

Untangling the Knots: Revisioning Feminist Engagement with Development

Report of the DSA Study Group on Gender & Policy Meeting

5 February 2008

International development agencies may have learnt to talk the talk about “gender” and “women”, but to what extent have they really been willing to take on the issues of power that were once at the heart of the “gender agenda”? Is the dilution of passion and purpose that accompanied the incorporation of the language of gender into development speak terminal? Or might there be ways to inject some new life and energy into a rather tired and stale field? What’s needed to repoliticise Gender and Development? How might more creative and imaginative approaches – such as the use of art and drama to create spaces to explore emotions and engage in dialogue – help move beyond being bored rigid by gender mainstreaming, and inspire engagement and action?

These were some of the questions that were explored in the first meeting of the DSA Study Group on Gender and Policy on February 5. Diverse participants - consultants and NGO workers, academics and activists - shared ideas, concerns and suggestions for framing future agendas for the group’s work. They spoke to a gamut of issues, ranging across fields as diverse as (subverting) neo-liberal market development, religious and citizenship to social movements, learning and the impact of new technologies (mobile phones, digital arts), from the conventional (gender and governance, growth, micro-finance etc.) to the excitingly different (using art, humour, reflective practice to explore and communicate). Some spoke with despair at the erosion of women’s rights that is currently happening in many parts of the world. Others spoke with optimism of the power and potential of women’s mobilization. The discussion turned and returned from the personal to the political, and to the imperative of revitalising feminist engagement with development.

The day was organized around two panel discussions. The first followed a round of introductions in which people shared their preoccupations and concerns about the kind of knots they were grappling with. Panellists Cecile Jackson, DSA President, digital artist and IDS communications officer Tessa Lewin and Oxfam’s Jo Rowlands focused on identifying some of the knots and exploring what might help us understand them better. Small group discussion then took up emerging themes, before returning for a brief plenary. The second panel explored possible avenues for untangling some of these knots, and exciting directions that work on gender was taking which bear further inspection and

reflection. Laura Turquet from Action Aid, Dahlia Goldberg from GROOTS and Zohra Moosa from the Fawcett Society sparked off a lively debate on futures possible.

From the days' deliberations, six themes emerged that formed the basis for small group discussion in the afternoon – which dealt with only the very tip of the iceberg of the issues at stake. There was considerable energy and enthusiasm for taking these discussions forward, either in the form of a series of thematic meetings or in a more concerted discussion that could range across these themes and bring them together in ways that helped give gender work the kind of new impetus that many felt was needed.

These themes were as follows:

- **Beyond “Gender”?** Talk about ‘women’s empowerment’ and ‘women’s rights’ seems to be replacing that of ‘gender equality’. What are the implications of this shift away from “gender”? Has the term become so diluted and depoliticized that it is time to abandon it? Or should we be actively seeking to reclaim it, reasserting the importance of a focus on gender *relations* – something that got lost as “gender” became a shorthand for “women”?
- **Understanding Change.** How *does* change happen? What would it take to move beyond the limited, linear conception of change that is often implicitly part of development’s planned interventions to an approach that celebrated surprises and engaged with complexity? How do we figure those who work with development initiatives as would-be change agents, into understandings of change – from the personal to the political.
- **Clarifying Demands.** With the opening of political space for policies and action on women’s rights and empowerment, there’s an urgent need for greater clarity about exactly what demands are being presented – what is it that women want?
- **Gender and Technology.** There are some amazing and exciting changes taking place in technology, and new technologies are becoming increasingly accessible to women. At the same time, there is a growing glimmer of awareness about gender amongst those who build bridges or roads, or design technologies. How can we tap into this force for change more effectively?
- **Mobilizing for Change.** Around the world, women are engaging with public and political life like never before, getting involved in social movements and mobilizing for change. But what kinds of change are they demanding? In some countries, religious movements are having much

more success than feminist or women's movements in attracting women. If feminism is about giving women choices, what happens when women use those choices to mobilize *against* women's rights?

- **Revisioning Feminist Engagement.** Feminists are, and have always been, an embattled minority. How can broader constituencies be built in support of women's rights, equality and justice? How can feminists engage more women and enlist the support of men in advancing these issues? What kind of politics of alliance-building is possible, and what needs to change to make this possible?

It is difficult to do justice in a report as short as this to the rich discussions that took shape over the course of the day, but it's worth making a few brief observations:

For all the feeling of ennui that there has been about the gender agenda, there was some real energy and enthusiasm in the room. Why? For some, mention of the word "feminist" was what had brought them to the meeting. For others, the prospect of re-visioning was what excited them, aware as they were of the problems of what had gone before, what they felt was needed now was an injection of new energy and ideas, and a more positive approach. There was also energy for transcending some of the old limitations – whether representation of women as victims or disdain for formal politics – and for seizing the opportunity that the rash of commitments to women's empowerment that we're hearing from mainstream agencies might offer. There was concern not to repeat the mistakes of the past. But there was also interest in re-visiting elements of previous approaches that had been lost in the passage of time, whether the kind of personal work that was associated with consciousness-raising in the 1970s and 1980s, or the emphasis on gender *relations* that went astray as the shorthand "gender" went into circulation in development.

There were some familiar themes. But there were also new dimensions to debates on issues such as culture and religion. There was a willingness to step beyond the kind of assumptions that have limited our ability to engage with the appeal for women of religion, and the kind of conservatism that is often associated with the main world religions. And there was a sense that we need to address societal shifts that have unsettled gender orders without completely transforming them, placing some men in increasingly precarious and vulnerable positions in the labour force, education and even in relation to the family. What, in the midst of all this, does feminism have to offer? What are the implications for development of rethinking the very terms of debate on questions of gender - and for

rehabilitating both “gender” and “feminism” within that debate? And coupled with a sense that “gender” hadn’t achieved its promise, there was also a cautious optimism about the things that have, and are, changing. As Sam Jackson put it, ‘we feel despair because we don’t see things shifting – but it depends on where we look”.

The purpose of the day was to begin a dialogue, and a number of issues surfaced that would be good to take further in subsequent meetings. These include:

- technology - how to use it tactically; how new technologies are opening up space for dialogue and dissent, creating opportunities for new connections and activism; without forgetting “old” technology, like the print media; engaging more directly with the media [could the DSA help on this via media training?]
- art - how different art forms can be mobilized in pursuit of women’s rights: political artists, musicians, theatre, mobile phone films, soap operas, YouTube..
- concepts - what new concepts do we need and what needs to happen for the old ones to regain some of their analytical and political bite? “Gender”, “feminism”, “intersectionality”, “heteronormativity” ...
- history - in an industry predisposed to forgetting, what can we learn about how change happens from looking at the past? And what new ways do we need to understand how change happens, beyond the LogFrame?
- influence - making more of our own access to influence in the UK via political engagement; revisiting/revitalising gender training as a way to influence through transformative learning

An overarching theme that ran through all our discussions was the need to get better at communicating - with each other, with “hostile” audiences, with those we want to enlist as well as those we want to influence. Tessa Lewin argued:

If we are to engage with social change, we need better descriptive language rather than technobabble. We live in a bubble and need to be proactive about stepping out of it.

The DSA Study Group has an exciting opportunity to take these issues forward and to plan subsequent meetings that focus in depth on the challenge of revisioning and revitalising feminist engagement with development.