't translate into actual gains. Ruth Pearson looks at market engagement, paid work, informal economy and empowerment. Dzodzi Tsikata suggests that rights-based approaches adopted by UN agencies, development agencies and INGOs 'give equity work a new lease of life' (p. 224) but need to be analyzed to assess the direction in which they lead, determining as Molyneux puts it 'which rights *matter*' (p. 235).

Gita Sen's book blurb warns that 'this book may discomfort some, but it is a badly needed antidote to the myths and fables that are scattered through the gender and development field.' This is so true. The book made me rethink many of the underlying contradictions and contested challenges involved in varying feminist approaches to development. It deserves to be read not only by students, practitioners, policy-makers and researchers but also by those in powerful positions in development and aid agencies and in INGOs who need to face up to the challenges powerfully presented in this volume.

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### References

- Molyneux, M. and Razavi, S. 2005, 'Beijing Plus Ten: An Ambivalent Record on Gender Justice,' *Development and Change*, 36(6): 983-1010.
- Vlachová, M & BIASON, L (eds) 2005, *Women in an Insecure World. Violence Against Women. Facts, Figures and Analysis*, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces: Geneva.

### Notes

- [1] Molyneux and Razavi 2005.  
[2] Vlachová and BIASON 2005.