BATTLES OVER BOOKLETS: GENDER MYTHS IN THE BRITISH AID PROGRAMME

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INTRODUCTION

Between 1986 and 1999 the British Government's development co-operation Ministry[1] published a series of information booklets to publicise its policy in relation to women and development (ODA1986, ODA1989, ODA 1992, ODA 1995, DFID 1999).[2] These were colloquially known in house as 'WID glossies'. They aimed to provide the government's policy position at the moment of publication. Three years or so later that position had shifted and a new booklet was required.

The cover of the 1986 publication has a photograph of a group of sullen, immobile sari-clad women, one very obviously pregnant, and in a rural setting. The next booklet, published three years later provides a more modern image of women. The cover provides separate photographs of individuals in uniforms of technicians working in a laboratory and on a research station. Three years further on and there is once again a group on the cover but this time it is of a lively young woman teacher in a salwar kameez sharing a joke with a group of laughing girl pupils. The fourth booklet was published for the Beijing Conference in 1995.and the illustration is of a single sari-clad woman in a sari, frowning in concentration as she produces a handicraft. Finally, in 1999 the title 'Breaking the Barriers' is illustrated by a group of girls *and boys* going to school representing the shift in British aid policy from Women in Development (WID) to Gender and Development.(GAD)

The choice of these covers was not arbitrary. It was a small but significant element in a repetitive contest within the Ministry about the pictorial and textual content of each booklet. These contests were perhaps the most significant arena for the making, confirming and disputing of the government's evolving gender and development policy. Each time the battle was between those who wanted the booklet as a means to draw a line in the sand and those who wanted it as an instrument to achieving a more radical or progressive policy.

 I write this article from the perspective of a biased protagonist. It is about the politics of engagement within a hierarchical and initially highly patriarchal organisation. We were missionaries acting as guerrillas while pretending to be mandarins (Miller and Razavi 1998) . Dreary arguments in bureaucratic meeting over the choice of words and pictures are described as a 'battle' because that is how I *felt* it to be. I experienced the process as what subsequent reading describes for me as a battle to illuminate, challenge and change the norms and meaning embedded in government policy (Fraser

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[1] Until 1997 this was the Overseas Development Administration when it became the Department for International Development.
[2] A sixth booklet *Poverty Elimination and the Empowerment of Women* was published by DFID in 2000 as one in the international development targets strategy series and is not included in this present analysis.

1989). Although I cannot represent the gender and development lobby, it seemed to me that many women in the group that was lobbying us had a similar view of a battle, one in which the construction of the policy document was a key aspect.

In the next section, and from this partial perspective, I describe the overall policy context in which the booklets were produced. I then provide a historical account of the specific policy processes that shaped each booklet and follow by analysing the stories, myths and fables that the booklets contain. I conclude by briefly touching on the advantages and perils in deploying such stories as an instrument to policy change.[3]

THE POLICY CONTEXT

Policy on an issue is very often a response to interest. If no one outside the Ministry is interested in the issue then it will probably fade away and disappear. That interest can come from another part of the government machinery, from parliament or from civil society. Interest from outside the country can also require a policy response. Communicating that response is a policy process in which what is said, how it is said and to whom it is said shapes the nature of the policy. Why there should have been so many WID booklets can be explained by the *attitude of policy makers* inside the Ministry concerning gender and to the *source of the external pressure.*

Senior civil servants can moderate the effectiveness of any external pressure. They can be very influential in encouraging or discouraging Ministerial interest in an issue. All three Ministers, during the time I was responsible for the British aid programme's gender policies, were favourable to the theme but either did not see it as fundamentally important or thought it politic not to express too much enthusiasm for the issue. At the same time, most senior civil servants never saw gender as genuinely significant, warranting a serious response in terms of changing the content of policy dialogue with aid recipient governments or shifting priorities in expenditure.   In some cases, they openly referred to gender as a tedious matter of 'political correctness'.

Leaving on one side the matter of civil service filtering, generally the level of Ministerial interest on a topic tends to be related to the frequency of Parliamentary Questions, comments in the media, the number of letters from the general public and the lobbying activities of those organisations with an interest in the topic. The response is through answering the Questions and letters and by making speeches to the lobbying organisation, as well as producing information through booklets and other documentation.

In the case of gender, very few Ministerial speeches were made[4], compared for example with the more frequent speeches on environment. Ministers tend to make policy speeches to lobbies representing formal organisations, such as universities, trades unions, the churches or business associations. However, in the case of gender, the lobby was organised through a loose network composed of usually marginalised representatives from non-governmental development organisations and universities. It was not sufficiently numerous to make up an audience for a speech. A further constraint to speeches is that Ministers have to be sufficiently interested in an issue to

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[3] I am grateful to Elisabeth Harrison and Jane Goldsmith for commenting on earlier drafts of this paper, and especially to Jane for background information concerning the gender and development lobby.
[4] The only one I recollect was Lynda Chalker's speech at Oxford University's Queen Elisabeth House in 1994.

give up their time to actually making the speech, even when written by someone else. A booklet on the other hand requires no more Ministerial time than a rapid read and the signing of a foreword that a civil servant has drafted.

Thus, the glossy booklets were probably the most significant instrument for this kind of policy process. It is the writer's recollection, one that would have to be validated by further research that, during this period, the number of booklets produced in proportion to the frequency of PQs and speeches was much higher than for other 'comparable' policy issues, such as the environment. The booklets were also an efficient means to communicate policy with the main source of pressure from outside the United Kingdom, the OECD Development Assistance Committee's aid review process. Finally, the Ministry received a steady trickle of letters and enquiries from the general public concerning its policy on women and each time such a letter was received an answer had to be sent. An up to date booklet performed a labour saving function.

While the WID glossies did not require significant investment of time and money from either Ministers or top-level civil servants, they served to give the impression to these sources of external interest that more was happening than was perhaps really the case. A booklet was a story-telling vehicle that simultaneously met conflicting objectives. For senior management the myths, as stories rather than the 'hard' numbers used in serious policy, could placate a lobby without influencing the practice of the Ministry. In contrast, for the social development advisers like myself (the gender specialists in the Ministry) the booklets' stories could serve as statements of aspiration and be an instrument to change behaviour and attitudes. If the stories were sufficiently convincing, giving the impression of gender-sensitive practice actually occurring in the Ministry's projects and programmes, middle management readers might be stimulated to adopt such practice, assuming from the booklets that others in the organisation were in advance of them.

Apthorpe comments that policy documents are more to please and persuade than to inform and describe (1997). In the case of the WID booklets, there was one audience to please and another to persuade. Senior management was trying to please the external lobby and the gender specialists were trying to persuade the Ministry staff. While allowing management to keep the whole issue of women in an apparently safe symbolic domain, the myths provided scope for subaltern subversion.

Our political intent was Sorelian - that the booklet should make real what was still largely imagined.[5] Others in the organisation wanted to use the booklets for an opposite purpose. For them the WID glossies were an instrument to please and placate both an external and internal lobby by demonstrating symbolic change without making any substantive change. Thus those seeking only symbolic outcomes exercised their positional and resource power to prevent the content of any booklet from becoming too radical.   As a result each time our aspiration that the booklet would be a myth to live by, was partially but never fully undermined.

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[5] Sorel on myths: 'We should be especiallly careful not to make any comparison between accomplished fact and the picture people had formed for themselves before action' (Sorel, 1961:42)

As other papers in this Bulletin make clear women lobbyists in and outside development agencies were colluding in the construction and reproduction of a rich gender mythology. These myths contributed to shaping the organisational attitudes and beliefs in ways that those of us involved in the contest only partially understood. They gave us a sense of power and meaning to what were otherwise tiresome and draining struggles. (Yungblut 1992, Weher 1988) [6]

THE HISTORY OF THE BOOKLETS

The first booklet 1986

When I joined the Overseas Development Administration (ODA) in late 1986, it was shortly after the appointment of a new Minister for Overseas, Chris Patten. On the left wing of the Conservative Party this was his first Ministerial post and he was keen to show himself open to new ideas and approaches, including the role of women in development. He had inherited a Ministry in which many of the older staff had first joined when it had been the colonial service. Natural conservatism had been reinforced by the severe cuts inflicted on its aid budget in the early '80's. Many of those in the most senior positions were economists promoting, through conviction, the neo-liberal policies of the administration of the time.   It was also an organisation whose senior management consisted of middle-aged men whose wives still by and large were staying at home. Women at work knew their place as filing clerks and secretaries. The few in senior positions dressed in grey and brown, working quietly in efficient obscurity.

The international women's movement and the Women's Decade had already made some impact on the ODA. It had recruited a 'social development adviser' to represent the country at the 1975 United Nations Conference on Women in Mexico and ten years later there were two such advisers working at the head office on societal aspects of development, including 'women's issues'. The Ministry was responding in part to the pressure of an external lobby largely consisting since the 1970's of a loose network of women academics working in the field of gender and development studies, joined by some women in development non-governmental organisations (NG0s) and in the British Council who were becoming successful in procuring responsibility as WID officers and specialists.

By 1980 the lobby had formed itself into the 'Decade Network' with a keen interest in the performance of the British aid programme. At the 1985 United Nations Conference on Women in Nairobi, the Network actively lobbied the UK Government representatives, including complaining that there had been no-one from the ODA at the Conference. Tell the story It was largely because of this lobbying that the ODA produced its first WID booklet in 1986, a few months before Patten became Minister and, by coincidence, my joining the organisation. The booklet was also responding to

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[6] Soon after I joined the ODA I was asked by a middle manager to review a draft answer to a Parliamentary Question relating to the government's policy on women. His draft answer noted that women should be *'beneficiaries'* of development, I took a pen and inserted '*and agents'*. This seemed to me tremendously daring. My heart thumped and my pulse raced. I felt I had struck a blow for women's freedom everywhere. The myth of agency was an inspiration to personal action. I felt truly heroic and waited for the sky to fall on me. The tired bureaucrat looked at my revised draft, gave it a little tick, popped it in his out tray and thus consented to a change in the Ministry's official perception of the role of women.

an interest from within the House of Commons, mainly from the All Party Group on Population and the booklet acknowledges this interest by cross-referring to another ODA policy booklet just published on population activities.

The second source of external pressure was the Women in Development group of the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD. The DAC is the coordinating mechanism for official bilateral aid. Within the DAC separate working groups pursue particular themes of common interest to all bilateral donors in an effort to improve collective performance. The DAC WID Group was one such. First established in 1983 it had become a strong network that provided mutual support to often beleaguered women responsible for their agencies' WID policies. This support included a friendly rivalry in the production of WID glossies, symbolic expressions of evolving policy among the membership. Following the 1985 Nairobi Conference, the DAC group had agreed Guiding Principles for Women in Development and a system for monitoring these. At the time, the British performance with reference to the Guiding Principles had been judged by the DAC as one of the worst and it had been hoped that the booklet would mollify that source of criticism..

The booklet describes 'how the ODA looks after women's interests' (ODA 1986: 6) and contains three key messages:

- The ODA never attempts to influence the social policies of recipient governments nor to undermine national culture and traditions;[7]
- Improvements for women can only be achieved if there is greater prosperity for all;
- In certain circumstances, it is essential to consider women's role.

The conservative tone of this booklet reflects both the lack of an internal feminist lobby inside the ODA and a Minister who had no interest in the topic. Its principal aim appeared to be to make explicit for the first time what had previously not needed to be defended. The booklet was very badly received by the gender and development lobby. Yet the very production of the booklet was an important step. While, it appeared to be merely stating what had been until then unexamined policy, the statements themselves illuminated the possibility of alternative policy. [8] That there was now available a written policy galvanised the lobby to attack it and propose changes. Patten's arrival gave them the opportunity for genuine dialogue.

The second booklet 1989
When Chris Patten became Minister for Overseas Development in 1986, he instructed his officials to start a dialogue with the lobbyists. The Decade Network brought into the dialogue women from a wider part of the UK voluntary sector and whose organisations, such as the Girl Guides movement, were members of international section of the Women's Organisations Interest Group (WOIG) within the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO). The international section of WOIG subsequently became the development section of the National Association of

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[7] As Goetz pointed out (cited in Razavi and Miller 1995) the reservations about interfering in other peoples' cultures with respect to the role of women did not apparently dampen aid bureaucracies' enthusiasm for interfering in other ways, such as population control.
[8] See Nancy Fraser's discussion on how the very act of articulating normative constructs exposes the hegemony and thus weakens it. (1989: 172-173).

Women's Organisations and was the means by which the gender and development lobby continued to meet Ministry officials during the whole period under discussion.

In the first few meetings of the Patten era, the contrast between the dark grey suited male officials and the women lobbyists appeared to me very striking. The men were clearly very uncomfortable with these women who were so very different in behaviour from their wives and secretaries. Many seemed to be wearing long earrings and flowing, bright coloured garments. They cut their hair very short like men, or, flagrantly feminine, wore it loose down to the waist. Their bangles jangled discordantly when they thumped the table to make a vociferous point. Certainly, the default, normative discourse of aid with its emphasis on efficiency and modernism appeared to be harder to maintain when challenged by these disorderly women.

That first booklet required a second that could refute its principal tenets. By late 1988 there were three social development advisers working out of London on projects across the globe (Eyben 2003). Their energy and enthusiasm had led to the integration of WID issues in an increasing number of existing projects as well as to our taking the lead in designing some new ones. They had also established cordial informal links with the WOIG, playing a brokerage role between the Ministry's male managers and the disorderly women. The hostile encounters of the past were becoming a distant memory. This was the context of the second booklet (1989) It was by far the longest in the series and was written to publicise the Ministry's decision to adopt a WID strategy in accordance with the Guiding Principles of the DAC and following a series of lengthy meetings with the gender lobby. The booklet's introduction stressed that 'we are listening to those who can advise us on what more should be done' (1989:7).

The drafting of this and subsequent booklets reflected the internal tensions between the senior management wish to please (but not change) and the social development advisers' wish to persuade (and change). The first draft was written by social development advisers, exercising considerable self-censorship but also seeking through the apt choice of words and stories to communicate that policy had shifted. The second draft reflected the changes made by the economist in charge of social development advisers and who was responsible to senior management for ensuring that the lines in the sand did not disappear. This draft was shown to the WOIG who (with behind the scenes encouragement from the social development advisers) proposed amendments and changes that would make it more radical than the first draft. The negotiations over these would eventually lead to a compromise in which the final draft looked very much like the first version.

The biggest challenge with the second booklet was to convince the senior managers that women's unequal status was not due to biology but rather a social and cultural construct. The social development advisers and the WOIG designed the regular three monthly consultation meetings so that each time WOIG met a different group of managers and policy advisers to discuss the particular issue that that section of the Ministry was working on, such as health, environment or infrastructure. These meetings provided a more subtle form of gender training to complement that which social development advisers were now rolling out across the organisation as part of the new WID strategy. By early 1989 management was persuaded that the new booklet could contain language that appeared to reverse the policy position taken in

1986. Whereas then the ODA would never interfere in other people's cultures, the Ministry was now prepared to admit that culture might be a problem – 'and not only in developing countries' (ibid: 5). Nevertheless the reaching agreement on the text was long and difficult and the cracks show:

> 'The cultural and legal status of women is often circumscribed, resulting in narrower occupational opportunities, limited property rights and restricted social outlets.

> The governments of most developing countries accept that women are disadvantaged and have agreed to promote strategies which will bring improvements. They recognise that development is hampered while half the population is unable to participate fully in economic and social activities, but usually wish to improve the position of women within their countries' cultural tradition.' (ibid:5)

The third booklet 1992
The principal targeted readership of the third booklet were ODA staff. By this time the ODA had repaired its damaged reputation in the DAC WID group[9] and relations with the lobby had become very fruitful. As mentioned earlier, the gender lobby (with many of the same individuals) became the development section of the National Association of Women's Organisations (NAWO) and continued to meet regularly with the Ministry. The job of the social development advisers was to manage the meetings in such a way that all felt happy with the outcome. This included advising the lobby on the topics that would not be suitable for discussion. For example in 1989 "domestic violence" was definitely not acceptable, pending more work to be done by the World Bank and others on why gender-related violence was bad for economic growth. Steadily however, with younger staff coming into the Ministry, and most staff by now having participated in gender training courses, the issue of women became routinized and less threatening. One senior manager wrote to another: "It is about time we give women a fair crack at the whip".

It was the intensive programme of gender training that served as the primary impetus for the third booklet. The main target of this (much shorter) booklet were the staff attending the training courses that had been designed and initially run by Caroline Moser with her gender planning methodology.(Moser 1993) . This was the last of the booklets to be published in octavo format. The foreword by the new Minister, Lynda Chalker, confirmed the Patten approach to the issue.

The fourth booklet 1995
The UN Women's Conference in Beijing set the scene for the fourth booklet. With funding from the ODA, the development section of NAWO established a Beijing Forum to take forward NGO preparations for the conference. A representative from the Forum was asked to join the official delegation to the Conference. The close alliance between ODA and its own lobby was seen as remarkable at a time when the ideas of 'partnership' between government and the voluntary sector, taken forward under the Labour Government, were still very embryonic.

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[9] The ODA chaired the group for the first time between 1991-93

Thus, the readership of the fourth booklet was not the lobby whose only outstanding disagreement with ODA was on the issue of structural adjustment. Explain While the booklet was interested in influencing ODA staff, the writers had little difficulty in identifying projects and programme to include as examples of progress on gender and development. A large number of ODA country programmes were themselves supporting government and civil society preparations for the Conference. Thus aid recipient countries that were ain important target audience of the fourth booklet. Chalker handing them out at Beijing

The booklet aimed to cover a wider range of themes than in the previous version to reflect the ODA response to the strategic areas of concern that were to be discussed at Beijing. It was a much more expensive product, demonstrating the enhanced access to budgetary resources of the social development advisers now running their own policy department. It was the booklet with the fewest myths and stories. By this time there were a large number of aid projects that were being designed to integrate gender issues and the apparent success of mainstreaming obviated the need for stories to either please or persuade.

The fifth booklet 1999
Two years after Beijing, in 1997, the Overseas Development Administration was transformed under the new Labour Government into the Department for International Development (DFID). Clare Short, as Secretary of State replaced Lynda Chalker . The social development advisory group was keen to produce a new glossy that would summarise the Labour Government's commitment to supporting the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. The delay in publication was a result of the initial effort that was needed by the social development group to mainstream gender in the new White Paper, the major policy document on development aid that the new government was to produce (DFID 1997). As ever, despite a supportive Minister, the civil servants drafting the document did not attribute much significance to the issue.

The purpose of the fifth booklet was primarily to remind DFID staff that gender still mattered in the new era. At the same time, when the fifth booklet was finally published in 1999 it had to reflect not only the DFID commitment to Beijing but, as discussed below, the new emphasis on tackling gender inequality as an aspect of eliminating global poverty. There was overall a much greater use and abuse of gender myths than in the fourth booklet. This can be attributed to the personal interest taken in the production of the booklet by Clare Short.   Until then the battle about the booklets had been between civil servants with the Minister signing off once the text had been agreed. Under Short the principal contest was now between the Minister and her civil servants. Unlike her predecessors, she took an intense and micro-level interest in the production of all policy statements and gender policy was no exception. She read and annotated every draft. Because of their potential to communicate messages to a wide audience she liked fables to support policy statements. In the field of gender and development there was available a rich seam to mine and a large number of myths re-appeared from earlier booklets.

THEMES, MYTHS AND FABLES

The sense of relative powerlessness in an indifferent if not infrequently hostile bureaucracy made symbols and images important spiritual resources to the small group of people working to mainstream gender within the Ministry. The drafting of a WID glossy was the occasion for a discursive battle with a symbolic outcome. Pfeiffer notes that such a symbolic outcome may be achieved even when the underlying facts and decisions remain unaltered and that for various reasons such symbolic outcomes may be all that that desired by those making demands of or within the organisation (1981: 179-209). Was that the case in this instance? Was it only the symbolic change we were seeking? While the symbolism *was* very important it also needed to be supported by real world changes if we were to continue to produce new WID glossies.

Although much of the content of the booklets changed radically over time, there were some policy issues, myths and fables that continued to appear from one publication to the next and which I examine in this section. By policy issue I mean a topic such as family planning or structural adjustment.   I take 'myth' to mean something poetic or metaphysical that is used to provide a normative explanation for the state of the world and the social order. [10] Fables are less normative and grand than myths. Like myths the Oxford English Dictionary notes that they may not necessarily be founded on fact but the dominant meaning is a story (true or not) that is told to convey a lesson.

What were the sources for our stories? Primarily they came from our two external interest groups, the gender and development lobby in Britain and the DAC WID group. The latter may have played a very influential role in the international circulation of gender myths. Sharing and comparing our glossies facilated the spread of the stories across the world of official development assistance.

Although I saw the booklets as statements of aspiration some elements of reality were also required. Typically each booklet provided some current gender myths illustrated with examples of projects and programmes funded by British aid. These examples were fables that had a basis in truth. Because we could not too often cite the same project from one booklet to the next, real world changes were required so as to be able to write the next booklet.[11] The impetus of the need to produce a new booklet (to demonstrate change) contributed to our efforts to re-shape or introduce new projects in the country programme expenditure. Thus, for example in the second in series (1989) it was with great satisfaction that I was able to include at the last very minute before going to press the first ODA-funded rain fed farming project that had just been approved by senior management[12].

The battle about the booklets concerned the disputed interplay of issues, myths and fables. The result of this interplay was for each booklet a dominant descriptor of

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[10] I am drawing here on the discussion of the different meanings of myth in Weiner 1996.

[11] I use 'real world change' in the sense implied by Pfeiffer when he refers to changes in allocation of resources.

[12] This was one of the first ODA projects to seek to mainstream participatory approaches and in which the project documentation sought a role for women that went beyond supporting them in the production of handicrafts. What subsequently took place and the broadening of the agenda by the women community workers is discussed in Jackson (check date)

women with minor and sometimes contradictory descriptions entering into the text and or the illustrations. A dominant descriptor in one booklet emerges as a minor theme in a subsequent one, and vice-versa. The myths and fables in each booklet serve to support and justify the descriptors. In 1986, the dominant descriptor was that 'women have babies'. In 1989 women are 'agents of development'. In 1992 they have a triple role and in 1995 they have rights. In 1997 women are primarily defined as poor. I briefly look at each of these.

Women have babies

That women have babies created fables that other women - voluntary health workers - are needed to stop them having too many babies and to teach them to feed the babies properly when they do have them. The *voluntary woman worker* appears in various guises in the 1986 and in the 1989 booklets. In about 1990 Caroline Moser and the writer visited together a British funded health programme in India and witnessed the performance of power when the male doctors harangued serried ranks of women voluntary workers and the fable disappeared from future editions of the booklet, if not from the real world. In 1995 a gender analysis is introduced and the demand for family planning is stated as low because men do not allow women to go to clinics and men are also part of the problem in 1999 when women are understood to be specially vulnerable to HIV/Aids.

Women in their reproductive role continue to appear in other guises. Domestic water supply projects are a response to women's needs and therefore unsustainable without women's involvement (1986,1989, 1995).   In 1986, just as women need water so they need firewood and, by collecting it, they damage the environment. In subsequent editions, we were able to promote them to environmental managers, hinting at the earth mother figure that conserves and protects nature. **(Leach in this volume?)**

Women as agents of development

By the late 1980's the DAC WID group had decided to use the efficiency argument as a way of 'talking to the boys' (Elson 1998) who ran the official aid business. In any case it suited our own self image better than the previous representation in which WID issues were confined to 'safe motherhood'. Thus, the key message of the 1989 booklet typified by the cover illustration was that to include women in projects led to greater efficiency and effectiveness. 'If they themselves are healthy and knowledgeable, if they have greater access to knowledge, skills and credit, they will be more economically productive' (ibid: 6) It was thus 'essential to recognise the role of women – as both agents and beneficiaries of development' (ibid: 22) One of the most interesting of gender myths appeared as part of this argument, namely that women are the dominant influence on the next generation. Women no longer just have babies, they have sons. This theme re-appeared in 1995 as investing in women's human development contributes to social and economic progress.

Despite the new and strong efficiency theme in the text, the old fables lingered on in the 1989 booklet's illustrations. Community workers were still teaching women nutrition and health (1989:6, 37) and visiting them in slums (ibid:16). Women were still having babies (ibid: 25, 26) and benefiting from clean water (ibid: 23). The photographs had been selected by staff in the Ministry's information service who did

not seek the advice of the social development advisers and when challenged stated with some truth that it was difficult to find in the photographic archive illustrations of women in the way the text of the booklet was seeking to portray them.

Women's triple role

Women's triple role appeared in the 1992 booklet as a direct outcome of Caroline Moser's influence on the Ministry's emerging gender and development policy.   In her training Moser had also stressed the strategic and practical gender needs framework but this was a concept that senior management refused to have incorporated into the booklet. In the Ministerial foreword reference was simply made to 'women's needs' as being possibly different from men's needs without specifying whether they were strategic or practical. However, the idea of strategic change was subtly introduced as a minor theme through the mythical assertion that 'women are prime movers in the process of change', thus justifying the consequential statement '...and yet women's needs and opinions are ignored in deciding how to plan change.'

Strategic gender needs were also introduced implicitly in the four key issues that the booklet saw as the challenge to women in development: legal rights, access to education, access to planning public services and social status. Once again the illustrations lagged behind the message of the text. This time the photographs reflected the message of the previous booklet. Every picture shows women as productive agents of development, not fighting for their legal rights nor seeking to change their social status. The only educational representation was the photograph on the front cover that had been taken by one of the social development advisers.

Women have rights

By 1995 the two main protagonists in the battle of the booklets had both been promoted and were equally more influential, respectively as Principal Social Development Adviser and Chief Economist. Because we both had more power in the organisation more was at stake and top management, previously unconcerned by what had always seemed a marginal issue, was applying pressure to prevent too radical a shift. Thus we took this new battle to a more intensive pitch in the effort to represent ODA policy to the wider world that would meet in Beijing. The key issue was the language of rights. The title *Making Aid Work for Women* was an explicit challenge to the efficiency argument for promoting women in development.

The context of this particular battle was that following the 1993 UN Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, the Minister, Lynda Chalker, was persuaded to make a speech in 1994 at Queen Elisabeth House that would emphasise that women as well as men have rights. The top civil servants in the ODA strongly disliked this rights language and instructed the Chief Economist to keep it under control from now on. The Minister was discouraged from putting Beijing into her diary.[13] Meanwhile, however, the social development group had access to some funds of its own and was supporting the activities of the British voluntary sector in their preparations for

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[13] She did go – and personally distributed copies of the booklet at a meeting of all the Commonwealth heads of delegation.

Beijing. These included strengthening their capacity to the gender lobby for a strong and positive engagement by the ODA. Even some women parliamentary candidates in the Conservative Party joined in.

The text and illustrations in this booklet reflects this conflict. The Minister's foreword starts with the old, comfortable myth of village water systems needing women to maintain them. By the bottom of page two however the language changes to incorporate for the first time a Gender and Development approach [i] Echoing the language in the draft Beijing Platform for Action it speaks of transforming the partnership between men and women while 'because most women in many countries have fewer choices open to them than most men, we need to make a special effort to support their empowerment' (1995:3).

Overall despite the breadth of the subject matter the use of myths and fables was in decline although some old ones were re-processed and new ones introduced, including women as peace-makers, reflecting the increase in conflict taking place around the world following the collapse of communism.

Once again the booklet's text was partly subverted by the illustrations. The cover page shows a woman making a basket and this picture is reproduced again on page 6 under the rubric 'Creating Opportunities'. Elsewhere however the new message of equal gender relations is illustrated by pictures of boys and girls at school and of men listening to family planning advice.

Women are poor

The dominant descriptor in the 1989 booklet of women as agents of development was supported by a minor descriptor of women as poor. This reflected part of the wider shift that was beginning to take place in development thinking at that time in relation to the social dimensions of adjustment. The gender lobby raised the issue of the negative impact of structural adjustment programmes on women. The language of the booklet in relation to this issue had to be very carefully chosen to reflect the government's positive view on the need for structural adjustment while recognising a need to re-focus the attention of international aid on poverty. Thus it is in this booklet that there appears for the first time in ODA literature the myth that 'women make up the greatest part of the poorest of the poor'.

That women are poor became the dominant descriptor in the 1999 booklet. Others have noted the constraints the poverty framework imposed on addressing gender equality as a human rights issue (Jackson 1998). While the emphasis on gender inequality as barrier to poverty reduction may have contributed to the re-appearance of efficiency arguments, the overall much greater use and abuse of gender myths can be attributed, as discussed earlier, to the personal interest taken by the Minister in the production of the booklet. Mythical numbers appear in support of the efficiency argument. It is *70%* of women who are poor (page 1) and women in Africa typically spend more than *five hours a day* travelling mostly on foot to meet the basic needs of their families; (page 15). Investment in education for girls is the single most effective way to reduce poverty; (page 9). Women also protect the environment, maintain peace and keep societies together, make up most of the labour force and pass on knowledge

to the next generation (all on page 1). They also have a better track record than men in paying back loans (page 4).

The myths sometimes sit uncomfortably with the detailed social analysis and textual descriptions of the various projects and programmes that the booklet describes DFID as supporting in relation to the Beijing objectives. The discursive crack between politician and gender analyst becomes apparent. Nevertheless common ground between the two is apparent in a section of the booklet that robustly breaks old barriers with the triumphant political slogan 'More power for women' illustrated by a full page photograph of two smiling women raising clenched fists. This has come a long way from the static group of sullen and silent pregnant women portrayed on the cover of the first booklet.

CONCLUSION

Various contributors to this Bulletin have discussed myth-making as a struggle for interpretative power. Because myths are resonant, enduring and good for galvanising action they are particularly attractive to activists and politicians such as Clare Short. They are also ambiguous and perilous. They can be reduced to slogans and captured by non-feminist and conservative forces that may then use them for their own ends. This has been the case of many of the efficiency myths that communicated the message that women must work for aid, rather than aid work for women.

The strength of myths is that they can be believed in and not believed in at the same time. Reflecting on the battles of the booklets, I realise that, while I rationally exploited some of the available myths as a means to getting gender on the agenda, at the same time their power encouraged action and energy that could not be sustained by dry and rigorous analysis alone. When I was part of the UN drafting committee for the Beijing Platform for Action (representing the DAC WID group) I was inspired to write the first paragraph of the PfA that speaks of the attainment of gender equality not as a zero sum game but as of positive benefit to men as well as women.

> *'Equality between women and men is a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice ...... A transformed partnership based on equality between women and men .... A sustained and long-term commitment is essential, so that women and men can work together for themselves, for their children and for society to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.'*

A myth to live by.

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