

Where next for gender in international development?

Written by Lucy Ferguson

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LUCY FERGUSON, FEB 17 2010

Thanks to decades of feminist activism within and outside international institutions, the issue of gender inequality is now firmly embedded within contemporary development policy and practice. However, the content and approach of gender policy remains highly contested amongst feminist academics and activists. The upcoming 'Beijing +15' conference at the United Nations in New York presents a timely opportunity for reflection and analysis on some of the key debates in this field. This event will entail a fifteen-year review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action – developed at the Fourth World Conference for Women and arguably the foundation of contemporary gender and development policy – evaluating the extent to which the Platform for Action has been implemented. In this essay I offer a brief overview of some of the debates and policies that inform feminist approaches to development policy and practice.

Feminist theories of development fit roughly into two branches – Women in Development (WID) and Gender and Development (GAD). Although the lines tend to be somewhat blurred, we can broadly say that WID adheres to a liberal feminist approach based on the integration of women into development processes and outcomes. In practical terms this has tended to involve creating employment and income for women within a framework of women's human rights. WID was pioneered in the 1970s and substantively informed development policy until the 1990s. In contrast, the GAD approach grew out of more radical feminist agendas informed by socialist and postcolonial politics. Central to GAD analyses was the interlinked nature of gender inequality and processes of capitalist restructuring. The focus on 'gender' rather than 'women' was a consciously political reframing, placing the focus on *relations of inequality* rather than on women as an unproblematic, globally universal category. The GAD agenda was established at the Beijing Conference in 1995 and has since been adopted as the official discourse of development. However, the extent to which contemporary development adheres to the more radical dimensions of the GAD agenda is a point of much debate. Indeed, many feminists would argue that in spite of the adoption of GAD terminology, development retains a profoundly liberal – or WID – approach.[1]

In terms of concrete policies, perhaps the most wide-reaching has been the commitment to gender-mainstreaming by international organisations. Despite widespread adoption of gender-mainstreaming programmes and policies, the impact on promoting gender equality has been difficult to measure.[2] Nevertheless, gender-mainstreaming remains a fundamental component of development institutions' commitment to the Beijing Platform for Action. More recently, however, the mainstreaming agenda has been somewhat overshadowed by the introduction of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Goal 3 – 'promote gender equality and empower women' – has arguably become the primary reference point for gender and development policy. In many ways, MDG3 can be seen as a less radical goal than the Beijing Platform for Action, as it does not make links between economic restructuring and gender inequality. Indeed, it has been argued that the MDGs sanction an approach in which gender issues are reduced to easily quantifiable measures of economic efficiency (or 'human capital' development) and 'gender mainstreaming' has been effectively replaced by a development agenda that views gender issues in a much more limited sense.[3]

As the world's largest and most powerful development institution, feminists have directed much attention and energy towards influencing policy at the World Bank, with varying degrees of success. Although the Bank officially adopted the GAD discourse in the 1990s – along with a broader commitment to social development and poverty reduction – in reality the institution has failed to make the links between economic restructuring promoted by the World Bank and the perpetuation of gender inequality in recipient countries. In its current manifestation, World Bank gender policy

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centres around the *Gender Equality as Smart Economics* agenda, which aims to 'increase World Bank Group work to empower women economically'.^[4] Within this framework, gender inequality is viewed not so much as a problem in itself, but rather as a barrier to economic development and poverty reduction. As the report clearly states:

Studies show that when women are given economic opportunity, the benefits are also large for their families, their communities, and ultimately for national development efforts. Opening economic opportunities for women puts poverty reduction on a faster track and steps up progress towards the Millennium Development Goals, which include the eradication of poverty and hunger by 2015.^[5]

As such, the key paradigm for gender policy within the Bank can be understood to have two fundamental objectives: to empower women *economically* (without any discussion of broader notions of empowerment); and to do this in order to more efficiently achieve other poverty reduction goals.

Feminist critiques of contemporary development policy and practice are constantly evolving.^[6] Of particular interest at the moment, for example, are debates around how development deals with issues of intimacy, sexuality and social reproduction. Recent work poses a series of important questions about how development – and feminist critiques of development – have tended to reproduce hetero-normative assumptions about social life.^[7] Other writers have questioned the ways in which development institutions have responded to the restructuring of unpaid work within the household and community that capitalist development has entailed. In Ecuador, for example, the World Bank has introduced projects which encourage men to do more housework and be better partners.^[8] In Central America, World Bank and UNDP projects promoting tourism aim development to create work for women that keeps them in the home and perpetuates women's assumed responsibility for social reproduction.^[9]

March 2010 is an important date for gender policy within international development, and for feminist politics in general. The Beijing +15 conference will involve 'the sharing of experiences and good practices with a view to overcoming remaining obstacles and new challenges'.^[10] At the same time, it is an opportunity for researchers, activists and NGOs to come together to discuss new definitions, policy objectives and political strategies. The outcomes are likely to have a substantive impact not just on gender issues but on development policy and practice as a whole.

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[1] For an introduction to feminist theories of development, see Pearson, Ruth (1999) 'Rethinking gender matters in development', in Allen, T. and Thomas A. (eds.). *Poverty and Development in the 1990s*. Milton Keynes: Open University; Jane S. Jaquette and Gale Summerfield (eds.) *Women and Gender Equity in Development Theory and Practice: Institutions, Resources and Mobilization*, Durham: Duke University Press.

[2] For an overview of the implementation of gender-mainstreaming see Emilie M. Hafner-Burton and Mark A. Pollack (2002) 'Mainstreaming Gender in Global Governance', *European Journal of International Relations* 8(3): 330-373

[3] For an expanded version of this argument, see Juanita Elias and Lucy Ferguson (2007) 'The Gender Dimensions of New Labour's International Development Policy' in Claire Annesley, Francesca Gains and Kirstein Rummery (eds.) *New Labour and Women: Engendering Policy and Politics?*, Bristol: Policy Press

[4] <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTGENDER/0,,contentMDK:21983>

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335~pagePK:210058~piPK:210062~theSitePK:336868,00.html , accessed 15th February 2010

[5] World Bank (2007) *Gender Equality as Smart Economics: A World Bank Group Action Plan*, Washington: World Bank, p.5

[6] For an excellent overview of contemporary debates see Andrea Cornwall, Elizabeth Harrison, Elizabeth and Ann Whitehead(eds.) (2007) 'Introduction: feminisms in development: contradictions, contestations and challenges' in *Feminisms in Development: contradictions, contestations and challenges*, London: Zed Books

[7] See Amy Lind (ed.) (2010) *Development, Sexual Rights and Global Governance*, London: Routledge

[8] Kate Bedford (2008) 'Governing Intimacy in the World Bank', in Shirin M. Rai and Georgina Waylen (eds.) *Global Governance: Feminist Perspectives*, Basingstoke: Palgrave

[9] Lucy Ferguson (2010) 'Interrogating 'gender' in development policy and practice', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 12(1): 3-24

[10] <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing15/overview.html>, accessed 15th February 2010