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# The Chimera of Success

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One of the many myths that populate the field of gender and development is one that claims 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. The job of creating "gender awareness" is done. After all, the argument goes, the major development agencies and the significant donors have all incorporated clear commitments to ensuring that women are adequately taken into account at all stages of development policy.<sup>1</sup> The view that gender awareness has become part of the common sense of development policy is now so widespread that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) report a growing *ennui*, a "gender fatigue" in metropolitan policy arenas with women's programmes increasingly being seen as *passé*.<sup>2</sup>

At least one of these claims is hard to refute. No reputable international NGO has been without its gender-sensitive guidelines for some decades and now, the power centres of development policy have followed suit. The UN was not surprisingly among the first to mainstream gender across its many agencies, but the World Bank has for some time also incorporated gender diagnostics into its various guidelines. The *World Development Report 2000/2001* (WDR) went as far as to state that gender inequality is 'of such pervasive significance that it deserves *extra emphasis* compared with other inequalities' (World Bank 2001). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development/Development Assistance Committee (OECD/DAC) Guidelines on Poverty Reduction (2001) also seem to offer proof of this institutionalised gender awareness; here gender inequality is cited as a 'major cause' of poverty. And one of the Millennium Development Goals is 'to promote gender equality and empower women'.

Such policy commitments are hard won, and they are not to be dismissed as being without any significance. They can influence policy direction and they can provide those pressing for positive policy outcomes with some leverage. On the other hand, they are fragile gains, and they can remain ineffective, purely formal, without teeth or support

for implementation. Hostile lobbies at home and abroad resist and ignore them, selectively adopt them or interpret them in ways which are cynically instrumental or simply counterproductive.

The main development institutions, for all their encouraging rhetoric have a mixed record in applying gender sensitive recommendations. The evidence indicates a significant gap between the gender equality guidelines and the practice. Evaluations of World Bank programmes are but one instance. An investigation carried out by its own Gender Unit into 100 Bank projects concludes that gender issues were 'widely neglected' (cited in Francis 2001). Other evaluations, of Poverty Reduction Strategies have found similar results, one commenting that there was no attempt to deal with the specificity of women's poverty (Bradshaw and Linneker 2003). Another evaluation, developed with support from the Bank, found that issues of gender equality and women's and men's differential access to resources and opportunities, were not taken into account in most analyses and policy proposals. The author reported that the poverty diagnoses were 'astonishingly gender-blind, genuine mainstreaming [was] quite limited and many key chapters were void of any reference to gender'. Further findings were that 'women were frequently lumped together with other vulnerable and disempowered groups, notably children and the disabled'. The report concluded that gender analysis was 'either absent or highly unsatisfactory', and the policy actions suggested were often 'exceedingly vague' (*viz*: 'improve conditions for women'). Where lip service is paid to gender mainstreaming there is little tangible 'on what this means or how to do it' (De Vylder 2003).

The development agencies might claim, with varying degrees of justification, that they do not bear sole responsibility for these outcomes since programmes are usually developed and implemented by governments or in collaboration with them. Governments naturally vary in the support they give to gender equality and women's projects, and in how far such support is backed up

by adequate institutionalisation and funding. Lamentably, we face a shortage of publicly available studies of how governments conceptualise, design and manage development programmes. This is strikingly true in regard to the growing numbers of poverty relief programmes which have appeared in the wake of the World Bank's New Poverty Agenda (NPA), launched in 1990. The NPA incorporates many good ideas that originated on the creative margins of development practice summed up in the triad of "empowerment, voice and presence", and an acknowledgement of the multidimensional character of poverty. Yet reports from Latin American ministries responsible for poverty programmes show that such ideas are still only vaguely reflected in policy design and implementation.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, poverty programmes remain in many cases badly managed, highly clientelised and inefficiently administered with responsibility spread across different government departments leading to a lack of coordination and consistency in approach. Poor statistical collection and evaluation procedures add to the lack of reliable data for policy feedback processes measurements. Also, indicators used to assess the scope and magnitude of poverty are still rarely disaggregated to show sex difference.

Women's organisations find it hard to make an impact on social policy provision in such circumstances. Feminist NGOs have often pioneered projects that incorporate principles of gender justice, and have been able to develop their own research capacity considerably in recent years allowing closer attention to women's needs. Yet in most poverty relief schemes, their influence is largely confined to local or small-scale project design. It is not unknown for policy-makers to argue that there is no need to incorporate a gender dimension in their poverty programmes since policies that benefit the poor 'necessarily benefit women', eliding women with poverty in a simple reduction that exports gender analysis altogether. This attitude has reportedly surfaced in relation to Lula's Zero Hunger campaign, which is surprising given the strength of the women's movement in Brazil and its historic association with the ruling party.

It would not be overstating the case, given this scenario, to conclude that despite the formal recognition of the gender-poverty link, anti-poverty programmes have remained for the most part innocent of gender analysis and as a result they

ignore women's particular circumstances, and rarely problematise gender relations. They therefore remain locked into dated conceptions of "gender roles" which fail to correspond to the realities of most poor women's lives and therefore do not meet their needs. For example, anti-poverty programmes place considerable reliance on women performing voluntary work, and assuming sole responsibility for children. Yet most low-income households are dependent on women's capacity to contribute money incomes and the demands of these programmes risk further weakening their tenuous hold on the labour market. The feeble efforts at "capacity building" associated with many of these projects confers few marketable skills. It goes without saying that food programmes, still a major plank of poverty relief, depend on assumptions about food preparation and provision being women's natural role, thereby reinforcing normative gender divisions at the fulcrum of such policies. Moreover, for all the talk of participation few of these programmes do much to incorporate women into the various stages of their planning and implementation, training in useful skills is weak or non-existent, and as a consequence programme participants are rarely provided with the means to achieve a sustainable escape from poverty. This latter point goes to the heart of the problem with the anti-poverty agenda.

The current emphasis on poverty relief in development policy is worrying enough, in that it stands for the failure of macroeconomic and development policy to generate adequate levels of growth. Poverty relief programmes have proved no palliative in dealing with the effects of economic policy and have offered little to the poor in a context of deepening inequality. Effective poverty relief can only come about when linked to sustainable development strategies, which are currently thin on the ground. But there is a failure of another kind, evident in the token, partial and selective incorporation of gender and gender equality principles into public/international policy. Macroeconomic policy has remained highly resistant to gender critique notwithstanding the well-documented evidence of the negative impacts it can have on women's employment, well-being and livelihoods. The mass entry of women into low-paid, informalised and insecure employment over recent decades can hardly be counted as a sign of economic policy success. Neither is the targeting

of women in anti-poverty programmes necessarily a step forward when they are only “visibilised” in their roles as mothers and unpaid “volunteer” workers. Here the gender blindness at the “top” of the policy pyramid is only replicated, and its effects multiplied, on those at the sharp end.

Considerable caution therefore needs to be exercised in any assessment of the impact of gender mainstreaming in international policy guidelines. Yet, if the spread of gender awareness and the impact of mainstreaming is exaggerated, how do we explain the current gender *ennui* when so much is still at stake? One thing is clear – it has less to do with a surplus of success and more to do with a changed *zeitgeist* brought about by the post-2000 darkening international political climate, more effective strategising and alliance building by conservative forces – popular, governmental and faith based – and last but not least, the less than woman-friendly policy mission of the most powerful nation in the world. But there has also occurred a troubling loss of vitality and direction of some feminist movements, the specific causes of which vary from region to region. While there are still vital movements in Latin America and parts of Africa and South Asia, all regions report some loss of dynamism. This has gone along with a critical reassessment of the Beijing process, with doubts expressed as to its representativity, the content of its proposals, and the universalist pretensions of the overall project.

Even among those who can be counted as broadly sympathetic to the aims of Beijing, opinion is divided over how to evaluate the gains that were made from the “globalisation of feminism”. For sceptics, the glass is half-empty rather than half-full. Their concern is that the transformative agenda has been captured by power, co-opted and instrumentalised, and its political vision has been neutralised, where not excised. Some worry that feminism’s original and critical aim – to eradicate social inequalities and to create new forms of social life and political practice – has been abandoned. Others doubt that an international women’s movement can now be said to exist: the editors of one collection of work by activists and scholars reflecting on Beijing express a concern that women’s movements and feminism may have become ‘an expression of women’s integration into hegemonic patriarchal institutions where they are reduced to a lobbying group, an appendix without influence’ (Braig and Wolte 2002: 6).

This scepticism has two aspects. One, often found among policy practitioners, is based on an evaluation of the policy record of three decades of activism, domestically and internationally. Here, issues of bureaucratisation, NGO-isation, technification of the women’s movement are foregrounded. The other aspect is of a somewhat different kind, deriving as it does from a theoretical position that sees integration into existing states and international institutions as, *in itself*, an abandonment of the broader, “critical” and, at least implicitly, revolutionary goals of much second-wave feminism.

No amount of national policy initiatives, quotas, or international norms and conventions will assuage this latter concern. However, in viewing the feminist influence on international legal instruments as primarily cosmetic, there is a tendency to underplay the positive impact that this legislation has had on national law and policy. Those who see the glass as half-full stress that legal gains are significant, and cite the example of CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women), the most important piece of international legislation encoding women’s rights, which commits 171 signing governments to respect a range of principles that have in some regions (notably Latin America) and countries led to positive reforms in constitutions and civil codes. Much of course depends on the will of governments and the energies of women’s movements to put flesh on these bones, and there are wide regional disparities in what has been, and can be, done with these instruments. CEDAW has the distinction among international conventions of having the most reservations or “bracketed clauses”. Yet as the history of working class and female suffrage demonstrates, reform processes are by their very nature slow. They encounter enormous institutional and often political resistance, as is evident in the mobilisation at the UN level of opportunistic conservative coalitions (US-Vatican-Islamist) against women’s reproductive rights.

Any consideration of Beijing necessarily problematises the significance of the advances made possible by human rights legislation. The human rights instruments and discourse helped to globalise women’s movement activism combining advocacy in international arenas with national, regional and local initiatives. Some Asian and African, and most Latin American and Caribbean women’s movements, have based their struggles for economic

and social rights on international human rights instruments. Which rights *matter* is the key question for those women's movements who have often situated their demands increasingly within a framework which counterposes an ethic of justice expressed in socio-economic rights to the prevailing "thin" utilitarian version of rights.<sup>4</sup> Human rights instruments have enabled women's movements to provide a normative and analytic framework for fighting against discrimination, reframing socio-economic injustices against women as human rights violations. The examples of education, quota laws, violence against women, and health show how rights discourses can be deployed to legitimise women's demands for the improvement of their legal status, political representation and well-being.

Convenient though it may be for some governments (and some identity-based political movements) to oppose human rights legislation on the grounds that it is an alien Western imposition, ideas of rights and justice are not the sole property of "the West" and, in an increasingly transnationalised world, they have acquired both local and regional resonance. Liberal conceptions of rights have their origins in the West, but their meaning has been contested, radicalised, extended and pluralised over the course of their history. But if these ideas are to be part of a genuine global conversation, they require some translation and adaptation to local contexts. The transnationalisation of a debate about gender justice

has accompanied the diversification of the global women's movement and has established the idea of feminisms in the plural. At the same time, debates over women's rights have become more intensely regionalised in recent years, demanding closer scrutiny to the particular context within which they are framed and fought for. There is some greater awareness of the political and ethical dimensions of the interface between global instruments and local settings than at the onset of the Beijing process and this might turn out to be an area where the glass appears more full than empty. Respect for difference, *but anchored within a movement essentially concerned with equality and justice*, and in a world of ever deepening social and economic inequalities and political conflict, still has its place.

To those who think that gender equality is *passé* it is worth remembering that women are not a "social problem" to be solved or a minoritarian constituency. Whatever the current priority in development policy is deemed to be, and however these priorities change, *gender analysis* will remain an indispensable adjunct to any programme or policy development process. But if it is to be more than another policy tool, it needs to be accompanied by some strategy for achieving gender *justice* as part of a broader commitment to greater social and economic equality. That is unlikely to happen without the political will, vision and strategy provided by collective action. This, perhaps is the main lesson of Beijing – and of its aftermath.

## Notes

1. The Dutch government's rationale for cutting financial support to the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) was reportedly along these lines.
2. This was the fate of the pioneering Nicaraguan feminist NGO Puntos de Encuentro which had to close most of its programmes due to lack of funding – discussed in Molyneux and Lazar (2003).

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3. Research I carried out for a forthcoming United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) publication on the new social policy and anti-poverty programmes in Latin America.
4. See Molyneux and Razavi (2003) for a fuller discussion of these issues.

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