
Political Fiction Meets Gender Myth: Post-conflict Reconstruction, “Democratisation” and Women’s Rights

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In her summary of important points to retain from the ‘Gender Myths and Feminist Fables’ workshop, Anne Marie Goetz made a useful distinction between the politics of development with a capital ‘P’ and feminism as micropolitics that aims, among other things, to push for institutional changes that further greater equity. An overriding preoccupation, expressed throughout the workshop, concerns the nature of the varied obstacles standing in the way of a feminist practice in development. It was argued that these obstacles range from selective appropriations of gender concepts by various international aid bureaucracies to the “domestication” of feminist agenda (and of “technologies” such as gender training), to the effects of global neo-liberal policies that have altered the terrain upon which claims to rights and entitlements could be articulated. It is possible to detect two parallel strands running through these discussions: one is an “internal” critique of how various concepts and approaches generated in the course of scholarly engagement with gender and development issues have fared in practice, the other is an evaluation of how changing global economic and political conjunctures are modifying the very terms of the debates we engage in. I would like to situate this brief intervention into the latter strand, namely, an interrogation of the effects of politics with a capital ‘P’.

Gender issues are becoming politicised in novel and counterproductive ways in a geopolitical context where armed interventions usher in new blueprints for governance underwritten by

international donors and global institutions. The cases I have in mind have entered our political lexicon under the somewhat misleading label of “failed states”. These often refer to war-torn societies with collapsed, decayed or vestigial apparatuses of governance whose political economies are driven by the arms trade, drug trafficking or other forms of illegal trade in primary commodities such as diamonds, oil or cocaine. These states are now augmented, in the case of Iraq, by the casualties of a new policy of armed democratisation and regime change.

I am less concerned with the effects of “gender myths” that have grown out of decades of feminist engagement with development policy and practice, than by the impact of the watersheds represented by the September 11th attacks on the USA and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.¹ The difficulties of developing a principled feminist response (and an appropriate politics of solidarity) in the face of these developments are self-evident. Even for those welcoming change, the trinity of democratisation, good governance and women’s rights can be turned into poisoned gifts under new forms of global trusteeship.

There are several aspects of this new conjuncture that invite us to reflect on a search for appropriate responses. First, there is a new conventional wisdom concerning the need to include women in post-conflict reconstruction, backed by UN Security Council Resolution 1325. The recognition of both the suffering of women caught up in conflicts and their potential as vital actors for a transition to peace

is undoubtedly a welcome development. However, in the absence of consistent policies to transform war economies into sustainable livelihoods offering minimal standards of security, this new attention to women is likely to open itself to the types of criticism encountered previously when women were hailed as the managers of poverty or of deteriorating natural environments. Second, the type of social transformation agenda implicit in global neo-liberal governance, as applied to state-building, has to be interrogated from a gender perspective. The notion that democratisation is coterminous with an expansion of women’s rights needs to be examined more closely in different contexts² as do the intended and unintended effects of donor interventions in this domain.

Using the case of post-Taliban Afghanistan (where reversing abuses of women’s rights has been an explicit item of policy), I would like to suggest that there is a growing gap between the discourses circulating in transnational feminist networks, politics at the national level and the way gender relations, which are embedded in complex layers of historical and cultural determination, are actually played out in everyday livelihood contexts.

Debates within transnational feminist constituencies over an appropriate politics of solidarity with women in Afghanistan proved to be quite divisive. These exchanges followed the familiar tropes of women’s rights as universal human rights vs. “feminism-as-imperialism”, reflected in a spate of articles both in the popular press and in academic journals (with evocative titles such as *Feminism as Imperialism*, *Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?* and *Imperial Wars or Benevolent Interventions?*). While some denounced intervention as an extension of colonial meddling, others highlighted the hypocrisy inherent in denying Muslim women their rights in the name of cultural relativism. This is not to suggest that global feminist mobilisation has been totally without effect, but its results were often mixed.³

Whatever the role of international platforms and actors, it is at the national level in struggles over constitutional and citizenship rights that the most important outcomes will materialise. A precarious balance between contending forces bring contradictory pressures to bear on women’s rights in Afghanistan. On the one hand, institutions of global governance, the UN system in particular, demand compliance with the various international conventions and standard-setting instruments that

underwrite women’s human rights. On the other hand, some of the most powerful internal political factions remain uncompromising on the matter of Islamic laws and have been vocally opposed to introducing changes in women’s status. The tug-of-war between these tendencies is reflected in the new Constitution of Afghanistan which simultaneously endorses the various international conventions to which the government is a signatory, grants equal citizenship rights to men and women and proclaims that no law can be in contradiction with the holy religion of Islam (giving the Supreme Court the right to revoke any law deemed to be so). The potential tensions between these various clauses will be played out in a political field where technocratic blueprints for gender mainstreaming (including the creation of national machinery – the Ministry for Women’s Affairs, MWA), will have relatively little purchase. In a fragmented polity with a weak central government that lacks a monopoly over the means of violence and without a functioning judiciary system the very concept of mainstreaming begs the question, unless it is narrowly understood as a practice to be embraced by donors in their own programming.

As donors, UN agencies and NGOs compete for their share in the “gender” market, often draining limited local capacity to staff their own projects in the process, there is a risk that local voices (especially non-English speaking ones) may be drowned out. Donor packages for women’s empowerment can easily miss their target in a context where the vast majority of women have limited contact with the institutions of the state, market or civil society. Yet, there is little indication of efforts to look beyond the mantras of capacity building, gender training and mainstreaming as a means of addressing gender inequity in the Afghan context. This, indeed, is a context that seems to elicit diametrically opposed reactions; either an unabashedly interventionist stance (demanding the application of state-of-the-art gender ‘packages’) or a defeatist posture (invoking cultural sensitivity to endorse the status quo). In either case, women activists who have been fighting for their rights for a long time both in exile abroad and in Afghanistan may end up as the losers, either because they are deemed to lack the necessary expertise or because they are seen as unrepresentative of their own culture.

A more creative engagement with the complexities of the politics of gender, which is laden

here as elsewhere with its own historical baggage, would mandate a contextual, non-technocratic approach which requires temporal horizons, levels of commitment and types of coalition building and collaboration that far exceed the time frames and resources of “project” cycles. What emerges in the

absence of such commitment is, to paraphrase Ignatieff who uses the term “nation-building lite” to denote shallow interventions involving minimum cost and risk, “feminism lite” which may inadvertently expose and disempower the very constituencies it seeks to support.

Notes

1. My own involvement in a UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women) project in Afghanistan between September 2003 and 2004 has prompted an examination of the issues presented here.
2. There is little doubt that in both Afghanistan and Iraq, elections are most likely to entrench the power of Islamist forces that will resist an expansion of women’s rights along the lines mandated by standard-setting instruments such as CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women). This simply alerts us to the fact that in the real world of politics all good things – national sovereignty, rule of law, democratic governance and women’s rights – do not necessarily come together.
3. Feminist Majority’s ‘Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan’ scored some US political victories for Afghan women’s rights. Through a series of petitions and

lobbying activities they played a significant role in 1998 in the refusal by the UN and the USA to grant formal recognition to the Taliban. It also put pressure to push the US energy company Unocal out of a US\$3 billion venture to put a pipeline through Afghanistan, which would have given the Taliban US\$100 million royalties. On the other hand, at a point in time when the Feminist Majority was in alliance with the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) the unveiling of a burqa-clad young representative of the organisation in the midst of a reading by Oprah Winfrey of Enslers’ *The Vagina Monologues* during a performance in New York, represented precisely the type of sensationalism and objectification which women struggling for their rights inside Afghanistan could do without.

References

Ignatieff, M., 2002, ‘Nation-Building Lite’, *New York Times*, 28 July