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# Reinvigorating Autonomous Feminist Spaces

Anne Marie Goetz

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This *IDS Bulletin*, and the ‘Gender Myths and Feminist Fables’ workshop on which it draws, reflects on a sense of unease among feminists in development work – a sense that gender mainstreaming has produced disappointing results, that we are as far as ever from influencing the flow of funds and the shaping of policy in development and that the burning debates in development and international politics are occurring elsewhere. By subjecting to critical scrutiny the myths that have helped to win a feminist case in development, but that have simplified and essentialised the feminist project, we are engaging in uncomfortable self-scrutiny that forces us to come to terms with two key problems: the de-politicisation that institutionalisation often breeds and the challenge of remaining relevant to the larger development agenda.

It is inevitable that gender mainstreaming has produced outcomes different to that which feminists might have hoped for – sometimes disappointing, sometimes surprising. The translation of a radical idea about social change into bureaucratic targets and procedures unavoidably results in something less world-shattering than the original revolutionary intention. Bureaucracies, whether of a bilateral development agency, a multilateral economic institution, a developing state or a non-governmental organisation (NGO), impose a discipline of classification, ordering and above all, containment, that has tended to strip the gender and development project of its ambition to eliminate gendered power disparities, and instead to focus upon achievable practical projects – microfinance instead of employment and property rights, for instance.

But it would be churlish to dismiss or denigrate the achievements of women and men who have pursued the gender mainstreaming project inside development bureaucracies. These bureaucracies are often deeply resistant to gender-equity concerns,

and the women-targeted or gender-sensitive programmes that they may produce are the result of often intense internal struggle by committed staff members. “Femocrats” risk undermining career advance by pressing what is often still seen as a counter-cultural and unpopular agenda. On the contrary, incentives in bureaucracies encourage conformity. Currently in the development field, this means conformity with the neo-liberal Washington consensus that sees the market as the primary engine of growth and resource allocation. In this environment, we must register as a significant success that gender equity and women’s empowerment has a place in most development policy discussions and on the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) wish-list. To have got this far is the result of deep commitment. Constructive criticism of gender mainstreaming has its place, but we must not leave out solidarity with gender equity advocates working “on the inside”, and recognition of the constraints under which they work.

If we, as feminists working in development, are unhappy with gender mainstreaming, we need to consider whether we can offer a credible alternative to current market-based orthodoxies. This brings me to the second problem raised above: the challenge of remaining relevant to the larger development agenda. The failure of the neo-liberal Washington consensus to reduce poverty has created an opening for new perspectives and critiques of mainstream development approaches. The new “good governance” agenda has appeared to offer promising footholds for gender-equity concerns, but there is also a risk that it will simply reinforce market-based approaches, resurrecting the state from dismemberment mainly in order to refigure it to better support the free movement of capital.

First-generation economic reforms in the 1980s aimed to relax the grip of the state on the levers

controlling market activity, social protection and welfare. Some of the “good governance” reforms of today represent a second generation of economic reforms. Reforms designed to build the autonomy of central banking institutions, tax collection authorities and the judiciary, aim mainly to make contracts more secure, install capitalist property relations and free markets from public intervention. The developmental role of these institutions, and the part they play in enhancing the citizenship entitlements of poorer people, can, in these conditions, become a secondary concern. This is not to say that important alternatives are not simultaneously being developed. Via the auspices of the UN, holistic understandings of human development have been elaborated, and new constitutions in some countries, such as South Africa, attempt to accommodate cultural diversity and battle social exclusion. Recognition of the importance of “governance” – and more specifically, politics – to development offers an important opportunity to critics of market-driven approaches to insert concerns with redistribution and equity. But there is no questioning the centrality of the market in current policy prescriptions, whether in service delivery, legal reform, or macroeconomic planning.

The tremendous build-up of global social movements in opposition to market globalisation in recent years has exposed the hypocrisy of rich countries in supporting the market in selective and self-serving ways. Terrorism has exposed what is perhaps the tip of an iceberg of resentment at the exclusions and injustices of an increasingly unequal world. My concern is that the epistemological tools and heuristics of feminism in development are indeed, as Ann Whitehead said at the workshop, “puny” in the face of the challenges raised by this changing international environment. What does feminism in development have to say as a critique of market-based development strategies and of the governance agenda? What alternatives can it offer in terms of development strategies and visions of social change that can respond to the resentments and injustices of so many people? Above all, feminism is challenged by identity politics: can a vision of gender-equity and feminist versions of social change compete with the versions of social justice and institutional survival arrangements offered through “traditional”, ascriptive, faith-based, or other identity-based institutions?

For me, what Maxine Molyneux (this *IDS Bulletin*) calls the ‘darkening international political climate’ has provoked questions about the relevance of “gender” as an entry-point to social analysis, and as the basis for my politics. The nauseating photos of abuse of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib crystallise this for me. As Barbara Ehrenreich observes, the engagement of American servicewomen in the sexual humiliation of Iraqi men bound together in one set of images illustrates ‘everything that Islamic fundamentalists believe characterises Western culture ... imperial arrogance, sexual depravity ... and gender equality’ (2004). These images certainly puts paid to any lazy or naïve versions of feminism that one might hold – versions of feminism that celebrate the standpoint of women because they are oppressed by men, that seek to place women in positions of power and influence so that they may bring their different needs and interests to bear on decision making. These images remind us of a point long stressed by Gender and Development (GAD) advocates – that the object is not to add women to existing institutions, but to transform them, for otherwise distorted institutions will distort new participants. Efforts to ease women’s access to politics, and currently popular assumptions that women in public life may be less corrupt than men, or more gifted at peace-building, must surely be reconsidered in light of the Abu Ghraib photographs.

But more fundamentally, credible feminist alternatives to fundamentalisms – market fundamentalisms or religious ones – require a moral vision that goes beyond gender equality. This is what feminists from the South have been saying for decades. I am also suggesting that we should start from a reaffirmation of liberalism – a larger struggle for human equality and perfectibility that opposes the subordination of any individual, groups, nations or races to any other. It is the connection between liberalism and capitalism, and democracy and the market, that has to be challenged, and the current good governance agenda deserves careful scrutiny for the ways that it may seek instead to strengthen that connection.

This raises two issues of relevance for my earlier points about gender mainstreaming and good governance debates. First, our objective when mainstreaming must be infiltration, not assimilation. We have too often, understandably, sought assimilation – we need personal career advance,

security, recognition, and for this we buy into institutional cultures and mind-sets and goals. The project of *infiltration* is harder to sustain and involves taking risks, or at least, makes us unpopular with colleagues.

Second, we need to develop our critique of the neo-liberal consensus from a perspective that supports strengthening the capacity of the state to defend equality projects. The state, as an institution for directing social change and protecting rights, has been under assault from all sides for the last 25 years. It is discredited as a wanton spendthrift by the Washington establishment, and vilified as an agent of oppression and social control by progressive groups, including some feminists. Of course, many of the states deserved the assault – many have been unaccountable and kleptocratic, many have so dampened economic activity as to exacerbate poverty, some have taken their remit to construct a national identity into the realm of genocide or ethnic persecution. Yet, as some of the other commentary articles in this *IDS Bulletin* note, the state is the main credible site from which to launch a long-term project of social justice. States still retain the capacities to devise and implement progressive laws – globalisation, informalisation and privatisation notwithstanding. Global governance, though still only vaguely conceived, is perhaps a desirable alternative to strengthening the state, but the American penchant for unilateralism means that global governance is a truly long way away. States are the main institutional arenas in which meaningful debates about legitimate social arrangements can be pursued and enforced.

The pursuit of both projects, feminist infiltration of institutions, and state-strengthening in the interests of social justice, must be grounded in feminist organisation – including providing the institutional basis for tackling domestic violence, providing women's studies courses, providing legal aid, promoting a satisfying work-life balance in the workplace, and so on. Molyneux, Sardenberg, Mama and others make this point too in this *IDS Bulletin*. Autonomous feminist association is what gives us the moral energy (and sense of humour) to carry on, it is the crucible in which ideas about alternative futures are generated, and it must become an institutional basis upon which to ground some of these alternatives. Assimilation is what happens when we have no home to return to, no community from which to draw affirmation and

support. Infiltration is possible when we can keep one foot outside of the institutions we are trying to change.

Infiltration is perhaps most important to pursue in some of the political institutions that have to date remained outside of the frame of gender and development work – in particular political parties. Women and feminists have experienced profound difficulty in altering policies and practices within political parties, yet these are the institutions that, once in power, direct state policy and determine the effectiveness of states in providing the positive functions mentioned above. For infiltration of parties to be effective, the credibility of feminists as representatives of legitimate social concerns has to be strengthened.

This points to another priority concern: the accountability of feminist organisations to their constituents. Feminist organisations often tend to *assume* a constituency, rather than institutionalise it through a paid-up membership with voting rights or other means of connecting constituents to leaders and establishing accountability systems. The accountability of feminist organisations to members and to women in general is an increasingly problematic issue in contexts where secular feminist movements seem to be losing ground in contrast with illiberal theocratic projects that seem to entrench restrictive interpretations of women's economic, sexual, and political rights. We are back to an enduring question: can we identify women's interests as a gender, interests on the basis of which we can organise and mobilise? And if not, then what are feminist organisations accountable *for*, and to *whom*?

Without autonomous feminist activity there is a possibility that all of the energy we have put into gender and development may have been harnessed for the wrong reasons and the wrong outcomes. Have we invested so much in primary education only to provide global capital, disembedded from national controls, with a more globally uniform labour force? Have we invested so much in microfinance so that surplus female labour may retreat to survival activities when forced out of work during periodic collapses of export industries? Have we pushed for women's inclusion in politics in order to pour a democratic smoke-screen over the fact that real power has shifted away from parliaments to capital markets? Of course not – all of these achievements have expanded women's choices and

resources. But if we are to be sure that we are not participating in grooming women to become more amenable handmaidens to international capital, we

need to reinvigorate autonomous feminist spaces and we need to think beyond gender equality.

### **Reference**

Ehrenreich, B., 2004, 'What Abu Ghraib taught me', 20 May, circulated by email