Revisiting the 'Gender Agenda'

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Mention of the word 'gender' has come to evoke a palpable sense of *ennui* amongst many development practitioners (Molyneux 2004). Its political and analytical bite has been blunted not only by the lack of specificity in its use, but also by the process of its domestication by development agencies (Molyneux 2004; Cornwall *et al.* 2007a, 2007b; Sardenberg 2007). 'Gender', it seems, has passed into the lexicon of development without troubling business as usual. 'Gender equality' is a term that has lost a clear sense of meaning: it is used as an umbrella term for as diverse a set of activities as gathering sex-disaggregated statistics, doing 'gender sensitisation' and making women more competitive in the labour market. And 'gender mainstreaming' has run adrift, as once-focused energies have been dissipated and made 'gender' no-one's responsibility. Transplanted from domains of feminist discourse and practice onto other, altogether different and in many ways inherently hostile institutional terrains, it would seem that 'gender' has retained little of the radical promise that was once vested in its promotion (Young *et al.* 1981; Pearson and Jackson 1998). That which lay at the heart of the 'gender agenda' – transforming unequal and unjust *power relations* – seems to have fallen by the wayside.

Critical evaluation of the current status of 'gender' in development points to the conclusion that its political and analytical bite has been blunted not only by the lack of specificity in its use, but also by the processes of its domestication by development agencies (Molyneux 2004; Cornwall *et al.* 2007a, 2007b; Sardenberg 2007). Recent years have seen efforts being made within donor agencies to revitalise the 'gender agenda'. There is growing talk of women's empowerment within these agencies, and some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have shifted their discourse altogether from gender equality to women's rights. What are the prospects of this return to talking about *women*'s rights and

women's empowerment delivering on the kinds of changes that feminists have long demanded? And does it represent a move in the right direction or a step backwards? This article seeks to address some of these questions.

In the spirit of celebrating 40 years of IDS, this article looks back at a foundational conference, The Subordination of Women in Developing Societies (SOW) held at IDS in 1978 (Whitehead 1979; Young *et al.* 1981), and draws on discussions and papers presented at a joint Sussex University and IDS conference in 2003, Gender Myths and Feminist Fables, that sought to take stock of the institutionalisation of 'gender' in development (Cornwall *et al.* 2007a, 2007b). My positionality in writing this piece is partial, as in partisan: I have a political as well as a professional stake in the repositioning of 'gender' and, indeed, in women's empowerment and women's rights. It is partial in a second sense, in that this piece only addresses part of a more complex and nuanced picture; its generalities are not intended to broad-brush what is now a complex and diverse field of practice. My point of departure for this article is also personal. I have always found it difficult to relate to the frameworks and models used to think about gender in development: they fail to make sense to me conceptually, experientially or politically. By opening a space for critical reflection in which these and other forms of disquiet about the fate of 'gender' in development came to be aired and shared, the Gender Myths conference revitalised my own engagement with the 'gender agenda'.

In line with the focus of this *IDS Bulletin* on reinventing development research, I retrace the pathways through which 'gender' found its way into development and explore some of the entailments of the transposition of an activist analytical category onto the world of aid, and the simplifications and

slogans that have accompanied its 'mainstreaming'. I juxtapose received ideas in development discourse with empirical and conceptual work that throw into radical question the presuppositions on which these ideas have come to depend. I go on to explore, in conclusion, what might be needed to revision the 'gender agenda'.

1 Talking 'gender': from buzzword to fuzzword

There are few languages in which a ready translation exists for a word that had become such a taken-for-granted development buzzword by the 1990s. 'Gender' has become a catch-all term for a plethora of competing meanings and agendas, shorthand for which the longhand has either been forgotten or was never really that clear in the first place. As Tina Wallace (pers. comm.) recently commented, what 'gender' means to development workers in developing countries may be restricted to a universal set of stock phrases that they have acquired as a result of exposure to 'gender training' or 'gender mainstreaming'. These phrases and their meanings may have little resonance with local interpretations of social relations and practices. Small wonder that the Zambian villagers interviewed by Harrison (1997) were so bemused at donor desires to 'do gender' by creating exclusive female institutions that they invited their menfolk along.

Like other development buzzwords that have been claimed from social movements, 'gender' gained salience within development when it began to take the shape of an acceptable euphemism that softened 'harder' talk about rights and power. In the process, its usage has become at times almost banal, leaving little scope for evoking either the outrage of injustice or indeed the entrenchment of inequity within the very workings of the development industry – let alone in the everyday lives of the people about whom development agencies profess to be concerned. The very ambiguity of 'gender' may have served activists and practitioners well, as a Trojan Horse with which to imbue apparently innocuous interventions with radicalising potential. As some would argue, 'gender' continues to offer a non-threatening entry point through which to address broader issues of rights and social justice. Yet when such efforts are rumbled, as in the case Cecilia Sardenberg (2007) describes where she was told emphatically 'we wanted *gender*, not feminism', the extent of the depoliticisation of 'gender' becomes more than evident.

Any social movement seeking to get its demands incorporated by mainstream political and bureaucratic institutions faces an uphill struggle to get issues on the agenda that do not match those of these institutions (Dryzek 1996). In the case of 'gender', this struggle has been intense; and significant costs have been incurred in the process. Anne Marie Goetz (2004) reminds us that 'gender mainstreaming' has produced tangible gains, cautioning us not to undervalue the work of 'femocrats' within development agencies. And much *has* been achieved. Yet as Amina Mama points out, 'unequal power and authority has ensured a dynamic of appropriation and incorporation that constantly subverts and depletes transformational feminist agendas' (2004: 121). She points to the ways in which this has led to 'gender analysis [being] denuded so that it ceases to challenge the patriarchal power of the development industry, and instead "adds value" to existing meta-narratives' (2004: 122–3).

Reduction of the 'gender' buzzword to a fuzzword that comfortably accommodates so contradictory a range of potential agendas and outcomes has left feminist engagement with development facing an impasse. Shifting frames of development discourse in the current geopolitical conjuncture provoke further contradictions (Mama 2004). As Deniz Kandiyoti notes, these changes have profoundly modified 'the very terms of the debates we engage in' (2004: 134). What we're left with is what Kandiyoti terms 'feminism lite' (2004: 136), with the consequence that interventions in the name of women may end up serving to further disempower those for whom they are intended. One such example is the kind of economic empowerment programmes being pursued by foreign NGOs in the Middle East, that marry a discourse of 'freedom' with an instrumentalist view of 'liberating' women from the shackles of 'culture' and pay scant attention to the structural roots of women's disempowerment (Islah Jad, pers. comm.).

2 'Gender' vs. rights?

A perennial concern among feminist practitioners and activists has focused on the language of engagement: whether we should be talking about 'women' or about 'gender'. Heated discussions accompanied the adoption of the language of 'gender equality' in the run up to Beijing, with strong opposition from Southern feminists to the prospect of losing in the process a focus on the struggle for women's rights (Baden and Goetz 1997). And some of the fears that

were expressed then have materialised over the last decade. 'Gender equality' provided a convenient silo within which to house anything to do with women. But the effects, in some contexts, have been to insulate 'doing gender' from engagement with broader issues of rights and justice. At the IDS40 conference, Nkoyo Toyo talked of how the exigencies of donor funding for 'gender' have circumscribed the possibilities for activism on core issues of citizenship, economic justice and political rights. 'This made gender harder to work with in a political sense', she commented, noting that while it did not dampen her and her colleagues' activism on questions of social rights and constitutional issues, they pursued this outside the discourse of gender.

Yet where 'gender' and 'women's rights' have been championed by influential international actors, further contradictions arise. Kandiyoti brings these contradictions into sharp relief in the context of Afghanistan. As she contends, 'even for those welcoming change, the trinity of democratisation, good governance and women's rights can be turned into poisoned gifts under new forms of global trusteeship' (2004: 134). Poisoned gifts indeed, some would argue, when today's conjunction of mainstream development prescriptions with geopolitical agendas lends an ironic tinge to the proclamations of commitment to women's empowerment emanating from the most powerful of global actors. Witness, for example, President Bush pledging in 2006 that the United States will 'help women stand up for their freedom no matter where they live,' and saying, with reference to Afghanistan and Iraq, 'there's no doubt in my mind, empowering women in new democracies will make those democracies better countries and help lay the foundation of peace for generations to come' (US Department of State 2006)

What we see in the ready slippages in development discourse between 'gender equality' and 'women's empowerment', between talk of 'gender analysis' and its translation into calls for sex-segregated data, are new challenges for feminist engagement with development. On one level, the battle appears to have been won. 'Gender equality' and women's empowerment appear on the top of bilateral and multilateral donors' statements of intent. In an era of 'more [money] with less [staff]', there are few signs that this is an area of work about to be cut. Most bilateral donors have recently carried out evaluations

of their 'gender equality' strategies, and several are poised to publish new policies. Girls' education and women's political and economic participation are now mainstream development concerns, encoded in MDG3. But on another level, the interpretation of feminist demands and their incorporation into development policy is disquieting. Closer inspection reveals that development agencies' concern with women has precious little to do with the politicised category 'woman' that served to animate and organise feminist demands. Rather, representations of women in the discourses of influential development organisations frequently combine gross essentialism with patronising paternalism.

Refocusing attention on women's rights and empowerment has been rightly welcomed by women's movements. It offers the prospect of repoliticising and reinvigorating a 'gender agenda' that is concerned with making visible and transforming inequitable power relations. It creates the space to talk once more of rights and power, and to highlight the discrimination against and persistent material, social and political disadvantages faced by women. Yet in the hands of the development mainstream, women's empowerment becomes a double-edged sword. Not only does it shift the spotlight away from structural issues of social and economic justice and onto the self-improving individual (Batliwala and Dhanraj 2004; Molyneux 2004). It dislocates the 'gender agenda' from precisely the concern with the relational dimensions of power that animated it in the first place.

3 'Gender' in development
'Gender and Development', or GAD as it is commonly known, emerged in the late 1970s against a backdrop of socialist feminist critiques of liberal feminist efforts to carve out more of a role for women in development (Whitehead 1979; Young *et al.* 1981; Razavi and Miller 1995). Its emphasis was less on integrating women within the frame of existing development institutions and projects, than transforming the very way in which 'development' was conceived (Jackson and Pearson 1998). This required a move beyond 'women' to active engagement with the relations of power that reproduced an unequal and inequitable *status quo*, and this came to depend on the mobilisation of a new analytical concept, 'gender relations'.

The SOW conference was a landmark event in the formulation of this new approach. Mobilising a

distinction between 'sex' (as biologically given) and 'gender' (as a social construct), this approach took a materialist view of the socially constituted relations between men and women, theorising 'gender relations' as the locus in which women's subordination and male domination were produced and sustained (Whitehead 1979; Pearson *et al.* 1981). Pearson, Whitehead and Young describe the aims of the conference:

> We wanted to develop a theory of gender which was integrated into and informed by the general analysis of the changing world economy. Our aim was to develop analytical and conceptual tools to encompass not only economic relations but also what have been called the relations of everyday life. (1981: x)

They go on to note:

> Our point of departure was that relations between men and women are social and are therefore not immutable and fixed. The form that gender relations take in any historical situation is specific to that situation and has to be constructed inductively; it cannot be read off from other social relations nor from the gender relations of other societies. (1981: x)

Their concern was to understand what Rubin famously described as the 'monotonous similarity and endless diversity of women's oppression' (1975: 160). Ann Whitehead's foundational contribution to the SOW conference, 'Notes Towards An Analysis of the Subordination of Women', sets out elements of this approach that came to be submerged in the subsequent incorporation of 'gender' into development. It is worth revisiting them here.

Whitehead's analytical focus is on the social *constitution* of gender relations, in contrast to the definitions of gender that emerged in the simplified slogans and training materials used to promote GAD which spoke in terms of the socially *constructed* relationship between women and men. She draws attention to the social practices that constitute and maintain relations of inequality and injustice, citing Rubin:

> What is a domesticated woman? A female of the species... She only becomes a domestic, a wife, a chattel, a playboy bunny, a prostitute or a human dictaphone in certain relations. Torn from these

relationships, she is no more the help-mate of man than gold in itself is money... (Rubin 1975: 158)

In spelling out the need to explore the range of subordinated subject positions available to women within particular social and economic orders, Whitehead moves the debate beyond a focus on women as being women to the specificity of those social arrangements that sustain inequality and injustice. Her focus is on lived experience of gender relations in all their complexity and materiality, not on the social constructs themselves, or even the 'constructions' associated with them. And she goes on to put her finger on a problem that was to beset feminist engagement with development for the next two decades and beyond:

> The rejection of women as an adequate analytical category has gained much wider acceptance... but there are still plenty of development and other writings which imply that this conceptual clarification has yet to be adopted by many (and perhaps even rejected by some).
> (Whitehead [1979] 2006: 24)

Looking back, it is worth noting how resilient the idea that 'women' is an 'adequate analytical category' has remained in development. Other elements of the SOW agenda, however, have all but disappeared from the surface of development discourses on 'gender' (although they remain alive and kicking in other sites of analysis). Its insistent concern with the materiality of gendered power relations has been dulled by the poverty agenda (Jackson 1996; Molyneux 2004); power has been left by the wayside in the taming of 'gender' to roll out 'gender training' and 'gender sensitisation'.

For all the lip-service paid to the social construction of gender relations, the reality of the application of 'gender' in development is the attempted substitution of one set of naturalised assumptions with another. Far from serving to draw attention to the ways in which social, political and historical processes produce particular gender identities and relations, the 'social constructions' that end up being mobilised in gender and development work are strikingly monolithic. Far from the nuanced understandings of the specificities of gender relations as power relations that the GAD agenda advocated, we're left with the gross essentialisms that incorporation into mainstream development has

attached to the category 'women' and ambivalent and ambiguous use of the category 'men'.

4 Issues of representation
Representations of 'gender' in mainstream development are usually those of *women*. Portrayed as peace-loving nurturers and carers, closer to the earth and inherently less corrupt than men (Leach 2007; El-Bushra 2007; Goetz 2007), such representations of women often take the shape of powerful and rousing 'gender myths' (Cornwall *et al.* 2007b) in which their protagonists come to be represented as abject victims, 'the poorest of the poor' (Chant 2004), or brave heroines who battle against all odds for a better life for their children and communities (de la Rocha 2007). Although the much-used phrase 'the poor and marginalised, including women' came to garland many a profession of development intent in the 1990s, what it actually meant was not 'including *all* women' but ignoring those women who failed to neatly fit the category of 'the poor and marginalised' (Win 2004). For there's a very particular kind of woman who appears in these narratives: her image is often someone quite other to those who invoke her (Mohanty 1988). Men are either missing from these narratives, or cast as all-powerful, lazy or irresponsible (Whitehead 1999; Cornwall 2000).

Catchy slogans and headline-grabbing statistics used to promote the 'gender equality' agenda further confirms the association of 'the poor and marginalised' *with* 'women'. This not only misses out men. It also pushes other women further and further out of view. Implausibly generalising figures like the oft-quoted '70 per cent of women are poor, do two-thirds of the world's work and own 1 per cent of the world's property' lend the comfort of numbers to these associations. It's not as if middle-class women are completely absent from these narratives: gender myths about women as the bastion of probity in public life (Goetz 2007) or peace-makers (El-Bushra 2007) are evidently as much about elite women as about the 'poor and marginalised'. But the mutual overlapping of poverty and gender narratives in development (Jackson 1996) is as troubling for a more politicised analysis of power as it is for building alliances to address broader concerns of social justice (Molyneux 2004).

One of the consequences of these representations is to obscure the contingent configuration of gender and power in women's and men's lives – and with it,

power relations and differences that matter (Amadiume 1987; Cornwall 2000; Woodford-Berger 2004). Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) gets to the nub of the issue with her argument that the tendency in 'Western feminist' analysis to privilege the 'coital and conjugal sites' of heterosexual partnerships serves to obscure the other gender relations that may be far more significant in women's lives and livelihoods in some contexts, such as relations of seniority, of status and of consanguinity. These 'coital and conjugal sites' become, by sleight of mind, so emblematic of women's subordination that other male–female and indeed female–female (Peters 1995) gender relations simply disappear from view. A further, and related, consequence is that sources of power and empowerment for women that lie outside development prescriptions are disregarded where they fail to fit the normative frame: the possibility, for example, that seclusion might be empowering, or that marriage might give women greater autonomy, or indeed that it may be young men who are the most disempowered in some contexts. These possibilities become almost impossible to contemplate.

What we see at work is a series of transpositions. 'Gender' becomes fixed as sexual difference. This frames two categories, 'women' and 'men', which, like all dichotomies, are bounded and mutually exclusive. 'Men' comes to be equated with power: 'women' with powerlessness. 'Men' are the victimisers: 'women' are their victims. Anything that fails to fit the frame is shunted out of it and naturalised assumptions are shunted in, in ways that preclude the possibility of dissonance. From there, efforts are made to recalibrate these dualisms through development interventions: 'women's empowerment', 'male responsibility' and so on. This produces a potent cocktail of normativities that are often shaped more by the preoccupations of development actors than the women they seek to 'help' (Mohanty 1988) blended with essentialism: 'the attribution of a fixed essence to women… the belief that those characteristics defined as women's essence are shared in common by all women at all times' (Grosz 1994: 84). The net result is the naturalisation of precisely that which the use of the analytical concepts of 'gender' and 'gender relations' by those involved in the SOW conference sought to bring into question.

5 Add men and stir?
Despite the emphasis on the *relational* dimensions of inequality and inequity that was part of the GAD

agenda, 'doing gender' is often conflated – in practice – with 'helping women'. The framing of 'gender' as about women *and men* was intended by the original architects of the GAD agenda to focus attention directly on questions of power relations and the iniquities of inequity. But as 'gender' became 'gender equality', and talk of 'women' gave way to the obligatory extension 'and men', this gave license to development agencies to turn away from supporting initiatives aimed at transforming power relations such as, for example, enhancing women's political agency, and towards funding projects that also involved working with men: not as allies, but as targets for 'gender sensitisation' and 'male involvement'. Stories abounded: of the leadership training programme for women politicians that was rejected because no men were involved, of the capture of disproportionate shares of the funding for work on violence against women by initiatives led by men, of the inanity of needing to 'add men and stir' in order to get any funding at all.

Within development studies, ambivalence continued to haunt the rising interest in men and masculinities over the course of the 1990s (Sweetman 1997; White 2000). Complaints were aired about the colonisation of seminars on 'gender' by a few self-serving male voices, of male-authored writing that barely paid lip-service to decades of feminist theorising – and about whether feminists working on issues of masculinity were complicit in diverting precious energy and resources from the struggle for equality and justice. Those feminists who did engage began to wonder where this was going. Bored of being bruised by accusations that their projects, their conferences and their debates did not engage men enough, some began to ask themselves: do men need to wait to be implored to give some time and thought to issues of injustice as evident as these? Is 'gender blindness' like learned helplessness, something men simply get away with because they are not rewarded for bucking the trend? And in any case, why should engaging men be women's responsibility?

At the same time, for all this talk about men, the language of 'gender' came to provide convenient cover for those feminists who continued to subscribe to the notion of universal male domination and saw their work as directed at women's liberation. But the interest in men and masculinities posed a further challenge, one that was more tricky to deal with than obtuse colleagues and 'gender-blind' policies. It

provided a space at the edge of gender and development where the presuppositions informing prevailing gender orthodoxies could be brought into question (Cornwall and White 2000; Cleaver 2002). Unstable as the category 'women' had become in the 1980s, the category 'men' provided a means of shoring it up. By the early 1990s, conceptual work on masculinities was taking further the work that the feminist theorists of the 1970s had begun. By highlighting the diversity of masculinities and the contingency of associations between (some) masculinities and power (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994; Connell 1995), this work disrupted the dualisms that lay at the very core of the 'gender agenda'.

The impact of rethinking masculinity on some areas of development, notably in relation to sexual and reproductive health and rights, has been significant (Esplen 2006). But remarkably little of this thinking has been taken beyond the arena of the personal to address the core structural issues with which feminist activism has been concerned. Amid dozens of studies of male sexuality and projects seeking to refashion masculine identities to address violence against women, there are precious few efforts being made by men to work with other men to address the embedded male privilege that remains evident in the spheres of politics and the economy. Feminist struggles for equal pay and the rights of marginalised female workers seem to find little resonance with the interests of men working on issues of masculinities and power. Feminists advocating for political reforms that bring about greater inclusiveness remain unmatched by men anxious to transform the highly gendered character of politics, let alone enhance the responsiveness of political institutions to issues of gender justice.

Is it time, then, to refocus the 'gender agenda' more explicitly on *women*'s rights, *women*'s political representation and *women*'s empowerment and jump on the mainstream development bandwagon that now seems to be taking off in this direction?

6 Back to women?

We need to go back to what we originally wanted: equality and rights.
(Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay, at the Gender Myths and Feminist Fables conference)

If the trouble with 'gender' lies only in part with the story of its translation into institutionalised

contexts and may include the way in which it was conceived and mobilised, including by feminist activists and practitioners, matters are somewhat more complex. For a start, it might be argued that some of the sacred shibboleths of gender and development – the distinction between 'biological sex' and 'social gender', for example – are part of the problem, rather than the solution (Gatens 1983; Butler 1990). The language of gender and development fails to resonate with most people's lived experience of the many different shades, tones and textures of relationships between and among women and men in different cultural contexts. And 'gender' as it has come to be used in development, in all its monochromatic simplification, may close off as well as open up avenues for advocacy, activism or action, for reasons and with the kinds of consequences that Prudence Woodford-Berger highlights:

> Essentialising relationships between women and men, by overemphasising differences and representing women and men as oppositional categories, makes little sense of the complexity of our own identifications and relationships, let alone those of others. Not taking into account different kinds of alliances and co-operational arrangements between and among various categories of women and men comprises nothing less than a denial of the many lessons we have learned over the years. And this is the ultimate disservice not just to ourselves but ultimately to those who gender mainstreaming is intended to benefit. (2004: 70)

When used as a descriptive term rather than an analytical category, 'gender' irritates those feminists concerned about soft-pedalling on fundamental questions of rights and power; it alienates men who might otherwise be allies who feel it is all about having a go at them and turning them into villains; it bores some of the bureaucrats and practitioners charged with its mainstreaming; and it may barely touch those whose lives development agencies wish to change. 'Gender equality' was always a problematic term, and not just because it is hard to imagine how an analytical category can be unequal (to what?), let alone be equalised. As Ann Whitehead (pers. comm.) argues, the problem with 'gender equality' is more with what it disguises: the specificity of women's demands, whether for equal pay or reproductive rights.

So is a return to 'women' a move in the right direction? Disentangling 'women' from 'gender' would appear to offer us the prospect of getting back to basics. But does it? What it does offer is a way out of the muddle of meanings that have accompanied the adoption of 'gender' in development. It provides a language in which to make unequivocal demands. It opens up more space for contests over the normative content of the category 'woman' than talk of 'gender equality' permitted. And it creates the possibility for focusing much more directly on the demands made by women for rights and justice. Yet 'women' is a descriptive term, one that can be filled with a diversity of meanings and mobilised for political ends by diverse actors, from neo-conservative promoters of 'family values' to radical feminists (Baden and Goetz 1997).

A return to 'women' risks leaving the kind of unhelpful essentialisms that accompanied the institutionalisation of 'gender' in development unchallenged. Some might argue that diverting more of development's resources to women needs to be celebrated rather than asking uncomfortable questions about the normativities embedded in some of today's development policies. But if the normative versions of 'women' that have become so comfortably accommodated within the professions of intent of mainstream development agencies serve not only to reproduce but also to reinforce the very notions that feminists have done so much to contest, what then? Molyneux (2004) explores, for example, how the kind of anti-poverty programmes that are increasingly being spoken about as 'empowering' may end up reinforcing stereotypical roles for women as mothers. And Batliwala and Dhanraj (2004) suggest that self-help groups, another favoured empowerment intervention, may end up deflecting women's energies into provisioning for families and communities and away from forms of mobilisation and collective action to claim their rights. We might well ask what is it that women are being 'empowered' to do? And how exactly will this advance social and gender justice?

7 Repositioning the 'gender agenda'
> Sometimes an expression has to be withdrawn from language and sent for cleaning, – then it can be put back into circulation.
> (Wittgenstein, cited in Heyes 2000: 16)

What 'gender' offered those who came together at IDS in 1978 was a concept that would serve not only

as a tool for thought but also for transformation. The potential analytical and political utility of the concept of 'gender' has been radically undermined by the work it has been put to do within development as a descriptor for a disparate set of interventions whose only family resemblance is claims to act with or on behalf of women – including those aimed at 'involving men' in pursuit of 'gender equality' goals. But it may not yet have lost its utility. Rather, what might be needed is, as Wittgenstein puts it, a bit of cleaning before it can be put back into circulation.

It may be tempting to reclaim the 'gender agenda' from the morass of euphemism, myths and muddled meanings that surround the use of the term 'gender' in development discourse by discarding the term altogether. Yet a return to making unequivocal demands in the name of 'women' may represent a move backwards rather than forwards, not least because of today's geopolitical conjuncture. The risk of becoming entangled with unhelpful – and politically undesirable – essentialisms is a veritable hazard where feminist advocacy meets with the agendas of mainstream development agencies, whose use of the category 'woman' may, to borrow a line from Judith Butler's critique of identity categories in feminist politics, 'simultaneously work to limit and constrain in advance the very cultural possibilities that feminism is supposed to open up' (1990: 147).

'Is it time', Ruth Pearson asked at the Gender Myths and Feminist Fables conference, 'to disinter feminism from gender?' I would say, decisively, yes. But it's also time to recognise that there are multiple feminisms, and that what Amina Mama (2004) has called 'developmental feminisms' may find little resonance with the realities of women's lives and struggles in different social and cultural contexts. What the concept of 'gender' can offer is a tool for analysis that focuses attention on the power effects of the social constitution of difference (Scott 1989) and that is sensitive to context. And this analysis of power can serve as a tool for transformation, with which to dismantle the barriers to self-realisation created by existing social, economic and political systems and structures. But in order to do this work, the concept of gender may *itself* need to be disinterred from the uses to which the term 'gender' has been put in gender and development.

If gender is to be useful, it needs to be recuperated as an *analytical* concept from its current use as descriptive

term. Dressing up generating sex-segregated numbers as 'gender analysis' or producing documents that talk about 'women and men, boys and girls' as if such dividing up the world into categories constituted 'doing gender' should be roundly rejected. Neither these, nor the ubiquitous and misused term 'engendering', has anything much to do with gender as an analytical concept. Gayle Rubin contends: 'we are not only oppressed as women, we are oppressed *by having to be women*' (1975: 165, my emphasis); feminism, in her view, should seek to liberate both sexes from the 'strait-jacket of gender' (1975: 137), so that everyone can express themselves more fully as human beings. The work that the concept of 'gender' *could* be put to do is precisely to release us from this strait-jacket rather than providing additional strings to constrain ourselves with.

Rather than naturalise sexual difference through the deployment of gender binaries that remain stubbornly tied to the anchor of sex essentialism, refocusing attention on the social practices that constitute gender relations and identities can put 'gender analysis' to more transformational uses. No more of the mantra 'gender is the socially constructed relationship between women and men'; rather, the concept of 'gender' can be used to bring into question naturalised assumptions about women, men and power, to illuminate the diversity of subject positions available to women and men in different contexts, and permit a closer assessment of the relational dynamics of power among as well as between them. What this kind of 'gender analysis' can reveal is the extent to which taken-for-granted assumptions about 'women' and 'men' deserve to be disrupted, and how getting to the issues of power at the heart of the matter provides a basis for solidarity and alliances across differences in ways that do not erase those differences.

If the 'gender agenda' is ultimately about redressing that which is unfair and unjust and challenging unequal privilege, then surely a focus on the changes that those who pursue it wish to see happen – greater fulfilment of human rights, equality, wellbeing and justice – offers more than burying the real issue, power, in linguistic obfuscation. Perhaps it is time to remove the mantle of acceptable euphemism that 'gender' has provided and to talk much more directly about equality, rights and power, for it is this kind of talk that long framed the demands of women's movements throughout the world. But to be able to talk as well as to act, what is needed is a new narrative: one that can embrace

activist concerns with women's rights, but steer clear of the essentialisms that have accompanied calls for women's empowerment; one that can go beyond the strictures of identity politics and provide the basis for broad-based alliances amongst those who identify with seeking an end to the injustice of unfair pay, unequal rights, discrimination and violence; and ultimately one that can convey the issues that matter in clear and unequivocal terms, rather than packaging them up in buzzwords.

Revisioning the 'gender agenda', then, calls both for rupture and renewal: for cutting away the dead wood of stale formulations and stagnant ideas, making new connections and building alliances, in order to lend greater vigour to the struggle for a more just world. It calls for seeing 'women' and 'men' as plural categories constituted by social practices, including those of development agencies themselves. It calls for paying closer attention to everyday lives and struggles in diverse contexts, understanding and articulating better what it takes to make a real difference to the relations of power that all that euphemistic talk about 'gender equality' obscures. And it calls for shifting the frame from unhelpful presumptions to a closer analysis of the power relations that create and sustain social injustice – and on those social practices, including those of development agencies, that *can* offer liberating alternatives.

Notes

* This article draws substantially on ideas developed through many hours of discussion and productive disagreement with Ann Whitehead and Elizabeth

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