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Choosing Words with Care? Shifting Meanings of Women's Empowerment in International Development

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ABSTRACT 'Women's empowerment', as used by international development organisations, is a fuzzy concept. Historical textual analysis and interviews with officials in development agencies reveal its adaptability and capacity to carry multiple meanings that variously wax and wane in their discursive influence. Today a privileging of instrumentalist meanings of empowerment associated with efficiency and growth are crowding out more socially transformative meanings associated with rights and collective action. In their efforts to make headway in what has become an unfavourable policy environment, officials in development agencies with a commitment to a broader social change agenda juggle these different meanings, strategically exploiting the concept's polysemic nature to keep that agenda alive. We argue for a politics of solidarity between such officials and feminist activists. We encourage the latter to challenge the prevailing instrumentalist discourse of empowerment with a clear, well-articulated call for social transformation, while alerting them to how those with the same agenda within international development agencies may well be choosing their words with care, even if what they say appears fuzzy.

This article is about why words matter for feminists struggling to make the international development machinery become a pathway for social transformation and the realisation of women's rights. Taking a historical perspective starting from what many now see as the highpoint of this struggle, the 1995 United Nations Women's Conference in Beijing, we examine the meanings given to women's empowerment. Findings from semi-structured interviews with those working on global policy issues in international development are analysed, along with a selection of policy documents published since Beijing.¹

For many feminists working in the field of international development, the Beijing Conference marked the apex of twenty years of sustained endeavour to secure women's empowerment as a central element in international development discourse, helped by the international climate being more favourable than before to women organising. The end of the Cold War led to the return of parliamentary democracy in many countries and an increased international emphasis on human rights. The macro-economics of the Washington Consensus and the associated structural adjustment policies of the 1980s did not disappear, but they ceased being a unique preoccupation. Apparently, people and their participation also mattered.

Today, the international development environment is very different. The post Cold War enthusiasm for the multiple voices of civil society is disappearing. At best,

diversity and debate are judged inefficient in a context where harmonisation of diagnosis and effort is seen as the most effective route to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). At worst, dissent by social movements may be seen as incipient terrorism (Howell et al, 2008). International NGOs, once seen as a vanguard for social justice, are today being accused of converging their agendas with the official development community (Murphy 2005). The Paris Declaration on Effective Aid and all the processes accompanying it are already proving successful in their most important principle, that of recipient country ownership (at least if this is determined in terms of government ownership). OECD countries are responding to the views of recipient government leaders, particularly those in highly aid-dependent sub-Saharan Africa, who may be less interested in the MDGs and more in developing economic infrastructure, expanding the private sector and encouraging foreign direct investment. A strong driver for revival of the economic growth agenda is China's arrival in aid-dependent countries as a significant donor, providing aid for economic investment as part of trade deals without any strings relating to human rights issues. The seeming triumph of the 1990s was that women's empowerment became a matter of justice rather than something necessary for development. Ten years after Beijing, Molyneux and Razavi noted the 'more sombre and cautious zeitgeist that has come to dominate world affairs in recent times' (2005: 984).

In such a context, enquiring into the meanings of words may prove useful. Words are construct visions of development. As Cornwall and Brock put it, 'If words make worlds, struggles over meaning are not just about semantics: they gain a very real material dimension' (2005:1056). A clear turn of phrase shapes how we imagine and seek to realise societal futures. As was the case with the Beijing Platform for Action, a strong, largely coherent text provides language that activists use as a discursive tool for strategy in national as well as global policy spaces (Moghadam 2005). Yet, the speech and texts examined in this article are rarely so clear. As we discuss, fuzziness may offer strategic advantages to feminists struggling in an unfavourable global policy environment. Ambiguity is a defensive mechanism that holds the ground rather than advances the cause. Is this is all that can be done in the present circumstances, or has the time come for a new rallying slogan? In our conclusion we discuss opportunities for imbuing *women's empowerment* with a clearer and more transformative intention.

Fuzzy words and their usage: context and consciousness

'Women's empowerment' frames the opening paragraph of the Beijing Platform for Action. For many policy activists working within and across state and civil society institutions, 'empowerment' and the meanings associated with it in that paragraph - 'participation', 'power', 'equality', 'social justice' -were resources they could draw upon for making change happen.²

Most policy texts, not just those from international conferences but also those of a single organisation, are drafted by many individuals. They are an eclectic mixture of old and new clichés, assembled together through a complex process of political negotiations, compromises and strategising, idiosyncratic whim and an almost unconscious collective response to the zeitgeist. Long-established notions may have to be jealously defended, while new ones introduced at the committee stage may sometimes travel unchallenged into the final text, as, if memory is correct, was the case of ‘transformed partnerships between women and men’, a notion in the opening paragraph of the Beijing document introduced by one of the authors of this article. Early one morning in a hotel bedroom in New York in 1994, prior to a meeting of the small informal group drafting the preliminary Beijing document, wide awake from jet lag and thinking contentedly about her own relatively new partnership that was proving so positively different from her first marriage, the phrase popped into her head from she knew not where.

Because policy documents are not sole-authored, oddities, contradictions and ambiguities are common, including the meanings given to abstract concepts within them such as empowerment. Nevertheless, broad trends of shifts in meaning can be traced. Looking at empowerment as a development *fuzzword*, Batliwala shows how its meaning in India has shifted from when first employed by feminist activists in the 1980s to transformation in societal relations as the core of empowerment, to becoming a technical magic bullet of micro-credit programmes and political quotas for women. As a neo-liberal tool, she argues, empowerment is now conceptualised to subvert the politics that the concept was created to symbolise (Batliwala 2007).

The shift of the kind traced by Batliwala may however be context-specific. Asked by us what women’s empowerment in developing countries meant for her, Clare Short (former UK Secretary of State for International Development) replied: ‘micro-credit, political quotas and girls’ education’, thus confirming Batliwala’s ‘magic bullet’ argument. Yet earlier in the interview, when reflecting on what empowerment meant to her personally, Short came closer to Batliwala’s meaning of relational transformation as the core of empowerment and talked of the need for a democratic conversation to take further such an understanding.

In the course of a single interview, Short had shifted her meanings of empowerment in relation to context and positionality; it meant one thing in Britain and something else in developing countries. In the former, she positioned herself in relation to her own direct experience in her family and constituency. In the latter, she reflected as a former development minister, a context in which the urgency of reducing poverty argues for rolling out policy initiatives to affect as many people as possible in the shortest time possible. Very practically, it may have proved to be a useful tool in getting more girls into school and more women into politics. Thus the meanings we

give to a concept not only shift over time; they can also shift in the context of a single interview or text. This is one aspect of fuzziness; other facets we now go on to discuss.

Why fuzziness

We offer four further explanations for the fuzziness of a concept such as empowerment. The first is intellectual laziness and time pressure. A muddled text or an incoherent speech may be simply due to people paying insufficient attention to their words. Secondly, fuzziness is used to create and sustain a broad-based policy constituency and to manage conflicts therein. An interviewee at the OECD Development Cooperation Department – which has the task of coordinating and seeking consensus among multiple political actors – provided the biggest range of meanings from among all our respondents, having developed the skills of coining language to accommodate a broad range of views. The fuzziness creates a ‘normative resonance’ that makes everyone feel good (Cornwall 2007: 472). It aims to please as many people as possible without revealing which meaning they personally favour.

The third explanation is that of ‘strategic ambiguity’. In conditions of recognisable discursive differences, a conscious political choice may be taken to remain vague so as to enrol those who might shy away should the concept be given too much clarity (Leitch and Davenport 2007). Such ‘strategic ambiguity’ is practised by feminist officials within development agencies, providing room for manoeuvre in circumstances where there is little chance of securing collective agreement to their own desired meaning. It may also help enrol others in supporting policy actions that the feminists hope will lead to broader rights-based outcomes, irrespective of whether those they had enrolled had intended such a result. The alternative of a clear and radical rights-based agenda would gain less support and may risk creating a backlash.

Fuzziness may be thought to be necessary, but is rarely popular. Accordingly, the need for greater clarity gets written into texts. The DFID Action Plan asks for ‘A *clear* [our emphasis] vision on gender equality supported by consistent policy and practice” (2007a: 9). Yet in commenting on their own Action Plan, some DFID interviewees thought that such clarity had not been achieved, believing the fuzziness constrained effective action and made it difficult for DFID to be held to account. Yet the desired clarity could not be realised. Thus our fourth explanation is that fuzziness of policy concepts is not due to the conscious choice of any individual or group, but is a collective response to organizational tensions. Good intentions are foiled by organizational requirements to keep all parties on board.

In the next section we explore how all these reasons for ambiguity and inconsistency play out in the construction of *women's empowerment* and its stable mate, *gender equality*.

Women's empowerment and/or gender equality?

In the Beijing Platform for Action, 'gender' tends to be used as an analytical qualifier. As an aspiration rather than a descriptor, 'equality between women and men' seemed more sensible and down to earth than the more jargon-laden 'gender equality'. Indeed, within the whole text of the Platform for Action 'gender equality' appears only 12 times, compared with 30 appearances of 'empowerment'. The appearance of 'gender equality' in development policy texts has become much more common since then, either twinned with women's empowerment as the third Millennium Development Goal (MDG) or, increasingly, standing alone. DFID twins the terms in its Action Plan, but in its glossy booklet published at the same time (2007b), 'women's empowerment' disappears. Different texts for different audiences. The glossy has a domestic audience is intended to demonstrate its response to the recent UK 'gender equality duty' legislation. The Action Plan is primarily for DFID staff and uses the MDGs as its justification. Thus there is logic in the apparent inconsistency between the two documents.

While some of our interviewees used the two concepts synonymously, others had clear preferences. Short disliked 'gender equality' because it does not of itself tackle the disempowerment of poor people. A Sida interviewee agreed: 'a poor woman can have gender equality and still be powerless'. Others preferred any phrase that includes 'women' - because women can get lost in 'gender' - while others preferred 'women's empowerment' because it implies action, whereas 'gender equality' is more static. On the other hand, one person saw the utility of 'gender equality', because equality is an *outcome* and economists - the most influential people in development policy - prefer outcomes. 'Women's empowerment' may be less attractive to them, because it is a *process*. Also, said someone, 'women's empowerment' can be scary, with connotations of being feminist and left-wing; it draws attention to power. 'Power is an aggressive word'. And women's empowerment is even worse, creating a 'visceral responses'.

Some interviewees may personally like 'empowerment' because it resonates with power and transformation, but for strategic reasons they preferred 'gender equality'. Others disliked 'empowerment' because they conceptualised power as a scarce resource so that if women have more of it, men will have less. For others, however, 'empowerment' was about 'power to' - as in women's power to make decisions over their own bodies. Some equated 'empowerment' with 'power within' and felt that one could not empower someone else - 'women are active agents of their own empowerment'.

Only one interviewee, from a global civil society network, perceived 'empowerment' as relational, in the sense of 'power with'. The emphasis among all other interviewees on the individual nature of 'empowerment' was exaggerated by some to such an extent that they found it difficult to think about the term other than with reference to their own personal sense of control, or in terms of matters such as gender balances and equal opportunities at their place of work.

How does empowerment happen? Some interviewees spoke of how their agencies were trying to 'empower women', but when we followed up by asking if it were possible for one actor to empower another, they shied away. It sounds pompous and self-important to say that you can bestow someone with power. 'It's saying, "I'm going to help you" ... it is self-righteous... there's a relation of power between those using the term and those who are its object', one person said; 'women should take control, they should empower themselves'.

A DFID text refers to women 'lifting themselves out of poverty' (2007a: 2). Sida talks strongly about women empowering themselves: 'Individuals and organisations develop their own capacity to promote gender equality' (2005: 9), and Sida's aim is to 'help create conditions that will enable the poor to improve their lives' (2005: 4). The World Bank mentions doing things *on behalf of* women, but also talks about 'the ability of women's organizations to reach a scale and sophistication where they are capable of articulating and advocating policies to promote women's economic empowerment' (2006: 6).

Yet, the developmental 'passive evasive'³ voice is also present. There is no subject (neither women themselves nor a development agent/agency) that does the empowering. 'Women should be empowered', says the DAC (OECD 2007), but by whom? '[T]hey may be empowered' says INTRAC (Oakley and Clayton 2000), but by whom?

One organisation: diversity of views

In DFID, we explored how six of the gender champions understood empowerment. Gender champions are not specialists but senior staff assigned this additional task as part of DFID's recent Gender Equality Action Plan. They 'are responsible for ensuring implementation of the actions agreed in their Divisions, making sure that staff get the help they need, promoting lesson learning and identifying what more needs to be done' (DFID 2007a: 5). They told us they saw empowerment as the removal of constraints, the achievement of autonomy and ability to make choices. Empowerment as a means to poverty reduction was understood as the clearest element in DFID's corporate fuzzy message on gender. It has 'first and second round effects' and contributes to achieving the MDGs.

One champion could not see any difference between ‘women’s empowerment’ and ‘gender equality’, although when pressed thought the latter might be more about equal opportunities. Views varied among the others. Two interviewees made their preference in relation to context – ‘women’s empowerment’ was more useful in countries where women are *really* disempowered and ‘gender equality’ more appropriate where the issue is enforcing legislation. Another preferred ‘gender equality’ as being less threatening, while a fourth preferred ‘empowerment’ because ‘gender equality’ seemed overly technocratic: ‘If DFID really believes it is a political issue – as it states in its brochure – then we should be upfront about it’. For another, ‘women’s empowerment ... smacks of special pleading’. She was pragmatic, willing to use whichever term best supports what they wanted to achieve. This, she decided, was probably ‘gender equality’ because ‘it panders to the beleaguered sensibilities of males’.

Overall, we found that preference for ‘women’s empowerment’ or ‘gender equality’ accords with the meaning each term is given, the associational context and the judgements made about the strategic utility of the two concepts. People’s views are a complex reflection of feelings and thought – a combination they take with them into drafting negotiations. What practical challenges and opportunities does such an intra-organisational diversity present? And what are the strategic implications when meanings of empowerment are not only diverse among individuals, but also subject to organisational shifts over time?

Sifting the shifting meanings

‘The Achilles heel of empowerment is that it implies that you don’t have power. Subordination is built in’⁴

Analysis of our material revealed layers or threads of overlapping meanings, combining and re-combining rather frequently over time within broader development discourses. Firstly, in this section, we briefly examine how texts and interviewees understand what empowerment is about, and we then look at how empowerment is commonly qualified, as political and economic. We conclude by looking at how empowerment is articulated as a matter of justice and/or efficiency, noting the recent return of long-standing instrumentalist arguments.

Empowerment is about.....

Today, most frequently empowerment is about choice, decision-making, realising opportunities and potential, and community action. *Choice* evokes agency and individualism, often connected to women’s sexual and reproductive lives (Sida 2005, DFID 2007a). ‘Free’ further qualifies ‘choice’, as in the World Bank’s removing “unfreedoms” that constrain individual choice’ (2006: 4). For Sida, choice is a right

(2005: 4). Older Sida and OECD documents talk about 'women and men... shaping the social and economic choices of the future' (Sida 1998: 13), and about 'women and men hav[ing] equal opportunities to make choices about what gender equality means and work in partnership to achieve it' (OECD 1999: 13). This older strain evokes ideas of people collectively shaping structures, whereas more recent interpretations of choice are more individualistic. One interviewee said that empowerment is 'the ability to get things done without being dependent on others'.

Decision-making is about women making decisions 'that affect their lives' (Sida 1998). UNDP says 'women still lack access to economic and political decision-making power' - in grassroots communities as well as well as in the macroeconomic policy arena (1997)⁶. Interviewees were especially individualistic when talking about decision-making. One person defined empowerment as the 'ability to live your life as you want it'. Another said it is 'being able to make decisions and being able to act on these'.

Opportunities and *potential* are frequent descriptors of 'empowerment', although 'equal opportunity' tends to be connected more often to 'gender equality'. Sida talks about equal opportunity for men and women (1998, 2005). The OECD DAC Guidelines for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment say that 'gender equality' does not mean sameness between men and women but that 'their opportunities and life chances are equal' (1999: 13). The World Bank comments in its video that 'restricting *economic opportunity* for women is unfair. Life's chances should not be preordained at birth' (2007a). But the older documents argue for equality of outcomes as well as equality of opportunity (UNDP 1997, DFID 2000a).

Linked to opportunity is the *potential* of women that needs to be 'unleashed', says BMZ, the German Ministry of Development (INWENT 2007). Quoted on their website, the then World Bank President Wolfowitz says that countries 'pay a high price for not allowing women to live up to their full economic potential' (INWENT 2007). DFID laments the inefficient 'loss of human potential' (2000a: 8), while speaking of women 'fulfil[ing] their potential as full and equal members of society' (ibid: 11).

Finally, despite resonances of the 'power within' in some interviews, such a meaning of empowerment is largely absent from the texts, and when present it is in the earlier set of texts from the years after Beijing. Similarly, notions of 'power with', in terms of power through *community*, are present in the DAC 1999 Guidelines. In Sida's 1998 text, community features as 'regional and global networks' and 'increased visibility of 'the women's movement (1998:22). While collective empowerment is still mentioned and fought for at DAC Gender Network meetings (OECD 2006 a, b), Sida's 2005 document dropped it. DFID follows the same trend: the only community mentioned in 2007 is the international community (DFID 2007a: 1, 2).

However, while other organizations have been dropping the idea of the collective, the World Bank seemingly has picked it up referring to strengthening women's groups to facilitate formation of farmers' cooperatives, water user associations, or export business associations (2006: 13). Whether this has the same discursive meaning as in the earlier Sida document is a matter we return to later. Among interviewees only a few mentioned communities, the collective, and women's movements.

Forms of empowerment

The most common qualifiers for empowerment are political and economic. *Political empowerment* is largely understood as being active in formal politics. Are there representative numbers of women politicians? (UNDP 2005: 3, 7). And, more generally, do women have a voice? One interviewee said that 'an empowered woman must negotiate on other women's behalf'. DFID's 2000 target strategy paper 'Poverty Elimination and the Empowerment of Women' says women should have 'an equal voice in civil and political life' (2000a:12). The picture on the front cover of that document, powerfully, shows two women with their fists raised in the air. The message is that of a women's movement. In 2007, the picture on the cover of 'Gender Equality at the Heart of Development' showed women queuing up to vote. In a shift towards instrumentalism, the later document notes that evidence shows that when women participate in politics, 'their access to services, jobs and education - and rights more generally - improve' (DFID 2007a: 3). One of the staff members interviewed noted that DFID is less interested in issues of voice than before.

Talking about women and equality in economic terms has, however, become increasingly popular. Mention of *economic empowerment* especially related to growth has increased since Beijing. While the World Bank's older document had three foci - education, health, and employment - the new document claims that the World Bank has had sufficient success in the first two, that now it needs to focus on the last - economic empowerment of women. The Bank wants to 'recapture the Beijing momentum and reenergize the gender agenda' (2006: 1). Two years later the World Bank President said, 'The empowerment of women is smart economics...studies show that investments in women yield large social and economic returns' (2008).

The Bank's slogan is catchy and incontestable: Women's Empowerment and/or Gender Equality as Smart Economics. Who wants to be labelled 'stupid' for not supporting it? The word 'smart', especially when attached to economics, is a conversation stopper. One interviewee, on hearing from us the slogan for the first time, liked it so much that he wrote it down. International aid ministries and United Nations organisations are adopting the World Bank's argument. The Director General of UNESCO in a message on this year's International Women's Day wrote,

'Gender equality is smart and just economics for many compelling reasons. It can act as a force for economic development and for improving the quality of life of society as a whole' (Matsuura, 2008: 2)⁵. The Director of the UN Division for the Advancement of Women noted that gender inequality is 'bad economics', citing the billions of dollars lost because of women's inequitable access to employment (Hannan Andersen 2008:1).

Of course, the economics and growth language is not new. Both in its earlier documents and today DFID mentions that women can improve growth rates, referring to the effects of education (DFID 2000a, 2007a). The shift may be more apparent in Sida, which in its later document emphasises more the need to include women in the economy and make them more productive by removing discriminatory barriers (2005: 9).

At a conference where an earlier version of this article was discussed, participants noted how development agencies have separated political and economic empowerment into different programmes and budget lines, thus marginalising a political economy approach to the structural changes required for women's empowerment. The split has led to privileging a meaning of empowerment associated with formal institutions and individual autonomy. Even with autonomy, the emphasis is more on the economic actor contributing to growth, and less on e.g. decent work and the unpaid care economy – and even less on issues of bodily autonomy and the power within. More broadly, meanings of empowerment associated with solidarity and collective action are being crowded out.

As we now go on to discuss, linking economic empowerment to growth reflects a broader discursive shift back to women working for development, rather than development working for women.

Instrumentalism strikes back

Some texts we examined state that women's empowerment is an end in itself, and others say that it is also a means to a complementary end, such as economic growth, poverty reduction, democracy, human rights, peace, conflict prevention, HIV/AIDS reduction and the MDGs. One interviewee explained that 'women's empowerment was functionally necessary for economic development and functionally necessary for fast development'. 'Gender equality is a goal in its own right' the recent DFID document says (2007a: 2). Then it continues to build instrumentalist chains, for example, missing the MDG target on women 'could lower a country's annual per capita growth rates by 0.1 - 0.3 percentage points' (2007a: 3). Already in 2000 DFID noted that 'Countries in sub-Saharan Africa that have not sent enough girls to school over the past 30 years now have GNPs 25% lower than if they had given them a better chance' (DFID 2000a: 16).

Not supporting women's empowerment is framed as inefficient. For the BMZ, limiting women's economic progress 'wastes resources and as such undermines development effectiveness' (2007: 1). The 2006 World Bank document notes that its 'Results-Based Initiatives (RBIs) are interventions that can increase women's economic empowerment within a reasonable time frame and at relatively low cost' (2006: 13). Launching in 2008 a campaign to reinvigorate efforts for achieving the MDG on gender equality, the Danish aid minister said, 'Women's opportunities to contribute to the development of societies need to be improved significantly. Otherwise, economic growth in developing countries will be constrained and the ability to care for the environment ... reduced'.

Several interviewees were very concerned that more evidence of this kind be available to justify investing in women. One lamented the death of 'Women in Development' because for him it 'had been an evidence-based agenda'. But he mentioned that 'women's empowerment' could do this as well. 'It is a key driver of development to have the energies of women to construct economy and society. There are multipliers... It is evidence-based'.

Is social justice surviving? The UNIFEM definition of 'women's empowerment' that the older 2000 DFID document quotes talks about social justice in terms of women 'developing the ability to organise and influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order' (DFID 2000a: 13). 'Justice' is found in older documents more than in current ones. Sida in 1998 observed that 'One of the difficulties of implementing policies on women and development in the past was the tendency to approach development initiatives in a technical or output-oriented way' (Sida 1998: 42). However, today development agencies appear to be returning to that 'past' way of doing things. Sida, for instance, though not introducing efficiency or effectiveness words, has dropped 'justice' and focuses on 'pro-poor growth' and 'poverty reduction' (2005, esp. pp. 4-6).

Yet, just as the World Bank picked up the lost words about collective empowerment, it picks up a moral argument in a powerful statement in its promotional video. 'Restricting economic opportunity for women is *unfair*'. Women's empowerment is 'not only the *right* thing to do, it is also the *smart* thing to do' (2007a). A dying flame is brought back to life, combining economic efficiency with a moral must.

However, one interviewee was strong in saying that '[w]e shouldn't emphasize the moral and political crusade in women's equality. We have the Gender Equality police checking documents, and people get put off by this'. Some interviewees appeared to genuinely believe in the efficiency argument, whereas others frankly saw it as a strategic ploy. A participant at the conference where an earlier version of this article was discussed noted that she had to use instrumentalist arguments in her

development policy work, to get her foot in the door and be taken seriously. An interviewee stressed, 'I am willing to go down the instrumentalist road because people understand it'. Another argued that 'What is required is to present a gender equality case that is based on development effectiveness'. And another, 'I compromise to get the word [gender] in, but then I/we need to quickly reinterpret it.

A DAC document from its Gender Network concluded optimistically that more policies have 'equity or equality rationales' than 'an efficiency approach' (OECD 2007: 18). However, we have found the opposite to be the case. Growth, efficiency and effectiveness are getting stronger while moral, justice and political arguments are weakening. Our concern is that an over-emphasis on growth has led to too much silence on justice. One interviewee said, 'Our dialogue is not values-based. It's about systems and effectiveness'. Clare Short remarked that the decade of the 1990s was a window for new historical possibility with its central focus on equity and rights. Women's empowerment was about transforming society, but this is not the current development aid agenda. Aid is no longer about transformation, she said. It has become technocratic.

The seeming triumph of the 1990's was that women's empowerment became a matter of justice rather than something necessary for development. For those seeking to support women's empowerment through international development aid, does it make sense to pursue an instrumentalist agenda in a policy environment that focuses on growth and security, while waiting for the winds of change blow round again? Or can we find new words to help bring that change around faster?

To answer this question we take a brief look at the wider policy environment and then conclude by proposing some pointers to a way forward.

Conclusion: Words and strategic choices

'I have a problem with throwing [empowerment] away even though it has been decaffeinated. The word comes out of the women's movement and has been simplified. We shouldn't throw empowerment away, but I want my meaning to be there'.⁶

The seeming triumph of the 1990s had been that social justice was seen as a sufficient reason for efforts to secure gender equality. Women's and girls' well-being was an end in itself. Although the argument for equality based on justice and fairness is not entirely neglected, the last few years have seen a strong shift back to the arguments of twenty-five years ago. This trend is indicative of a wider movement in development policies, away from the visions of global social justice articulated at the great United Nations conferences of the last decade towards a revival of market-led growth as the main engine of development.

Ten years ago, with a poverty reduction agenda, women were important because 'two thirds of those living in abject poverty' are women (DFID 2000b: foreword by Tony Blair). Today, with a growth agenda, the importance of women is argued by a DFID Minister on the basis that '[in] the state of Karnataka in India a small rise in the ratio of female to male workers would increase per capita output by up to 37%'.⁷

The growth trend has both permitted and resulted from a resurgence of language traditionally at the discursive heart of international aid economists' positivist thinking, which can be represented as 'Observation + Correlation + Explanation + Prediction' (Archer 1998: 190). It underlies results-based management, another element of the Paris Declaration which encourages cross-country regression analysis to support instrumentalist arguments showing how empowerment delivers results for whatever development outcome is desired.

This particular discourse, re-energised by the Paris agenda, emphasises the individualistic thread in 'empowerment' that has become more dominant in recent years. Is there an alternative? Or are those jumping on the smart-economics bandwagon making a sound decision in difficult circumstances, to find room for manoeuvre? Or are they perhaps making a discursive sacrifice, one that crowds out other agendas while failing to deliver in return any benefits in terms of international aid shifting to a stronger focus on women?

So far, there is little evidence that the instrumentalist arguments are making much headway in the wider global policy world. For example, although the World Bank's Gender Action Plan emphasizes the importance of women's access to land, in its latest World Development Report - on agriculture – the Overview contains not the least mention of *women's* inequitable access to land (2007b). And in each of her two policy speeches on the centrality of growth for development, the DFID Minister Vadera gave women/gender just one mention. It is in Sweden that the gender/growth link appears to be gaining most discursive prominence, as one of the five themes in the Finance Minister's speech at the 2007 World Bank annual meeting – and, possibly as a result of this, mentioned in the communiqué from that meeting (Bretton Woods 2007). However, a quick web search of recent speeches by other Finance Ministers revealed no other such mentions. There was for example no mention of women or gender in a long speech by the Finance Minister of Ghana in Frankfurt in December 2007, setting out all the development challenges facing his country, nor in the annual 2007/08 budget speech of the Finance Minister for Uganda. Neither was there any reference to gender equality in two speeches one of us heard in December 2007 when two Presidents of sub-Saharan African countries were setting out their development agenda to audiences in the North. So, are we finding the social transformation agenda being thrown away while the instrumentalist strategy is failing to deliver?

The growth/gender link, which harks back to the 1970s and 80s, may well prove to be a pathway to nowhere. We believe it is political pressure that brings policy change, not technical positivist arguments about evidence, even when such arguments are couched as a catchy slogan. That investing in women creates more wealth is hardly a rallying call for civil society action. International NGOs have been criticised for becoming co-opted into an international aid system through signing up to the Millennium commitment to poverty reduction. As the unifying MDGs fade into the background, shall we find emerging a sharper discursive distinction between official aid agencies and those non-governmental organisations? Does this offer one possibility for reviving in international development policy spaces a more transformative agenda?

Bringing social transformation back in?

Any such agenda has to take into account the relative power and significance of different international development organisations in shaping women's empowerment, compared for example with the global corporate sector or religious movements. As noted by one of our interviewees, a feminist and former Minister in an African country, indisputably development organisations remain extraordinarily influential in many aid dependent countries. And, while we can hardly imagine their full-hearted adoption of a feminist agenda, these organisations' individual and collective heterogeneity offers opportunities and resources for developing transformative agendas that other actors can develop, adapt and use as they see fit in their own specific policy environments. The effort is worthwhile.

Empowerment is increasingly imbued with a theory of change based on rational choice and methodological individualism. Other meanings remain extant, carrying connotations of 'power within' and 'power with'. Empowerment through women organising in associations and groups, as it appears in Bank texts, starts from the premise of the individual as distinct and separate from society – or at its crudest, that society is nothing more than the aggregate of individuals. Thus, collective action is about working with others for one's own personal benefit, without a concern for 'any real changes to the existing oppressive structures (class or patriarchy)' (Rosario 2004: 2).

Distinct from this rational-choice notion of collective action, another meaning of collective empowerment survives and is expressed through notions of solidarity and 'power with', articulated by some of our interviewees. Such notions derive from another intellectual tradition than methodological individualism, namely relational notions of empowerment linked to the idea of our inseparability from social processes (Eyben 2008). It puts back into 'women's empowerment' that very scariness that frightened some of our interviewees. It means that women's empowerment *is* more about transforming society, and less about making women more effective wealth producers.

We have argued that the fuzziness of the concept of women's empowerment can carry strategic advantages for savvy politically active feminists working in global policy spaces. Yet there are risks. That same fuzziness can permit a more coherent agenda - that gender equality is smart economics - to capture the discursive heights while feminist development workers either capitulate or flounder around lamenting the golden days of Beijing.

International development organisations will never formally get rid of the language of gender and women. They will continue to produce new policy statements and glossy booklets that, like DFID's latest, once again announce 'We must ensure that all our policies and programmes consider the impacts they have on women and girls' (2007b: 24). Yet today, as one of our interviewees commented, 'There's no heat out there'. To help create the heat, the time may well be ripe for a diverse coalition to breath new life into 'women's empowerment'. Although another interviewee nostalgically harked back to the 1990s, looking backwards to what now looks like a heroic age is not the pathway forward.

An initial step might be to avoid that kind of fuzziness that comes from intellectual laziness and carelessness with words. One must be carefully deliberate about making words fuzzy. A second step might be to study what one could term 'discursive judo', looking for means to use the opposition's strengths for one's own transformative ends. This includes assessing what is on the mainstream policy agenda at the moment. Climate change, for example, presents creative possibilities when couched in terms of climate justice. The third most important step is to create new discursive futures through a politics of solidarity (Rao and Kelleher 2005). International NGOs, feminist academics and civil society activists need to work at developing and communicating clear messages - such as women's collective empowerment requiring a people-centred economics. A strong voice from the radical margins gives strength to those feminists inside development organisations who can covertly encourage activists while choosing their own words with care, even if these appear ambiguous.

Notes

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We chose texts primarily from the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC), DFID, the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), the United Nations Development Programme

(UNDP) and the World Bank. We also interviewed two dozen people, including some from four of the above organisations. Apart from Clare Short, their comments are non-attributable.

² Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, China: Available at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/>.

³ A term coined by Robert Chambers.

⁴ A participant at a conference where an earlier version of this article was presented.

⁵ Presumably, 'society as a whole' should be read to mean 'it's also good for the other 50% of the population'.

⁶ Participant at conference

⁷ Speech by a DFID Minister Shriti Vadera at the Growth Commission's European consultation, December 2007 www.dfid.gov.uk/news/files/Speeches/growth-commission-shriti.asp

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