

**MAKING A DIFFERENCE?
GENDER AND PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT**

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SUMMARY

Participation, empowerment and inclusion have become the new development buzzwords. As the development mainstream takes on some of the practices of participatory development, feminist concerns about representation, agency and voice become ever more pressing. Amidst rhetoric about ‘full participation’ and the involvement of ‘the community’ or ‘all stakeholders’, evidence from some contexts suggests that the very projects and processes that appear so inclusive and transformative may turn out to be supportive of a status quo that is highly inequitable for women. A number of potent challenges arise once a closer look is taken at participatory development and questions are asked about who participates, in what and on what basis, who benefits and who loses out.

This paper seeks to address some of these questions and challenges. Highlighting some of the tensions that run through ‘gender-aware’ participatory development, it draws on empirical material from Africa and Asia to explore the gender dimensions of participation in projects, planning and policy processes. In doing so, it reflects on strategies and tactics that have been used in efforts to make participatory development more gender sensitive. Much depends, the paper suggests, on how ‘gender’ is interpreted and deployed in development settings. The pervasive slippage between ‘involving women’ and ‘addressing gender’ may be tactically expedient, but it provokes a series of questions about the extent to which current understandings of ‘gender’ in development mask other inequalities and forms of exclusion. Making a difference, the paper suggests, requires rethinking ‘gender’ and addressing more directly the issues of power and powerlessness that lie at the heart of both Gender and Development (GAD) and participatory development.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, participatory development has shifted from the margins to the mainstream. Enthusiastically embraced across the political and institutional spectrum, it appears to hold the promise of opening up new spaces for addressing issues of gendered power, agency and representation. The shift in participation discourses beyond beneficiary participation and the project focus to embrace wider questions of citizenship and voice (Gaventa and Valderrama 1999; Cornwall and Gaventa 1999) parallel the focus in recent political science on the seemingly world-wide erosion of citizen trust in representative politics. There is, it seems, an emerging convergence of interest in enhancing inclusive citizenship and extending the depth and scope of participation.

Yet, despite the claims to inclusiveness that come with advocacy of participation in development, Guijt and Kaul Shah point out, 'the language and practice of "participation" often obscures women's worlds, needs and contributions to development, making equitable participatory development an elusive goal' (1998: 1). The occlusion of women's voices in 'participatory' processes raises challenges that strike at the heart of efforts to promote participation in development and undermine staunchly held claims. To make a difference, participatory development must engage with questions of difference: to effectively tackle poverty, it must go beyond 'the poor' as a generic category, and engage with the diversity of women's and men's experiences of poverty and powerlessness. Gender and Development (GAD) advocates and practitioners set out to do precisely this, bringing a gender perspective to bear on policies and practices that maintain, or exacerbate, women's marginalisation. In this regard, the two approaches would seem complementary. There are, however, significant points of tension between them. These arise from, and are productive of, very different ways of dealing with the questions of engagement that both seek to address.

In this paper, I take up these themes. I begin by exploring some of the dimensions of 'participation' and 'gender' in development. I go on to draw on examples of 'participatory' projects from Africa and Asia to analyse some of the obstacles and opportunities for women's participation and for addressing gender issues. Some of the most trenchant critiques of the neglect of gender issues and the silencing of women's voices in participatory projects and policy-related work focus on the practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) (see, for example, Mosse 1995; Jackson 1996; Guijt and Kaul Shah 1998). Given the prominence and popularity of PRA amongst strategies for participatory development, I pay this approach particular attention in this paper. Through an analysis of the use of participatory approaches in policy research, I examine questions of voice, representation and agency. Reflecting on the dilemmas and questions raised throughout my analysis, I conclude by exploring some of the issues that need to be addressed if participatory development is to make a difference.

2. PARALLEL WORLDS, PARTIAL CONNECTIONS? GENDER AND PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT

The essence of participation is exercising voice and choice and developing the human, organisational and management capacity to solve problems as they arise in order to sustain the improvements. (Saxena 1998: 111)

Participatory research is fundamentally about the right to speak. (Hall 1993: xvii)

Saxena and Hall's words parallel much in the Gender and Development agenda (see, for example, Kabeer 1995; Razavi and Miller 1995; Pearson and Jackson 1998). Razavi and Miller (1995) document the shift from an earlier focus on bringing women into development, to a concern with issues of power, conflict and control.¹ Critiques of WID's essentialist focus on women, one that in practice often involved simply reinforcing hegemonic notions of gender, drew attention to the social, material and institutional dimensions of gender disprivilege (Young *et al.* 1981). Rather than creating space within existing approaches to development for the inclusion of women, as WID sought to do, proponents of GAD focused more directly on female subordination as itself productive of exclusion, and on how mainstream development practice perpetuates gendered inequalities. Feminist concerns with voice, choice and rights informed this new agenda, one explicitly concerned with transforming oppressive gender relations (Kabeer 1995; Razavi and Miller 1995).

The parallels do not stop here. Although the gender-blindness of participatory researchers has been vividly characterised by Maguire (1987), feminist and participatory research methodologies share a number of common epistemological, ethical and political principles. From a common concern with the relationship between the knower and the known, to a recognition of the ways in which claims to 'objectivity' and 'truth' can silence other versions, both place an integral value on an ethic of commitment to social transformation (Mies 1983; Gaventa 1993). These shared principles are mirrored by common experiences in the development domain. As White notes, for both participation and gender: 'what began as a political issue is translated into a technical problem which the development enterprise can accommodate with barely a falter in its stride' (1996: 7).

Just as efficiency arguments were used to make a case for increasing women's access to development institutions, so participation gained currency through arguments about the cost-effectiveness and benefits to efficiency of engaging 'primary stakeholders' in development projects. Just as mainstreaming gender has led to some dilution of its political dimension (Goetz 1994), so too has the rapid scaling up of participatory approaches often stripped away the more radical dimensions of participatory practice (Blackburn with Holland 1998). And, just as GAD emerged as a rearticulation of some the principles on which WID had faltered, so too is participatory development beginning to be reframed with a more explicit emphasis on citizenship and on participation as a right (Cornwall and Gaventa 1999).² Recognising these parallels is important: there is much that can be shared, and learnt, from common experience.³

Three key lines of tension cut across these approaches. The first, and perhaps more obvious, is that between an explicitly feminist approach – one that situates *women's* choices and agency as a central problematic – and approaches concerned more broadly with enabling ‘the poor’ or ‘the oppressed’ to gain a voice in the development process. The arguments made by many feminist participatory researchers and practitioners resonate with the positions taken by advocates of GAD (Maguire 1987; de Koning and Martin 1996; Guijt and Kaul Shah 1998). The issues are familiar: the subsumption of ‘women’ under ‘the community’ masks the distinctiveness of women’s experiences, and claims to inclusiveness wobble once questions are asked about who participates, decides and benefits from ‘participatory’ interventions. But just as a broader focus on poverty and powerlessness in participatory development can mask gender inequities, so too can a focus on women obscure other dimensions of exclusion; as recent work has shown, gendered powerlessness is not only a female condition (Sweetman 1997; Cornwall and White 2000).

The second area of tension concerns the role of the practitioner. Much Gender and Development work is conventionally carried out at some remove, with little if any engagement from those affected. It often consists of the application of external models and concepts as a basis for designing or assessing the impact of interventions *for* women. For participatory development practitioners, a primary aim is to transform conventional development into a process of engagement *with* and *by* local people, rather than to use ‘expert’ knowledge to dictate interventions. A central paradox of gender-aware participatory development resides in the contradictions this tension provokes in practice.

Perhaps the most fundamental tension of all cuts across approaches to GAD and participatory action development. Participatory Research and GAD seek explicitly to question the ‘naturalised’ assumptions that, for example, associate women with weakness or the poor with ignorance. With the goal of confronting and transforming inequalities, they introduce particular ideas about power and difference. Social analysis underpins these approaches, despite differences in theoretical orientation between them. In contrast, participatory approaches deriving from the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) school of practice emphasise the particularity of local experience, concepts and categories, and privilege personal experience over structural analysis. Rather than importing concepts from elsewhere, the focus in PRA is on enabling local people to articulate and analyse their own situations, in their own terms.⁴

This opens up the potential for a more nuanced approach to difference, one that acknowledges the complexity and diversity of local experiences. There are a number of resonances here with contemporary feminist theory. But herein lies the source of tension. By seeking to ground analysis and planning in local discourses and institutions, PRA appears to offer the facilitator little scope for challenging (or seeking to change) aspects of the status quo that other participatory and feminist practitioners would find objectionable. This seems to leave little room for a feminist PRA practitioner to baulk, for example, at older women’s calls for measures to teach younger women to respect their husbands. The apparent relativism of PRA, then, carries with it implications about adjudicating between alternatives, and taking a stand (see Fraser and Nicholson 1988). Yet the PRA process is geared at the production of consensus; as such, it can work both to enable different voices to be heard and to mask dissent, depending how it is used.

Differences within add a further layer of complexity, disrupting any easy equation of ‘gender’ or ‘participation’ with a single methodology or approach. The rapid rise in popularity of PRA over the last decade has led to regarding it as practically equivalent to ‘participation.’ Yet participatory development has a history spanning a century (Eyben and Ladbury 1996) and embraces contrasting perspectives on the nature of social transformation, as well as a diversity of methods and methodologies.⁵ Equally, the association of GAD with operational frameworks characteristic of gender training and planning (see, for example, Moser 1993) masks a diversity of approaches to questions of gendered difference, agency and power (see Jackson and Pearson 1998).⁶ These differences produce further lines of connection - as well as tensions - between approaches to gender and participation.

2.1 Situating ‘participation’

The term ‘participation’ appears to offer everybody what they would like to understand it to mean, evoking a warm sense of togetherness, common purpose and mutual understanding. For some, ‘beneficiary participation’ is proposed as a management tool that can help shift costs to recipients while enhancing project effectiveness. For others, ‘participation’ evokes recognition and enhancement of people’s ability to speak out, act, and determine their own ‘development’ through fundamental changes in power relations. Although the two can go together, these very different perspectives on participation represent a fundamental difference in *kind*, rather than simply in degree.⁷

Twenty years ago, an influential UNRISD paper defined popular participation as: ‘organised efforts to increase control over resources and regulative institutions in given social situations on the part of groups and movements hitherto excluded from such control’ (UNRISD 1979, cited in Stiefel and Wolfe 1994: 5). In the 1990s, the term ‘participation’ has taken on a new gloss, captured by the World Bank’s definition: a ‘process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them’ (World Bank 1994, cited in Rietbergen-McCracken and Narayan 1998: 4). The shrinking scope of participation in this definition - to influencing and sharing, rather than *increasing* control, and over *development* initiatives rather than resources and regulative institutions - is indicative of the more instrumental approach that has come to characterise much mainstream participatory development work.

Distinguishing who participates, how, at what stages, and in what becomes crucial for determining the shape ‘participation’ takes in practice. Arnstein’s (1969) celebrated ‘ladder of participation’ has served as a model for variants that seek to apply the principles of a shifting scale of participation to the development context. Often presented as steps along a scale from less to more, these typologies lay out ideal types against which to measure participatory development initiatives.⁸ Most implicitly locate agency for bringing about change in externally induced intervention; few carry with them the link Arnstein’s model made between participation and citizenship. Where they are most valuable is in distinguishing merely being told, from being asked, being brought into decision-making processes and being able to determine the shape that action takes. Where they are less valuable is in disentangling the complex and contested meanings of participation in development settings. White’s (1996) typology (below) is more useful in squarely identifying some of the

contrasting tendencies manifest in the uses to which ‘participatory approaches’ have been put in development.⁹

Form	What ‘participation’ means to the implementing agency	What ‘participation’ means for those on the receiving end	What ‘participation’ is for
Nominal	Legitimation – to show they are doing something	Inclusion – to retain some access to potential benefits	Display
Instrumental	Efficiency – to limit funders’ input, draw on community contributions and make projects more cost-effective	Cost – of time spent on project-related labour and other activities	As a means to achieving cost-effectiveness and local facilities
Representative	Sustainability – to avoid creating dependency	Leverage – to influence the shape the project takes and its management	To give people a voice in determining their own development
Transformative	Empowerment – to strengthen people’s capabilities to take decisions and act for themselves	Empowerment – to be able to decide and act for themselves	Both as a means and an end, a continuing dynamic

(Adapted from White 1996: 7–9)

Precisely because ‘participation’ can mean so many different things and because multiple understandings easily co-exist, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly where to draw definitional lines in practice. And because definitions of participation in development contexts often remain blurred, there is scope for a range of potential interpretations when it comes to implementation. For participatory development takes shape through the actions of particular agents, who bring to the process their own agendas, preconceptions and modes of interaction.¹⁰ In the contested terrain of participatory development practice the elegant ideals of inclusion all too often fall away in the face of institutional expectations and procedure, or for reasons of expediency, conflict-avoidance or prejudice.

2.2 Locating ‘gender’ in participatory development

‘Gender,’ like ‘participation,’ acquires a multitude of meanings in the contested arenas of development practice. Considerable differences between feminisms and approaches to development continue to inform academic approaches to GAD (Jackson and Pearson 1998). Much of this sophistication is lost in practice. Despite the pervasive use of the term ‘gender,’ operational frameworks tend to treat ‘women’ and ‘men’ as if they constituted immediately identifiable groups by virtue of their sex alone. ‘Women’ are often represented as if their relationships with men consisted of competing claims and conflicting interests, in which they are invariably the weaker party. ‘Men’ become powerful, shadowy figures who need somehow to be countered. In the process, the concerns and projections of a particular variant of western feminism come to be translated into development practice (Mohanty 1987).

Seen as the domain of women, gender work in participatory development contexts has tended to be equated with a concern about ‘women’s issues.’ Examples abound where ‘women’ and ‘men’ are consulted,

yet where only 'women's' interests and concerns are treated in terms of 'gender.' The particular conceptualisations of 'gender' in gender planning frameworks (e.g., Moser 1993) act as a powerful filter for information. By separating out and categorising women's activities as if they existed independently of social relationships, these frameworks produce a version of 'reality' to serve the needs of planners. In doing so, they impose notions about the individual and about the nature of gender difference that may be at odds with the experience of difference and connectedness. While highlighting particular aspects of gendered disadvantage, they can render invisible differences within the category 'woman' and mask important relational aspects of male-female interactions (see, for example, Mohanty 1987; Razavi and Miller 1995). As Goetz's (1989) study of Guinean fish smokers illustrates, a focus simply on women's activities can obscure important dimensions of their livelihood strategies - in this case, vital relations of interdependence between women and men.

Questions arise about the extent to which 'gender-aware' development practice can effectively engage in making sense of the complexities of gender relations within communities (Kandiyoti 1998; Cornwall 1998a). Just as 'gender' has become a shorthand for 'women,' 'gender relations' generally refer only to that dimension of male/female relations that involves actual or potential heterosexual relationships (see Tcherzekoff 1993; Cornwall 1998a). Other kinds of male-female relationships are, as a result, shunted out of the frame. The relationship between an elder sister and her younger brother, for example, might be vital in understanding patterns of resource allocation and intra-household dynamics, yet would not be seen as 'gender relations.' Similarly, inter-generational relationships, such as between older female business owners and their younger male employees, are often occluded in easy generalisations about 'male power,' and cast outside the bounds of 'gender relations.'

Privileging particular kinds of male-female relationships as 'gender relations' also leads to a disregard for the gender dimensions of same-sex relationships (Peters 1995). Relations of power between female kin, affines and workers may be based just as much on culturally embedded notions of gender as male-female relations. These relationships may be just as, if not more, important to women's wellbeing and livelihood strategies than their relationships with their husbands. Yet these relations are overlooked by many variants of 'gender analysis,' as Kabeer (1995) points out. The practical equivalence between 'gender' and 'women's issues,' and the limited focus on particular kinds of 'gender relations,' both act to obscure the analytic importance of a focus on gender as a constitutive element of all social relationships and as signifying a relationship of power (see Scott 1989; Wieringa 1998). The question of how to redress women's exclusion *as women* in many development settings remains critical. However, it is evident that the 'add women and stir' approach to addressing 'gender issues' in participatory development may provoke more dilemmas than it serves to solve. Retaining this distinction between 'involving women' and 'addressing gender issues,' I go on in the following sections to explore some of the issues at stake.

3. WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

The question of *who* participates and *who* benefits raises a number of awkward questions for participatory development. The very projects that appear so apparently transformative in terms of 'local people' exercising voice, choice, managing and solving problems for themselves, can turn out on closer inspection to be supportive of a status quo that is highly inequitable for *women* (Maguire 1987). In this section, I take a closer look at two kinds of participatory development projects. The first, a classic mainstream 'participatory' initiative, illustrates the kinds of barriers to participation faced by women. The second, a project that sought to address women's exclusion, highlights some of the uneasy dilemmas that arise for gender-sensitive participatory practice.

3.1 Engaging participation, excluding women

Bina Agarwal's (1997) analysis of the virtual exclusion of women from the new institutions of community resource management in India, formed as part of the Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme, has wider salience for debates about gender in participatory development. JFM emerged in the 1980s as a radical new approach to tackling forest protection (Sarin 1995; Poffenberger and McGean 1996; Joshi 1998), based on the principle of partnership between forest departments and community institutions, through which forest management is decentralised. Through participation in management committees, community members gain access to forest benefits. The celebrated 'participation success story' of JFM emerges, in Agarwal's analysis, as 'gender exclusionary and highly inequitable' (1997: 1374).

Despite their apparent success, Agarwal charges that these programmes fail to ensure women's participation in management and equity in benefit sharing. Membership of committees, rather than citizenship, has come to determine usufruct rights: membership is extended to one person per household, with the assumption of equitable intra-household distribution of benefits. Women are rarely members of JFM committees and rarely attend meetings, even when nominally part of these committees. Unable to exert an influence over the rules for forest protection, Agarwal reports that women have been banned from entering the protected areas where they formerly collected fuelwood. She cites an example from Gujarat where women, commenting on an award for environmental conservation given to their village, said: 'What forest? ... Since the men have started protecting it they don't even allow us to look at it!' (Shah and Kaul Shah 1995, cited in Agarwal 1997: 1374). Sarin and SAARTHI suggest that the shift to 'community' protection has had further repercussions: 'due to the policing role shifting from Forest Department staff to household men, cultural taboos prevent women from even voicing their problems' (1996: 21).

Agarwal draws attention to by now familiar constraints to women's participation. In the JFM context these included: logistical constraints relating to women's time use; male bias on the part of male forestry officials and workers; social constraints ranging from seclusion to norms about women's capabilities and roles; the absence of a 'critical mass' of women, which impinges on women's voice in public arenas; lack of experience in public speaking and a lack of recognised authority (1997: 1375). She cites a female member of a forest membership group: 'I went to three or four meetings ... No one ever listened to my suggestions. They

were uninterested' (Britt 1993, cited in Agarwal 1997: 1375). As Sarin and SAARTHI (1996) contend, JFM is based on deeply problematic official assumptions about how village organisations work. This confirms the point made by Lind, who draws attention to the replication of gender inequalities in community structures that are used or created to service development projects, noting that, 'increases in local power may not automatically translate into power for women' (1997: 1217). The JFM example 'highlights the problem of treating "communities" as ungendered units and "community participation" as an unambiguous step toward enhanced equality' (Agarwal 1997: 1374).

What solutions does Agarwal suggest? Practical adjustments to meeting times and membership rules would, she argues, be addressed easily enough with gender-aware planning. This strategy is similar to that employed by gender-aware PRA facilitators to involve more women in activities (see Guijt and Kaul Shah 1998). The argument that a 'critical mass' of women enables some women to gain the confidence to speak out is familiar from debates on gender and political participation: getting more women into the structures of governance can create more space for women's concerns (Goetz 1999). Yet, as Phillips (1991), Goetz (1999) and others have made clear, the presumption that women will necessarily represent women's 'gender interests' is more complex than is often recognised to be the case:

The representation of women as women potentially founders on both the difficulties of defining the shared interests of women and the difficulties of establishing mechanisms through which these interests are voiced (Phillips 1991: 90).

On issues that do affect women-in-general, such as - to take an example from the JFM context - access to fuelwood, it is important that women *qua women* are given space to articulate their concerns. Yet as Agarwal notes, simply including women will not in itself enable them to exercise their agency in decision-making arenas. Instead strategies are needed to increase women's confidence and awareness of their rights, in order for them to be more assertive in joining such committees and to speak out. For this, she suggests, the presence of a gender-progressive NGO, especially a women's organisation, is a major factor: membership of such organisations, she argues, makes women more self-confident and assertive, and more vocal in mixed gatherings. As Sarin's (1995, 1998) work on JFM shows, the engagement of gender-progressive institutions can enable women to take up that space to effectively challenge their exclusion. But, as Phillips makes clear, caution may be needed in moving beyond particular concerns that are clearly shared, to identifying female representation with enhancing the position of women-in-general.

A number of dangerous essentialisms lurk behind well-intentioned efforts to increase women's participation *as women* in development fora such as users committees. These are dangerous, rather than simply wrong-headed, because they can act to deepen the exclusion of the more marginalised while providing a reassuring image of having taken measures to address gender equality. Simply increasing the numbers of women involved may serve instrumental goals, but will not necessarily in itself address more fundamental issues of power. Pervasive essentialisms in GAD characterise women as community-oriented carers and men as irresponsible individualists. But there is no reason to suppose that women, by virtue of their sex, are going to be any more open to sharing power and control than men. As is evident from almost two decades of

feminist debate (see, for example, Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Mohanty 1987; Moore 1994), those who represent ‘women’s concerns’ may reinforce the exclusionary effects of *other* dimensions of difference.

Installing women on committees as a legitimating device may merely shore up and perpetuate inequitable ‘gender relations’ *between* women. At the community level, the myth of female solidarity can often wear thin. Female participants in participatory development project committees may not identify themselves primarily, or even at all, with other women. To assume so is to dislocate women from their social and affective networks and relationships.¹¹ It also, rather ironically, masks women’s agency in the pursuit of projects of their own that may be based on other lines of connectedness and difference.¹² Equally, there is no reason to assume that enabling women to have more of a voice in fora like development committees will *necessarily* make any contribution to transforming gender relations.

Herein lies a more fundamental challenge. What if when women raise their voices, the ‘interests’ they articulate affirm culturally located notions of ideal femaleness that outsiders might judge oppressive? What if ‘women’s voices’ echo those that argue that women are incapable of making decisions, need male guidance, should remain in the home? And what if the ‘needs’ women profess are connected with being more able to fulfil their duties as wives and mothers? This raises a number of awkward questions that highlight a tension between the emphasis in participatory development on enabling people to engage in decision-making on their own terms and the feminist agenda of GAD, as the following case reveals.

3.2 The dilemmas of choice

Mounting pressure to attend to the needs of women, especially in donor-funded projects, means greater attention to strategies to include women. Efforts are made to secure female representation on committees; consultation may take place with single-sex groups as part of project formulation; projects may be evaluated according to the extent to which identified ‘women’s needs’ are met. Mayoux (1995) contends that little empirical evidence exists of cases where participatory projects without an explicit ‘gender’ focus have actually enabled women to influence and share control. Putting this high on their agenda for change, Oxfam sought to build a gender focus into the fabric of their support to the Kebkabiya project in Sudan (Strachan with Peters 1997). Their efforts reveal a paradox at the heart of ‘gender-aware’ participatory development.

Initiated as an attempt to increase food security in North Darfur, the Kebkabiya project moved from setting up seed banks to broader livelihood interventions. Oxfam was concerned to avoid increasing workloads, alienating women from the community and causing a backlash from men in the name of empowerment. But women themselves had little expectation of being involved, and men made all the decisions in the community: ‘any activity that included simply sitting around and talking was seen as a task for men’ (1997: 48). Women had a heavier workload, lower levels of education and faced the additional barrier of access to the meeting point of the management committee, some two hours walk away.

Initially, women’s involvement in the project was limited to helping to build seed banks, consistent with other kinds of manual work often carried out by women. Initial attempts to get women onto seed-bank management committees were unsuccessful. At this point the project shifted. In the process of establishing village committees as a means of handing the project over to community management, strategic decisions

needed to be made. Amidst arguments for and against separate committees, in almost all villages women decided on separate committees. Women began to gain confidence and a sense of their collective voice by analysing their problems together. They realised that they needed to be heard by the men for things to change, and wanted to move towards joint committees. Oxfam worked to persuade men of the value of women's involvement in the project, and eventually most committees merged (Strachan with Peters 1997).

The project recruited two female women's coordinators to help increase the participation of women and to represent women's concerns on the project management committee. Village women asked for practical help with things like handicrafts, food processing and poultry raising. The women's coordinators thought these projects should be supported – this, after all, was what women wanted. Oxfam worried that supporting traditional gender roles would reinforce women's inequality. This raised a thorny dilemma:

... despite Oxfam's belief that participation in decision-making is vital for development, when local women stated their needs for support for their own income-generating activities, Oxfam's response was not entirely positive, because it was felt that such activities were unlikely to lead to genuine empowerment and development for the women (Strachan with Peters 1997: 53).

Instead, the Project Co-ordinator secured a special fund to support those women's projects he regarded as in line with project aims, as a means to securing women's involvement in the main project. One of the women's co-ordinators reflected:

I now think that if we had implemented the separate women's income-generating activities earlier it would have led the women to believe that handicrafts projects and the like were all that Oxfam was prepared to offer them. But by this stage women had been sufficiently empowered by involvement in the main project to start using the voice they had gained to make additional demands regarding their other needs (Strachan with Peters 1997: 53).

Working with women's groups separately, then seeking to integrate them with the 'main,' male-run, committees can address both the issues of 'critical mass' and the confidence to speak out raised by Agarwal (1997). Importantly, the Kebkabiya case raises a number of other critical questions.

The village women in Kebkabiya were quite explicit about what they wanted. They may have looked around at what other development projects did for women and framed their 'needs' in ways that would curry favour with the NGO. They may have contemplated the opportunity cost of involvement in committees where their opinions were not likely to be listened to. Or they may have wondered whether it was worth their while getting involved in this project when they had more pressing things to do. It is, of course, impossible to tell. What is significant is that the NGO hesitated about letting them get on with what they wanted to do. Despite commitment to participatory decision-making, those with the power to allocate resources withheld support, and then gave it piecemeal with other objectives in mind. They did this because they believed that it would be in women's interests, even if the women themselves did not see it this way, to participate in the main project.

As Oxfam found in the Kebkabiya case, it is hard to know where to draw the line between what ultimately boils down to a rather ‘top-down’ insistence on women’s involvement in project management when dealing with the ‘bottom-up’ perception of women themselves that this would be unseemly and irrelevant. This instance encapsulates a central tension between GAD and participatory development, invoking a familiar debate in feminist circles over ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ interests (see Molyneux 1985; Jonasdottir 1988), one that remains largely unresolved.¹³ If women *choose* not to participate in mainstream projects, preferring interventions that would seem to reinforce what outsiders regard as their subordination, what does the gender-aware participatory development practitioner do?

Fierlbeck’s (1997) analysis of the concept of ‘consent’ as used in liberal theory addresses precisely this kind of dilemma. Choices such as these cannot be simply argued away with reference to ‘false consciousness.’ Nor can an argument that focuses on the restricted contexts of choice within which women define their interests be effectively sustained, for it breaks down once women’s choices in less restricted contexts are examined more closely. But her conclusion fails to offer succour: ‘we must be willing to probe and to query the choices and decisions of “autonomous” agents,’ for consent is ‘in itself not only a moral construct but, more tangibly, a potentially political device for ensuring obedience’ (1997: 43). This rather begs the very questions of agency that she seeks to answer.

As Scott (1986) and others have argued, overt compliance may be a strategic option that enables those in positions of unequal power relations to gain space: the ‘hidden transcripts’ (Scott 1990) of those Sudanese women might provide a different perspective. It might well be the case that the women complied with the ways the development project constructed their interests as ‘women’ to secure goals that remained consonant with their own projects. It might be that complying with normative ideals in pursuing ‘women’s projects’ gave them room for manoeuvre whilst maintaining important relationships with men (see Arce *et al.* 1994; Villarreal 1990). In any case

... women’s attachment to and stake in certain forms of patriarchal arrangements may derive neither from false consciousness, nor from conscious collusion but from an actual stake in certain positions of power available to them (Kandiyoti 1998: 143).

The ambiguities here vividly illustrate the very real tension between intervening on the behalf of others and enabling ‘beneficiaries’ to design their own interventions. Seemingly benign interventions may undermine the strategies of those for whom ‘actual stakes’ in current arrangements may involve more than initially meets the outsiders’ eye. Inviting ‘the community’ to design their own interventions runs the risk, however, of reinforcing other kinds of stakes: those that maintain the status quo. Nowhere are these dilemmas more apparent than in contexts where PRA is used to enable ‘the community’ to engage more directly in the development process. It is to this, and the implications for what kinds of development projects emerge, that I now turn.

4. FROM APPRAISAL TO ACTION: GENDER IN PARTICIPATORY PLANNING

Shifts towards more participatory and adaptive planning processes for development projects are increasingly evident. It is now common to find the rhetoric of 'participation' in the language of project appraisal and planning. All too often donor demand for 'doing a PRA' remains unmatched by commitment to participation in decision-making or management, and development business as usual prevails. Just as the nominal inclusion of women appears to satisfy 'gender' goals, so too the use of participatory methods may be tokenistic rather than transformative – particularly when it comes to the lofty ideals of inclusion that come as part of the package (Ngunjiri 1998).

'Doing PRA' ranges from engaging potential 'beneficiaries' in substantive reflection, analysis and strategic planning, to one-off performances where communities are 'PRA-ed' and project documents prepared on their behalf. Differences between the ways in which PRA is used, like differences in definitions of participation, are of kind rather than simply of degree. Advocates as well as critics have been highly critical of the uses to which PRA methods are put in the name of 'participation' (see, for example, Guijt and Cornwall 1995). Much depends on the facilitator's own skills and inclinations, as well as on complex institutional factors that condition the possibilities of using PRA in participatory processes.¹⁴ The sheer diversity of practice undermines generalised critiques of PRA and calls for a more situated approach to PRA in practice.

Writings on PRA describe an approach to development that stresses inclusiveness, respect, mutual learning, and the importance of actively engaging people in analytical processes that can strengthen their capacity to act for themselves (Chambers 1997). If anything, it might be expected that the principles of the methodology make it especially appropriate for gender work. Yet a focus on gender is not implicit in the methodology; nor is it often an explicit element of PRA practice. Where gender has been paid attention, it is often through a deliberate emphasis on difference (Welbourn 1991) or through the use of other tools alongside PRA, such as gender analysis (Guijt 1994; Humble 1998; Kindon 1998). The examples given below show that PRA can be used in empowering processes that enable poor women to realise their agency, gain a voice, and work together to transform their situations. Yet it is also all too easy for PRA to be used by facilitators who lack a concern with process, power and difference, to exacerbate exclusion. One of the more obvious consequences is the silencing of women's voices.

4.1 Missing women, masking dissent

Mosse's (1995) account of the challenges faced in the early stages of project planning in the Kribhco Indo-British Rainfed Farming Project (KRIBP) in India has gained considerable currency in debates on gender and participation.¹⁵ Often read as a generalised critique of PRA, Mosse's insightful piece is rather more situated. Redolent with the hallmarks of what many PRA practitioners would dismiss as 'bad practice,' it is an account of a particular project's attempts to come to grips with an entirely new way of working.

The project aimed to identify women's perspectives on farming systems, strengthen their roles in natural resource management and 'open new opportunities for women's involvement in household and

community decision making and resource control' (Mosse 1995: 4). Initial training and familiarisation activities included conducting what Mosse terms 'PRAs' in villages in the project area, consisting of three days in villages using visual techniques and interviews with groups, before a plenary village meeting.¹⁶ Women's participation was minimal: 'very few women attended these PRAs, their attendance was discontinuous and they did not play a role in the round-up and planning sessions with which the PRAs often concluded' (1995: 16–17).

The location of activities in public places from which women were effectively excluded made it difficult for women to attend, let alone participate. A decision made by the project to time these one-off events so as to capture seasonal migrants who might otherwise not be there reflected a concern with maximising male participation with little regard for women's availability.¹⁷

The PRAs took place during a season when women's work (especially weeding) does not allow participation ... PRAs assumed that women would be available collectively at central locations (away from the worksites of home and field) for continuous periods of time... these requirements... were incompatible with the structure of women's work roles (Mosse 1995: 18).

It is unclear from Mosse's account whether any thought was given at the time to how to include women, or other more marginal actors. It appears not.

As public events, Mosse argues, these 'PRAs' did not permit sufficient articulation of dissent to allow marginal women a voice. By creating what effectively amounted to public performances, the team failed to recognise the extent to which the powerful might take control of the public arena, and the implications for the inclusion of other voices. Set in 'a context in which the selective presentation of opinion is likely to be exaggerated, and where minority or deviant views are likely to be suppressed' (Mosse 1995: 13), this worked to exclude the voices of women – and, although not mentioned, presumably also the voices of junior and more marginalised men. Concluding that the public 'PRAs' he witnessed 'tend to emphasise formal knowledge and activities, and reinforce the invisibility of women's roles' (1995: 21), Mosse contends that 'women's agreement with projections of community or household interests will be tacitly assumed, and the notion of distinctive perspectives overlooked' (1995: 21). Given project aims, it is easy to imagine the unfolding scene had there been no reflection on the limitations of these 'PRAs' and thought given to measures to be taken in subsequent work to address women's exclusion.

Mosse's account vividly demonstrates how marginal actors can be excluded in PRA processes, but in using this to critique PRA-in-general he fails to address a fairly fundamental point: much depends on the user. PRA methods in themselves are largely gender-neutral. Even those methods that appear to be gender-insensitive, such as wealth ranking of households (Jackson 1996), can reveal dimensions of gendered difference that might otherwise remain obscure (Welbourn 1991; Scoones 1995).¹⁸ Powerful examples exist of PRA methods being used to facilitate gender awareness, such as Bilgi's (1998) use of daily time routines with men to explore and challenge their prejudices. Yet the appealing simplicity of PRA methods makes them all too easy to simply slot into the repertoire of technical methods fieldworkers already use. As Goetz notes, in the context of GAD,

The search for simple formulae and tools to integrate gender-sensitive data and practices to projects and policies implies faith that technique can override forms of prejudice embedded in organisational cognitive systems and work cultures (1997: 4).

If existing prejudice about whose knowledge counts and what counts as knowledge structures the use of these methods, then it would be hardly surprising to find traces of these assumptions in the outcomes of exercises such as these 'PRAs.'

Mosse's account provides several illustrations of these biases. He draws attention to what he calls the 'aesthetic bias' (1995: 24) of PRA techniques, suggesting that their formality marks out their use 'as the province of men' (1995: 19). Yet it emerges that the KRIBP team was mainly male, and this their first encounter with PRA. It is then rather unsurprising that the team preferred neat maps and charts, familiar to those with technical backgrounds. The 'messier' women's versions and interviews were, Mosse observes, implicitly valued less. Mosse's analysis points to PRA methods as the source of the problem, but it seems more likely that the team's *own* assumptions about women's responsibilities and knowledge conditioned their use of these methods.

How might women's perspectives have been voiced in this context? One barrier to women's participation is time - to sit and talk, analyse, come to meetings. Holding sessions at times that women suggest as convenient, or when women are less engaged in productive work, at least allows the option to participate. Spreading discussions over several sessions may also enable women to take part. Where time is needed most, however, is in building women's capacity to speak and to act: this is something that rushed incursions into communities and hastily cobbled together action plans inevitably fail to address.

Consideration also needs to be given to the gendered nature of institutional spaces so as to locate PRA sessions in places where women feel comfortable.¹⁹ Yet even within the public domain, space can be made for those who are more marginal by structuring the process to include them. One often-used tactic is to work with separate groups, each of whom presents their analysis in turn in open sessions. Coming forward to present a diagram to an audience held captive by the process is less intimidating than speaking out as a lone voice, but also puts collective concerns on the agenda. These strategies can make a difference and, importantly, can provide an important lever for change precisely *because* these events are public. The challenge, as Kesby (1999) points out, is in extending the space beyond the liminal performative domain of the PRA exercise to the everyday fora in which community decision-making takes place.

One of the most powerful barriers to women's inclusion is entrenched attitudes and taken-for-granted assumptions amongst fieldworkers themselves (Chambers 1997; Parpart 1999). The use of PRA with 'the community' can all too easily end up with an unquestioning focus on soliciting the participation of those who are assumed to know, or taking versions produced by the dominant as if they represented the whole. Requiring teams to work with women as well as men, younger as well as older people, has helped create awareness among fieldworkers of dimensions of difference (Welbourn 1991; Jonfa *et al.* 1991).²⁰ Whether or not this effectively addresses *gender* issues remains open to question. Just as handing over control to a highly inequitable 'community' is hardly a recipe for transformation, simply enabling women to speak, as Parpart

notes, is not necessarily empowering, and ‘can disempower if it removes the ability to control the dissemination of knowledge’ (1999: 263).

Gender-blind applications of PRA offer little prospect of enabling women’s voices to be raised in cultural contexts where very real obstacles exist to women’s participation in the public domain. The standardisation of the ‘PRA’ package, the rapidity with which fieldwork was done, its public nature, the lack of female staff and a failure to anticipate these challenges effectively excluded women from early planning activities of the KRIBP. Clearly, institutional as well as methodological issues were paramount in this instance. Whether marginalised voices are *heard* and whether their voice is sustained depends on more than getting the appraisal and planning process right. Without more fundamental institutional change to create an enabling environment for gender-sensitive participatory development, the most participatory of intentions can fall by the wayside.²¹

Turning to Uganda, I explore a case where deliberate efforts *were* made within a longer-term process of change where the aim was not simply to ‘include women’ but to institutionalise measures to address gender equity. Drawing on the KRIBP experience, Mosse argues that

Women have to clothe their ideas and encode their desires in particular ways to make them heard and accepted as legitimate in the public domain of the PRA. But often, their particular concerns do not find a place in the consensus which a PRA generates (1995: 21–22).

Tackling precisely these issues, Redd Barna Uganda has sought to develop a process where these ‘particular concerns’ remain on an agenda within which communities can ‘agree to disagree’ (Guijt *et al.* 1998).

4.2 Making space for difference

Redd Barna Uganda’s experience with participatory development projects provides an example of how attention to difference can be combined with community-wide participatory planning (Guijt 1996b; Guijt *et al.* 1998; Mukasa 2000). Aware that plans made at the level of ‘the community’ often leave contentious gender issues, such as family planning or domestic violence, off the agenda, Redd Barna sought to create spaces in which gender- and generation-specific issues could be tackled within a broader participatory planning process. Redd Barna Uganda’s (RBU) experience offers a number of important insights into the complexities of integrating gender into participatory community-based planning.

Institutional commitment at the highest levels has enabled RBU to work with an approach that makes gender and age differences explicit. The impetus for this came from a shift in direction from within the organisation towards an approach more responsive to children’s rights and needs (Mukasa 2000).²² As part of this shift, greater emphasis was placed on working directly to address women’s subordination. These changes have taken place within a broader enabling environment for participation afforded by the shift to decentralised governance in Uganda, and political commitment to women’s participation in politics (Goetz 1999). Aware of the limitations of contemporary uses of PRA for appraisal alone, RBU consciously chose to define their work as ‘PRAP,’ extending the PRA acronym to emphasise the importance of participation in planning (Irene Guijt, pers. comm.).

Initial work focused on creating separate spaces for older and younger men, women and children to analyse their own situations using PRA methods which formed the basis for a community action plan (Guijt *et al.* 1994). Priorities for action were then placed on the agenda at a community meeting that brought groups together to share their findings. This in itself was a significant innovation. Yet, as RBU found, dividing up communities according to age and gender and then bringing people together to create a single ‘community action plan’ might have created the space for younger women and children to speak, but not necessarily for them to be listened to. Lessons were learnt about the need to integrate planning into a longer process of engagement through which plans emerge, and are rooted firmly in local ownership. As Guijt *et al.* note,

A common feature of PRA processes is that the organisations involved claim that they lead to viable community action plans (CAPs), often after less than one week of analysis and planning. It is, of course, nonsense to assume that community consensus on development priorities, with equitable benefits, is possible in a short time span (1998: 234).

To plan effectively, RBU developed a five-stage process, from preparation (sensitisation and advocacy for the participation of women, children and other marginalised groups), initial immersion, analysis of ‘intra-communal difference’, planning, and implementation with monitoring/evaluation (Guijt *et al.* 1998). Working with partner organisations, and relating closely to government, RBU support this process with skills training, making the time to give plans solid foundations, spanning months rather than days of input.

RBU have sought a means of addressing the challenge of inclusion through advocacy and conflict-resolution as part of the planning process (Sewagudde *et al.* 1997; Mukasa 2000). Each group generates its own priorities and engages in active deliberation on the issues raised by other groups before deciding what priorities needed to be brought forward. Rather than presenting priorities at the point of a community meeting, where it may be more difficult for women to press their case, this process opens up the opportunity for groups to begin to consider the priorities of others. Since this takes place outside the public arena in which negotiations over plans for action take place, there is also opportunity for the groups to reflect on others’ priorities without needing to be ready to defend their own. Using an ‘issues matrix’ to differentiate the concerns of different groups, the process of analysis at community level identifies shared or group-specific priorities. These are then taken forward into community or group action plans, creating a layered action planning process whereby major shared concerns can be addressed at a community-wide level, while groups can be supported to devise and implement their own plans.

Inevitably, conflicts have emerged. Mukasa’s (2000) insightful account of how issues of difference emerged in the village of Nataloke contrasts with Mosse’s description of the silencing of women’s voices. It also reveals the very real threats that such a process opens up. In the preparation phase, advocacy and sensitisation activities opened up a focus on gender- and age-related issues. Starting with discussions of perceptions about the position of women and children, RBU facilitators wove together the use of PRA methods and other tools from gender training to generate debate and reflection. This initial phase also determined the appropriate timing and location for PRA sessions. During the ‘immersion’ phase, peer groups

worked separately on their own analyses. The community meeting that brought them together took on an entirely different character as a result of these deliberate efforts.

Rules for the community meeting were set with inclusion in mind: each group was given the opportunity to present their concerns, and conventional hierarchies of seating and prioritisation of speakers were addressed to make space for the less powerful to speak. Older women represented their analysis in the form of a song condemning husbands who spent women's hard-earned money on alcohol, gambling and women. She reports a tense silence, broken by the voice of a respected elder:

The women have actually raised real issues although it is in a wrong forum ... they have raised issues which we usually settle at 3.00 a.m [deep in the night]. The women have talked! YES, they have talked! They have brought out the issues that are a taboo in a public forum like this. In front of the visitors! But since what they have talked is the undeniable truth, for me I appeal to fellow men that we should not become angry, instead we should say we are SORRY and begin afresh (Muzee Mukama, cited in Mukasa 2000: 13).

Older women, otherwise isolated and vulnerable in the private sphere of the home, were able to take courage in the anonymity that their group identity provided, and speak out for the first time. Younger women too, began to speak out against domestic violence and control over their movements. In response, men fought back. Mukasa writes:

The response which came entirely from older men was sharply critical of their issues and insisting that they were to blame for their plight. They accused them of being frivolous, lazy and unreliable as wives. The men defended themselves on polygamy using quotations from the bible. They again accused them [the younger women] of washing their dirty linen in public by mentioning issues that are strictly private (2000: 13).

Eight months later, a review highlighted the extent of the threat this had posed for men (Guijt 1997). Women declared pride at gaining greater access to legal representation through links with a voluntary women's law association, for cases of domestic violence, maintenance of children and inheritance. Men, however, spoke of women's violation of cultural taboos by bringing 'private' issues into public fora. There had been a backlash, with particular consequences for younger wives, who had been beaten as a direct result of spending their time in PRA meetings rather than on domestic work. The divorce rate was up as a consequence.

For RBU, this experience emphasised the importance of advocacy in bringing about change and the crucial need to work directly with men. Awareness of the effects that meeting regularly or for long periods could have on young women's domestic relationships led to greater sensitivity in planning meetings. A realisation emerged that treating 'women' as a single group masked tensions and diversity between them.²³ Mukasa's account highlights the importance of disaggregating 'gender' and paying attention to the 'differences within': in this case, the barriers to participation and voice faced by the younger women as a consequence of intra-household relations with older women. One tactic RBU have pursued is to attempt to

build understanding between groups of the acceptability of gender and generational differences in priorities, so as to create a basis for shared understanding, if not for common priorities for action. A direct focus on the negotiation of responsibilities seeks to ensure that the priorities and concerns of more marginal groups that are not shared by others in the community are not completely obscured (Guijt *et al.* 1998).

By creating space for women's voices to be raised and heard, RBU's approach goes some way towards addressing the barriers to inclusion evident in the KRIBP case. Equally, by bringing differences in perspective and priorities into clearer view at the start of the project, it holds the potential for addressing some of the challenges that beset both the JFM and Kebkabiya projects. An important dimension of this is the work RBU do to promote not only an awareness of difference, but *respect* for the priorities of others. In this respect, they seek to address Kabeer's contention that:

... creating 'access' is not enough. Equity requires that poorer women and other excluded groups are not just able to take advantage of such success but do so on terms which respect and promote their ability to exercise choice (1999: 76).

What has emerged from reflections on RBU's experience (Guijt *et al.* 1998) however, is that while their focus on age and gender has proven a powerful way to initiate change, it has also masked other differences, notably economic differences. Kabeer's point about the terms on which the involvement of excluded groups is addressed is highly significant: dividing communities along externally-defined axes of difference can obscure the intersections between these and *other* differences, as well as taking for granted forms of commonality that fail to match with people's own concerns, connections and agendas (Cornwall 1998b). In so doing, it can serve to obscure relations and relationships of power and powerlessness, in all their complexity.

Nevertheless, the Redd Barna case offers a powerful example of how PRA can help address the exclusion of women's voices and raise issues of gendered power in planning. It also shows how, when used as part of a process in which 'common sense' notions about sexual difference can be destabilised and challenged, PRA can open up the possibility of reframing 'reality' to make apparent other kinds of choices. As Kabeer's (1999) analysis of 'empowerment' makes clear, however, it is only when analysis moves beyond the everyday materialities of people's lives to explore issues of gendered power - the missing step to which Crawley's (1998) critical analysis of the empowerment claims of PRA draws attention - that some of these other choices become imaginable. To do so requires moving beyond the comfort of consensus; it equally requires institutional commitment to supporting a longer-term process of social change rather than seeking to implement 'quick fix' development solutions. As I go on to discuss, these experiences raise further, perhaps more potent, challenges when participation is 'scaled up' to policy level.

5. WHOSE VOICES? WHOSE CHOICES? PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES, GENDER AND POLICY

Effective participatory development needs an enabling environment in which to thrive, and is in itself productive of changes in the relationships of local people with those beyond the project interface. ‘Bottom-up’ initiatives have led to changing relationships with the state and wider-reaching policy shifts (Cornwall and Gaventa 1999), and attempts to bring policy-making closer to those affected have stimulated the use of participatory approaches beyond the project domain. Here I take a closer look at one kind of participatory policy initiative, Participatory Poverty Assessments (Norton and Stephens 1995; Holland with Blackburn 1998; Robb 1999), from a gender perspective. In doing so, I return to themes raised earlier in this paper to address issues of voice and to explore the ways in which this form of research engages with questions of gender.

Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) have gained popularity in recent years, especially within the World Bank (Robb 1999). Booth *et al.* suggest that

By giving expression to the many different dimensions of deprivation and to what poor people themselves say about what causes them to remain poor, PPAs have the potential both to give us a fuller understanding of poverty, and to make it more difficult for poverty to be ignored or side-lined by politicians and other decision-makers (1998: 5).

A tremendous diversity of practice comes under the label of ‘PPA.’ The emphasis in many PPAs has been on producing information for policy-makers, through the use of a variety of rapid assessment methodologies.²⁴ The increasing use of PRA in PPAs has led to a greater emphasis on engaging ‘the poor’ in defining their own agenda for change (Holland with Blackburn 1998; Robb 1999).²⁵ Some of the more recent PPAs have sought a more active means of bridging the gap between policy-makers and those who policies affect by engaging a diversity of actors in the research process, paving the way for a more inclusionary policy process. Bringing together diverse teams of facilitators and researchers in innovative and longer-term processes, ‘new generation’ PPAs open up spaces for engagement by local government officials and NGO workers, ‘street-level bureaucrats’ who play vital, often unacknowledged, roles in shaping policy (Lipsky 1980; Grindle and Thomas 1991).

What are the prospects for getting gender issues onto the agenda – and for the inclusion of women’s voices amongst those of ‘the poor’? Many of the issues raised earlier emerge when a closer look is taken at the dynamics of PPA processes. At the community level, the challenge of inclusion requires strategies such as those suggested earlier to reach women, and to enable them to speak. Recent PPAs have sought to balance teams by sex and to introduce gender sensitivity into training, encouraging wide consultation. Yet whether or not facilitators take discussions further than bald materialities to facilitate critical analysis of the gender dimensions of poverty depends on more than getting the planning and training process right.

Lebrun’s (1998) study of the UNDP-funded Shinyanga PPA illustrates the ways in which gender issues were sidelined in the field, despite efforts to incorporate gender in training and fieldwork design. Lebrun

notes the limitations of an assumption of gender-based solidarity between fieldworkers and those whose 'voices' they solicit:

By being an urban-dweller, working in the formal sector, educated, and from a middle-class background, the female fieldworker had good reason to feel closer to her male colleagues, rather than to village women... it is also a better move in terms of personal career development to express solidarity with a male colleague, rather than entering into conflict with them on gender issues, especially if the woman holds a lower position than her male colleagues in the hierarchy of the district bureaucracy (1998: 26).

Lebrun's analysis highlights an important point. The agency of the facilitator is obscured by the pervasive imagery in PPAs of neutral facilitators simply listening to and recording poor people's voices. Robb, for example, makes the claim that 'PPAs are responding to the challenge of inclusion by directly representing the views of the poor to policymakers' (1999: xii). The 'poor people's voices' that emerge in PPA reports are presented as if they were authentic versions of what the poor want. Yet to claim that the views of the poor are *directly* represented in these documents would be disingenuous. The politics of the encounter (Jonfa *et al.* 1991) and the processes of editing and editorialising PPA reports are hardly unmarked by the positionality and perspectives of PPA facilitators. Whether and how gender issues are raised, then, would seem to depend on the agency of those who shape this process and on their understanding of 'gender.' It is to this that I now turn.

5.1 Gender in PPAs

Conventional approaches to poverty assessment often obscure important gender dimensions, not least the distinctive ways in which women and men experience poverty (Jackson 1996; Kabeer 1997; Razavi 1998). PPAs, with their promise of a more dynamic and differentiated account of processes of impoverishment and of extending conventional definitions of poverty beyond the straitjacket of income-consumption measures, would seem to offer important opportunities for highlighting the gender dimensions of wellbeing and deprivation and bringing about gender-sensitive policy change.

To what extent do they fulfil this promise? Perhaps most significantly, participatory poverty research has highlighted 'intangible' aspects of poverty with important implications for gender. Older PPA studies often spoke about 'the poor' as a category, whereas many recent PPA reports give vivid accounts of the differences in poor women's and men's experiences. The UNDP Shinyanga PPA (1998) focused explicitly on such differences, raising issues from domestic violence to the impact of male alcohol consumption on household wellbeing. The Tanzania PPA (World Bank 1997) highlighted dimensions of vulnerability in female-headed households that conventional poverty assessment would fail to capture. The Zambia PPA (Milimo, Norton and Owen 1994) provided compelling arguments for the disaggregation of the category of 'female-headed household,' something that ongoing work in the Ugandan Participatory Poverty Process (UPPAP 1999) has taken up. The South Africa PPA (May *et al.* 1998) focused directly on women's experiences in heterosexual relationships, emphasising a definition of poverty as powerlessness. Domestic

violence, marital instability, tensions within family relations, lack of legal rights for women (particularly over property), insecurity and concerns about personal safety all emerge.

Whether these findings emerge in the framing of policy, however, depends not only on the politics of the policy process, but on how 'gender' is interpreted, something about which there appears to be little consistency (Whitehead and Lockwood 1998; Karen Brock pers. comm.). If 'gender' means 'ask the women too,' then the product of exercises like PPAs will likely be gender-disaggregated data that has been 'gathered' with little attention to gender dynamics, gender relations or the contexts in which the data were produced. If 'gender' is equated with concepts like the gender division of labour, then the atomised accounts of men's and women's workloads characteristic of the gender roles framework (Moser 1993) may emerge. If, as is most frequently the case, 'gender' refers to 'women's issues,' it would not be surprising to see findings concerning women's access to resources, perhaps some dimensions of institutionalised disprivilege, and suggestions regarding interventions like women's groups or the provision of credit.

Razavi and Miller argue that 'the situation of women cannot be improved simply by "asking the women themselves" what their interests are' (1995: 38). Dividing up communities on the basis of sexual difference is in itself hardly a guarantee that 'gender issues' will emerge. Indeed, as Kandiyoti argues:

Taking 'naturalised' categories at face value may enhance adequate communication and promote so-called 'bottom-up' approaches to development which are sensitive to local constructions of gender, but it does not necessarily further the goal of putting them into question (1998: 146).

What is evident from an analysis of the treatment of gender in many PPAs is that these very 'naturalised' categories and the assumptions that go with them remain largely unquestioned. The deliberative potential of PPAs is under-realised, exacerbated by the tensions between eliciting local versions and engaging in critical reflection. The dilemmas of the Kebkabiya project have particular resonance here, as the versions produced in consultative exercises may go no further than reaffirming normative constructions. But even if women's statements are taken at face value, it might well be wondered to what extent younger, more marginal women would risk speaking out in brief encounters that generally last no more than a few days. It is easy enough to seek out 'women's voices' and hear only the more prominent among them. The depth of insight gained in the process is questionable, especially without the contextual knowledge to situate who speaks and what they speak about.

Getting gender on the agenda in these settings may provoke some of the tensions explored in the Kebkabiya case, and the dilemmas that are evident from RBU's experience. Yet within policy research, this challenge goes much further, extending beyond contexts in which information is initially produced, into the policy process, where knowledge is mediated and transformed in the framing of policy recommendations. Gathering gender-disaggregated data is clearly not enough to ensure that 'gender issues' get onto the poverty-alleviation agenda. What is apparent from work in other spheres is the powerful institutional and attitudinal barriers that exist where gender is concerned, limiting the prospects for policy change. Goetz's (1994) analysis of the ways in which information about women is taken up in development bureaucracies underlines the point that what policy makers *want to know* tends to determine how information is used.

Given the dearth of critical research on PPAs, little can be said about the processes that give rise to the framing and formulation of policy, and indeed of their implications in terms of gender. But the conclusions of one recent study are suggestive. Whitehead and Lockwood's (1998) analysis of six World Bank Poverty Assessments (PAs), four of which had a PPA component, reveals a limited influence of gender-relevant insights from PPAs on the shaping of World Bank policy recommendations emerging from country-level Poverty Assessments.²⁶ While Whitehead and Lockwood draw attention to this as indicative of the inherent limitations of PPAs, it would seem that rather more is at stake. As they point out, the policy sections of these documents simply reflected current World Bank policy. What is, perhaps, most interesting about their analysis is their careful attention to the ways in which gender issues become increasingly marginalised in the process of producing the Poverty Assessments. At every stage, from the field to the final report, they note how gender issues slipped off the policy agenda. The rich seam of policy-relevant information in field reports was not effectively used in syntheses: gender issues barely made any appearance in policy recommendations.

Whitehead and Lockwood's account highlights the role that those who produce PPA reports play in framing the 'voices' they claim to represent. Clearly, there are multiple potential readings of any evidence. Their contention is that gender issues can easily be overlooked in the absence of an explicit conceptual framework that brings them into consideration. They cite Booth *et al.*'s (1998) re-analysis of recent World Bank PPAs through an assets and vulnerability lens, in which gender emerges loud and clear, from insights into implications for women's vulnerability and wellbeing, and lack of access to political capital, to gendered differences in priorities for policy change. Barely any of these issues emerge in the Bank's own versions. To bring them into view, they argue, a conceptual lens is needed through which to 'read' these findings. What Goetz' (1994) work suggests, moreover, is that to *keep* gender in view more is needed than ways of making *analysis* more sensitive to gender.

5.2 Making a difference?

What difference would the use of a more explicit conceptual framework, characteristic of current models of gender analysis and advocacy on gender issues, make? The South Africa PPA (May *et al.* 1998) provides a good example. Focusing on gendered powerlessness, the South Africa PPA report provides compelling insights into women's experiences, speaking of women's powerlessness in the face of male violence, and of their strategic uses of available power in 'manipulating' men to hand over their wages. What is striking about the SA-PPA is its focus on the more intimate dimensions and dynamics of heterosexual relationships, going well beyond the gender-disaggregated picture that emerges from other PPA work. The policy recommendations that emerged were inflected with a concern that women's wellbeing would not be left out of the picture.

What made this PPA different? Arguably, the accretion of experience in PPAs helped to make it methodologically superior to others. NGOs with longer-term relationships with communities were key actors, high level officials were brought into the process, innovative methods combinations ensured that sound evidence could be produced for policy advocacy, and the quality of the outputs were high. But empirical evidence alone cannot ensure that gender issues make it into reports or policy recommendations. It

seems that the vital ingredient here that made such a difference was the inclusion of feminist researchers and NGOs in the field team. And it was *their* agency and *their* agenda that surfaced gender issues and kept them on the policy agenda. In this respect, the participatory dimensions of the SA-PPA helped to open up the space for strategic advocacy on women's concerns; this, coupled with the use of gender analysis to guide fieldwork and analysis, brought gender issues to the fore.

This example emphasises the embeddedness of knowledge production in the agency of those who engage in the process. It also draws attention to how conventional gender analysis might occlude *other* gendered voices. The twist to this tale is that from the viewpoint of GAD, the SA-PPA might serve as an exemplary case of how gender analysis and gender advocacy can be effectively brought to bear on the PPA process. But the SA-PPA report is in itself equally exemplary of the *limitations* of conventional gender analysis: an important missing dimension is men's perspectives *as men*. Peppered with the voices of women, whose testimonies provide a vivid illustration of the dimensions of power and powerlessness that the report does so much to highlight, the report is virtually silent when it comes to men's voices. 'Men have become marginalised through unemployment, social institutions and the absence of alternative opportunities' (1998: 18), the authors note. But rather than eliciting men's views on the issues this raises for them as men, the authors conclude: 'as a result, [men] pose an economic and physical threat to women and children' (1998: 18). In this way, the perspectives men might have on these issues are eclipsed by the use of a generic category of men-in-general, themselves perceived as 'the problem' (Cornwall 2000).

This example illustrates the dangers of equating 'gender' with 'women' and, in the process, failing to capture men's perspectives on gendered powerlessness. Rosemary McGee (pers. comm.) reports that in fieldwork for the Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment (UPPAP) some young men spoke about *their* gendered vulnerabilities. Unable to afford education, with no land or jobs, young men are economically alienated. Some move in with older women as their 'concubines' as a way to manage, which challenges their sense of self and leaves them in an insecure and vulnerable position. As long as policy narratives on gender are framed as being about 'women's issues', the voices of these young men all too easily become submerged within the generic category 'the poor.'

6. MAKING MORE OF DIFFERENCE

In this paper, I have taken snapshots from the practice of participatory development as a focus for an analysis that explores some of the potentials and stumbling blocks of a gender-aware approach to participatory development. What is evident is that unless efforts are made to enable marginal voices to be raised and heard, claims to inclusiveness made on behalf of participatory development will continue to appear rather empty. Remedies such as requiring the representation of women on committees or making sure that women are consulted are necessary but not sufficient. The challenge of inclusion requires more than the short-term projects characteristic of much development effort. It takes time, and rests on more than simply inviting people to participate. More attention must be paid to strengthening the capabilities of women - *and* men, particularly those who are more marginal - to act as 'makers and shapers,' rather than simply as 'users and choosers' (Cornwall and Gaventa 1999). Working with difference requires skills that have been under-

emphasised in much recent participatory development work: advocacy, conflict resolution, assertiveness training (Mosse 1995; Welbourn 1996; Guijt and Kaul Shah 1998).

A more fundamental obstacle remains in the quest for equitable development. The ethic of participatory development and of GAD is ultimately about challenging and changing relations of power that objectify and subjugate people, leaving them without a voice. Yet the ways in which 'gender' is framed in both participatory and 'gender-aware' development initiatives continues to provide a barrier to transformation. Throughout this paper, I have attempted to highlight some of the problematic consequences of essentialising 'women.' It is, however, in the essentialisms that surround the ways in which 'men' are treated in gender and development that some of the most fundamental problems lie (Cornwall 1997). Mayoux (1998), for example, slips into the 'men-as-the-problem' discourse, arguing that increasing male participation can bring about a further entrenchment of male opposition to gender equality. But why should increasing women's participation be seen as a Good Thing for gender equality, while involving more men be seen as a potential problem? What are the implications of seeing women's participation – or men's participation for that matter – solely in terms of gender?

Ironically, 'gender-sensitive' interventions may remain profoundly insensitive to the dynamics of difference, precisely because of the assumptions that are made about 'gender.' Kandiyoti notes 'the blinkering and distortion that may result from the importation of Western feminist concerns and units of analysis into gender and development writing,' arguing that

We may have to remain agnostic over the relevance and utility of the category of gender itself if it lessens our alertness and sensitivity to the myriad forms which social organisation and hierarchy may take and if it results in extracting men and women as social categories from the contexts in which they are embedded (1998: 146).

Yet I would argue, with Scott (1989), that 'gender' remains useful, precisely because it signifies an aspect of all social relationships and a relation of power. What is at issue here is the slippage between 'gender' and 'women' and the ways in which 'gender relations' come to be understood. The strategic use of a universal category 'woman' continues to make good political sense in some contexts and for some purposes: women's reproductive rights are an excellent example. But allowing essentialisms to spill over into the vastly more messy realities of development practice risks overlooking completely those relationships that make most difference to women's and men's lives and livelihoods. These are 'gender relations,' but they extend beyond conventional definitions to embrace relations of power in which gender is but one aspect in a constellation of intersecting differences. Recognising these complexities and moving beyond unproductive, loaded generalisations about 'women' and 'men' is to move towards addressing the fundamental issues of power at stake.

Shifting the focus from fixed identities to positions of power and powerlessness opens up new possibilities for addressing issues of equity. In practical development terms, this implies more of a role for participatory approaches to explore, analyse and work with the differences that people identify with, rather than for identifying the 'needs' of predetermined categories of people. This calls for an approach that is

sensitive to local dimensions of difference and works with these differences through building on identifications rather than super-imposed identities.²⁷ In this way, concerns that are conventionally seen as 'gender issues' - such as violence against women - can become points of identification that some women, *and* some men, can mobilise around as entry points for change (see Greig 2000; Cornwall 2000).

This would not preclude a direct focus on issues that women-in-general might commonly identify with. It would not require abandoning completely the important struggle for women's rights. But it would help move beyond the assumption that all women identify with 'gender issues' and that bringing about change is a zero sum game in which women-in-general are pitted against men-in-general. In doing so, it would recognise that some men may be just as affronted by the exclusion of women and may be important allies in combating its effects; and that some men are themselves excluded from development initiatives that appear to benefit men-in-general. Equally, it would serve to tackle some of the consequences of defining interventions in terms that fail to embrace the needs of women and men who fall outside the boundaries created by assumptions about 'women's needs,' as is the case in domains like reproductive health (Greene 1998; Cornwall 1998b).

Changing the frame to focus on relations and positions of power and powerlessness offers an entry point for rethinking approaches to gender and participation. While the tensions outlined at the start of this paper continue to provide obstacles to making participation in development more sensitive to difference, they also offer opportunities for bridge-building that can make the most of points of connection between GAD and participatory development. The myths and assumptions that underlie approaches to gender and participation have served important purposes in putting these issues on the development agenda. The time has come, however, to move beyond imposing the straitjacket of the categories and concepts that comes with conventional approaches to gender, or superimposing myths of community on the contested terrain of participatory development. To realise the potential of shared commitment to voice and choice, new alliances are needed that can both acknowledge the diversity of relations, institutions and interactions that sustain poverty and powerlessness and seek new ways to bring about change. The challenge ahead lies in how to refashion our tools and reformulate our strategies to capture these opportunities and to make more of a difference.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Razavi and Miller's (1995) overview provides an excellent account of the emergence of Women in Development (WID) and Gender and Development (GAD), and insightful analysis of the discursive construction of 'gender' in operational frameworks used.
- ² This, too, has considerable implications for gender. Lister argues: 'Citizenship as participation can be seen as representing an expression of human agency in the political arena, broadly defined; citizenship as rights enables people to act as agents. Such a conceptualisation of citizenship is, I would argue, particularly important in challenging the construction of women (and especially minority group women) as passive victims, whilst keeping sight of the discriminatory and oppressive male-dominated political, economic and social institutions which still deny women full citizenship' (1998: 228).
- ³ At the 1998 NGO/World Bank conference on mainstreaming participation in Washington D.C., for example, there was little mention of the gendered dimensions of participation and no mention of what could be learnt from attempts to mainstream gender.
- ⁴ This is of course not to say that writings on PRA are atheoretical. A close reading of Chambers' (1997) work would suggest resonances with a Foucauldian theorisation of power/knowledge (see Gaventa and Cornwall 2000). Yet the emphasis on building consensus through mutual understanding also has resonances with Habermas (1984) and his 'communicative rationality.' The implicit epistemological relativism of PRA, with its emphases on exploring multiple, situated knowledges rather than arriving at any single 'truth' are set within an approach that grounds this exploration in the materialities of an ontologically 'real' world. It might, then, be theorised as a form of critical realism. What is significant here is that the presentation of PRA as an atheoretical, common sense approach has enabled a diverse range of people to take up and use its methods and principles. As Chambers (pers. comm.) argues, more explicit theorisation might well have closed spaces for engagement.
- ⁵ There is a profusion of acronyms and approaches. The principal approaches include: Training for Transformation (Hope and Timmel 1984); Participatory Research and Participatory Action Research (Tandon 1988; Park *et al.* 1993; Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991; Reason 1994); Participatory Rural Appraisal (Chambers 1992, 1997); Participatory Theatre (Mda 1993; Boal 1998). See Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) for a comparative account of some of these methodologies.
- ⁶ Most obviously, these differences include the tensions between materialist feminist and liberal feminist approaches to development - mirroring tensions between socialist, radical and liberal feminism in the 1970s and 1980s (see Moore 1988). More recently, these tensions have been further complicated by the implications of anti-essentialist critiques (see, for example, Mouffe 1992; Butler 1992; de Lauretis 1986; Wieringa 1998).
- ⁷ Nelson and Wright (1996) characterise this as a distinction between participation as a means and participation as an end. This is not entirely productive, as participation as an end tends in itself to imply participation as a means towards that end.
- ⁸ These typologies draw attention to the different potential interpretations of participation, from induced participation through to processes of interactive learning and collective action (see, for example, Hart 1992; Pretty 1995; Cornwall 1996).
- ⁹ Importantly, it overcomes the implication inherent in many of these typologies identified by Guijt and Kaul Shah (1998), that participatory projects involve a progression to what Guijt (1996a) has called the 'nirvana' of participation.
- ¹⁰ Issues of agency in the project context extend beyond the intentions of the developers themselves: how the so-called 'beneficiaries' themselves interpret project aims and are able to use their agency to orient development project to *their* projects becomes highly significant (Arce *et al.* 1994; Jackson 1997; Harrison 1997a; 1997b).
- ¹¹ Molyneux (1985) makes the point that 'women's interests' and 'women's gender interests' are not always coincident, nor are 'women's interests' necessarily based on an identification as women. Unfortunately, much of the power of Molyneux's incisive account disappears in the conversion of 'interests' into 'needs' in Moser's (1993) elaboration of 'practical' and 'strategic' needs (see Wieringa 1998, for a well-founded critique).
- ¹² Studies of the involvement of 'elite' women in women's groups in Africa, for example, suggest that elite women can make use of these fora to gain access to resources, and that a shared gender identity rarely serves as an important basis for alliances (von Bulow 1995; Harrison 1997b).
- ¹³ This complex debate goes beyond the scope of this paper.
- ¹⁴ What makes a process 'participatory' rests on more than the use of 'participatory methods': it resides more in the locus of control over what decisions are made, at each stage, what these methods are used for and by whom (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995).
- ¹⁵ The KRIBP is a bilaterally funded project situated in the Bhil tribal region of Western India, managed and implemented by the Krishak Bharati Cooperative Ltd. At the time Mosse's article was written, it was supported by the UK Overseas Development Administration (ODA), now the Department for International Development. Its goal was to improve the livelihoods of poor farmers through the use of a participatory and poverty-focused

approach to farming systems development, focusing on increasing local resource management capabilities and improving the ability of the poorest to access government programmes.

16 Versions of this 'PRA package' have become common fare the world over, although more recently it has become common practice to divide groups according to age and gender. A popular recipe for these 'PRAs' is a one-off incursion into villages which results in a 'community action plan,' assembled as a notionally consensual output after three to five days.

17 Simply 'asking the community' for a time convenient to them may have the same effect. In a Gambian case village men on behalf of 'the community' picked a 'suitable' time for a team of trainees to visit which coincided with a major ceremonial event for village women (Kane *et al.* 1998).

18 Ranking households as undifferentiated units masks intra-household difference (Jackson 1996), but this technique can also be used to rank *individuals* then map individual ranks onto household clusters, which draws attention to precisely these differences.

19 Mosse suggests that using PRA in non-public contexts would address exclusion from 'formal,' public spaces. But public places are not necessarily less desirable places to hold discussions with women, as Hinton found in work with Bhutanese refugees in Nepal: women preferred not to have discussions in their own homes, as they were more likely to be interrupted or overheard (Hinton 1995).

20 As Jonfa *et al.* (1991), for example, found in a setting where women were silent observers of a 'community' resource mapping exercise, once women and children were *invited* to make their own maps they set to with enthusiasm.

21 Debates amongst PRA practitioners have recently focused on the institutional preconditions for effective participation (see Blackburn with Holland 1998). Among the few documented examples of organisations who have drawn on the participatory principles they use in the field to transform their own institutional culture, the Women's Collective in Tamil Nadu (McCarthy 1998) is among the most inspiring.

22 An initial training course in Zimbabwe introduced PRA, with a specific focus on working with gender and age-specific peer groups (Fuglesang *et al.* 1993). Input from a consultant with a strong orientation towards gender took the organisation through a learning process that focused on increasing their responsiveness to these dimensions of difference (Guijt *et al.* 1994, 1996b, 1997).

23 Mukasa (2000) notes how older women would give younger women domestic chores to do if they saw that they wanted to go out, and that poorer women could all too easily be excluded if facilitators were not sensitive to the pressure on their time.

24 Robb's (1999) survey of 34 World Bank PPAs includes among the approaches used Beneficiary Assessment, SARAR, RRA (consisting principally of semi-structured interviews and focus groups), PRA and an unlabelled category of semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Less than a third used PRA.

25 The extent to which this happens depends, of course, on how 'PRA' is understood. In some cases, it seems, 'PRA' methods were used as part of a quantitative research design, to which qualitative research was simply tagged on. In others, it appears that 'PRA' consisted of the use of little more than conventional qualitative methodology and the methods often associated with it: participant observation, interviews and focus groups. Quite what is 'participatory' about PPAs that simply use these methods to gather information to present to policy-makers remains an open question.

26 These included Zambia, Uganda, Tanzania and Ghana.

27 In this, I follow Mouffe (1992), in suggesting that identities are always contingent and depend on specific forms of identification. Rather than presupposing some kind of homogeneous identity, then, looking at the ways in which people identify themselves with others or with particular issues can provide a more effective basis for action. The challenge is to hold together - rather than dispense with, or completely erase - a politics of difference that is premised on the contingent, situational identity claims that make an identification with 'women's issues' possible, with a politics in which identifications provide the basis for action on commonly held concerns.

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