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DSA- Gender group

Some Troubling Thoughts on Gender and Development

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My talk today does not pretend to address the burning issues of the day (such as the economic crisis and its implications- my economist colleagues much better placed to do that in the afternoon) but to think aloud about a longer term malaise which I feel has been building up in the field of gender and development- something I have been observing from the sidelines, primarily as an academic. To situate myself for my audience, my involvement started around the time of the first UN conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975 as a very young academic in Turkey and continued after I moved to the UK in the 1980s. I have been offering a course on gender development at SOAS since 1992. I have also been involved in a range of consultancies in the field of gender with UNDP, UNIFEM, UNESCO, DFID and other agencies.

I am starting from the premise that much feminist academic research grounds its legitimacy on a claim to relevance to the struggles of women in the contemporary world. And that we must be constantly mindful about the ways in which our theories are appropriated, interpreted and ultimately converted into tools for either policy or activism. Although, ultimately, we have little control over the life of concepts once they are taken over by activists and practitioners we must nonetheless endeavour to take stock of these effects.

As I see it, the field of gender and development, which is extremely diverse in disciplinary terms, has been evolving within a triangle of powerful influences and in dialogue with them. First, there has been a dialogue with the changing *öcanonsö* of the broader field of gender studies and gender theory. What is worth noting here is that while gender theory has increasingly gravitated towards the humanities, the field of gender and development remained committed to a political economy and social relations approached broadly defined. Nonetheless, there has been a selective incorporation of some approaches and themes (the more recent focus on masculinities and sexualities can be seen as the product of these influences). Second, the field of gender and development has been in the paradoxical position of successfully generating new concepts which then get absorbed into the development mainstream (which bilateral agency lacks its toolkits for gender analysis and gender training? Or indeed which international NGO?) sometimes straitjacketing its practitioners. The volume on *Feminisms in Development* that many of you may be familiar with came out of a conference at IDS that featured a great deal of soul searching about the depoliticizing effects of this type of incorporation. Finally, the changing geopolitical landscape, especially since the events of September 11, 2001 and the so-called war on terror, has had a decisive impact on discourses about gender equality and in particular on global perceptions of feminist activism. I may not be able to analyze the effects of all three types of influences in the time allotted to me but will argue that their

combination produces a particularly challenging environment for the development of feminist agendas. The 'post-feminist' turn in the West, the 'technocratic' approaches of international funding agencies and a new politicization of gender issues in the context of the war on terror create profound dilemmas that we need to urgently address.

To highlight some of the dilemmas I want to put before you today, I would like to start with two vignettes. The first concerns an arresting spectacle which was reported to have taken place at the Beijing Conference on Women in 1995 when a phalanx of veiled women from Iran faced a demonstration of gay and lesbian women activists with the chant of 'perverts, perverts'. If the conference in Mexico had been about interpellating women as disadvantaged agents of development and Nairobi about acknowledging the global North-South divides that a group of South-based feminists, DAWN, had put at the heart of their feminist agenda, Beijing signalled something else altogether. Beijing represented the coming of age of the 'gender agenda' in development and its official incorporation into development policy through gender mainstreaming. But Beijing was also the occasion for calling into question the conceptual foundation and subject matter of the conference itself- the concept of gender with its implicit notions of **injustice** and **mutability of gender relations**. (You may recall how Baden and Goetz thoughtfully discuss these reactions in their paper titled 'Who needs sex when you can have gender?')

This brings me to a second vignette based on a rather poignant article by Nighat Khan, a Pakistani feminist of my generation reflecting on Beijing and its aftermath. Khan presents the introduction of the word 'gender' and the liberal focus on issues of human rights as a sinister development since (and I quote) 'The language of feminism has been appropriated, diffused diluted, depoliticized and even trivialized.' She sees gender mainstreaming as having given birth to the 'femocrat' who regardless of whether she is in politics, government, the UN, development agencies, academia or women's groups and NGOs has meant the retreat of feminist projects. She also expresses nostalgia about a time when 'post-modernism had not validated every specificity no matter how reactionary, retrogressive, immoral or amoral; when heightened individualism did not prevent people coming together into a movement, when the women's movement itself was more spontaneous political struggle and not a collectivity of activities and projects and action plans'.

A more recent and more disturbing personal encounter came very recently when at a conference on the Middle East I met a colleague based in Ramallah who had founded the first women's studies programme at a Palestinian university- someone undoubtedly committed to feminist goals. She announced that she no longer worked on gender issues and had dissociated herself from what she called the 'gender elite'. Others around the table assented- it had become a badge of honour to dissociate oneself from the 'gender agenda' set by donor agencies. The question is: how did we get here?

There is no question, to my mind, that the disaffection expressed by Khan lies in the fact that the women's movement in Pakistan had been co-opted by the establishment and joined forces with she saw as an illegal military regime. (Khan refers specifically to the 2000, 8th of March officially celebrated in Islamabad with General Musharraf as the keynote speaker, government ministers and diplomatic corps in attendance).

This, she suggests, makes a mockery of the women's workers strike in Chicago and the call by Clara Zetkin to declare the 8th of March International Women's Day.

I think these examples whether from Pakistan or Palestine point to a much broader issue namely the links between **struggles for women's emancipation and the political contexts in which these are enacted**. In relation to the Middle East, Marina Ottaway remarked that compliance with some gender conditionalities (such as having dedicated national machineries, increasing women's political representation etc..) is a relatively soft option for authoritarian regimes of the single party or dynastic variety in comparison to moving towards more genuine democratic representation and a social justice agenda. The social justice agenda, also fuelled by the iniquities of post 9/11 geopolitics, is now frequently captured by Islamist movements and platforms in the Middle East that are staunchly opposed to the provisions for gender equality enshrined in various international standard setting instruments. This leaves women's movements in the unenviable situation of either playing along with repressive and corrupt governments in the service of a donor-driven gender mainstreaming agenda or trying to find virtue in an Islamist opposition that offers them very little room for manoeuvre on the gender justice front. These examples of co-optation, a much milder version of which is the subject of Sonia Alvarez's work on women's movements in Latin America, are quite widespread.

According to Gita Sen movements for gender justice and social justice have been drifting apart and that many social movements with reactionary agendas have taken up platforms for social justice. She points out, for instance, the movement to cancel the 'odious' debts of Southern countries often works in alliance with the Catholic Church whose current hierarchy is vehemently opposed to gender justice.

Religious conservatives have systematically attempted to emerge as the champions of the South. The hard-line positions taken by Northern negotiators on economic issues - the right to development, debt, trade, financing - provided fertile soil for a growing rapprochement between the Vatican and at least some Southern negotiators. By the early 1990s, Sen notes the Vatican had all but silenced Catholic liberals and liberation theologians by branding them as proto-Marxists, and filled the Church's hierarchy with prelates who were extremely conservative on both gender and grassroots empowerment of the poor. Nevertheless, the hierarchy appeared to recognize the strategic importance of making common cause with Southern countries on economic inequality issues so as to win friends for its crusade against the feminist agenda. From then on the Vatican began to use its growing clout to argue against global economic inequality while opposing women's rights and gender equality in every possible international forum. By the time of the Vienna Conference on Human Rights in 1993, the Vatican had begun to mobilize its forces against the recognition of women's rights as human rights. In Cairo, the Vatican allied itself with Islamic conservatives to resist the adoption of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action.

These conjunctures are usually attributed to the effects of neo-liberal globalization aggravated by the wave of neo-conservatism during the Bush years. I think, however, that the reasons go much deeper and point to a 'disconnect' at the heart of feminist/gender theorizing in academia. Thus the growing chasm between North and

South is not only a matter of macroeconomics and geopolitics but of the concepts through which we apprehend reality. This includes the concept of gender.

Feminist activism, had from its inception, distinct sources; in anti-colonial movements in the South, in socialist understandings of the 'women question' and in the liberal citizenship struggles of the North.

It is very difficult to comprehend what happened to these strands outside their own sociological context and I would like to propose that post 90s theorizing on gender (and 'gender feminism') was a product of social changes taking place in the North articulating concerns and sensibilities forged in the North which then took over as 'canons' in the academy. This was a period when the **anti-feminisms of the South** (taking the form of post-colonial and post-modern repudiations of modernity and the influence of the West) met **the post-feminism** of the North with consequences we are to fully understand.

In the North, post-feminism was based on a double entanglement according to Angela McRobbie; the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life (viz. Bush on chastity) with processes of liberalization in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations (gay couples fostering or having their own children, civil partnerships etc.). This double entanglement coincides with a period when feminism in the academy finds it necessary to dismantle itself. The turning point comes in the 1990s when the representational claims of 2nd wave feminism are interrogated by post-colonial feminists like Spivak and Mohanty among others. Under the influence of Foucault there is also a shift away from feminist interest in centralised power blocks-the state, patriarchy, law- to more dispersed sites and events. The body and the subject come to represent a focal point for feminist interest (as best exemplified by the work of Judith Butler).

Female achievement in the West predicated not on feminism but on 'female individualism' new meritocracy at the expense of feminist politics. Ironically, in the North we witness a backlash against political correctness and a reaction against 'the seemingly tyrannical regime of feminist puritanism' while in countries of the South feminism is interpreted as libertarianism and licentiousness.

In the North, we also witness a fusion of sexual liberties and feminist platforms when in fact these can support very diverse ideologies (it is perfectly possible, for example, to be a sexual libertarian and a racist). Going back therefore to the growing gulf between North and South it would be fair to say that vocabularies and priorities are more divergent in 2005 than they were in 1975.

Donor-driven gender activism: engineering gender equality

I shall henceforth use the term *donor-driven gender activism* (as distinct from feminism, however defined) to refer to the effects of the global *dispositif* regulating gender equality. I will use the case of Afghanistan as my illustration. In order to better understand the various initiatives intended to promote gender equality in Afghanistan,

it is important to situate these in the context of mechanisms that global governance institutions (UN agencies in particular) deploy in the service of a gender equality agenda.

The state-building effort in Afghanistan was driven by a succession of international meetings leading to benchmark documents and time-tables. These were in turn: Securing Afghanistan's Future (2004), The Afghanistan Compact (2006) and I-ANDS (2006) leading to ANDS. The gender policies of the Government of Afghanistan were formulated within the framework of these international agreements.

It is worth noting the effects of a succession of United Nations World conferences on Women (from 1975 in Mexico City to Beijing in 1995, followed by Beijing+10) each followed by Platforms for Action that set targets for member states. Various transnational feminist alliances form around UN platforms to lobby governments and international organizations on key policy issues. For instance, the Feminist Majority Foundation Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan is credited with having played a significant role in 1998 in persuading the UN and the US to reject formal recognition of the Taliban. At the national level, the Afghan delegation that participated in the Beijing+10 UN Women's Conference in New York in 2005 used the event to push for the adoption of a National Action Plan for Women in Afghanistan (NAPWA) (**policy diffusion**). The 10-year National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA), prepared with technical assistance from UNIFEM, was designated in the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) as the principal policy tool to support gender mainstreaming.

Thirdly, the creation of national machineries for the advancement of women, to follow up on global commitments, was also implemented in Afghanistan. The Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) was established in 2002 and charged with mainstreaming gender into the policies and programmes of the line ministries to ensure that gender equality concerns are addressed. This Ministry has a tenuous existence constantly at risk of being abolished, without a core budget and heavily reliant on international technical assistance. Gender mainstreaming was identified in the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) as the main strategy for achieving gender equality. The 'toolbox' for gender mainstreaming, tried and tested in many other countries, was also deployed in Afghanistan. This consisted of the establishment of gender units, gender focal points and working groups in mainline ministries and creation of inter-ministerial task forces, to co-ordinate various donor-funded programmes.

A study by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) assessing the effects of these efforts in six selected ministries revealed a great deal of confusion over the meaning of gender (as distinct from women), a lack of clarity about the mandate of gender units (or even total lack of awareness about their existence), a general tendency to assign low priority to gender issues and a preoccupation with the degree of fit between gender mainstreaming and Islamic prescriptions (variously interpreted by different respondents).¹ Interestingly, despite 30 years of war that

¹ Anna Larson 'A mandate to mainstream: Promoting Gender Equality in Afghanistan' AREU Issue Paper Series, November 2008.

eroded the central administration, the ministries in question were not quite the *tabula rasa* donors imagined them to be. Their most proximate experiences of women's advancement dated from the PDPA period when women's *shuras* took up women's grievances over work and pay conditions and staged celebrations of International Women's Day on the 8th of March- a practice that evidently lives on. The welfarist paternalism of Soviet-inspired policies appear to have had more resonance with the rank and file than the abstract language of gender training. It appears, therefore, that the apparatus of 'gender mainstreaming' was grafted upon an institutional culture that did not so much resist its introduction as sidelined it. Parallel structures were set up to satisfy donor requirements whilst carrying on with business as usual.

The principal driving force behind the mainstreaming agenda were foreign technical assistants allocated to ministries by various bilateral donor agencies to train locals in the vocabulary of gender mainstreaming and gender training and making them fit to produce the accountability mechanisms required by the donors. This replicated a pattern already noted by many commentators concerning the creation of a better paid 'second civil service' consisting of international technical advisors who are able to interface with the donors, produce the necessary documents and meet their deadlines. A process of foreign-assisted policy formulation linked into a sub-contracting structure of international and local NGOs for the implementation of specific programmes meant that a process of selection operated, excluding the non-English-speaking and non-'gender-trained'. Although this is by no means unique to Afghanistan, a particularly narrow base of female human capital and expertise was redirected to staffing projects and programmes designed by international agencies and their foreign consultants.

The general malaise about the ineffectiveness and misdirection of aid had made it possible for a populist candidate from Kabul to win a seat in parliament on an anti-foreign NGO ticket. When it came to gender issues this discontent had the additional bonus of carrying the charge of being Western and therefore alien. The global iniquities of US interventions in Iraq, its support of Israel's wars and the treatment of detainees in Guantanamo enhanced the symbolic resources that Islamist constituencies could mobilize against the government, further marginalizing the tenuous hold that gender activists had on the policy formulation process.

But what of women civil society activists who had worked tirelessly, both at home and in the diaspora, and who have no wish to see their hard won gains being annulled yet again? Surely dismissing them as Western-looking and donor-driven would be a gross misrepresentation since their presence and activities are of long standing and there are a variety of tendencies among them-including women seeking a more egalitarian voice within an Islamic framework. Indeed, the relatively limited mobilization of women during periods of state-led modernization in Afghanistan received a new impetus through the experiences of displacement and exile. The number of Afghan women's NGOs operating in the diaspora increased, establishing women as civil society actors. Even under the Taliban and despite serious pressures, there is evidence that women's solidarity networks and organizations, some of which operated clandestinely, acted as a medium of both political resistance and empowerment. As late as 2002, I witnessed that UN Habitat Women's Community Forums- one of the donor-funded initiatives that had managed to survive under the Taliban and offered women literacy and income generation skills, still managed to

retain some of their highly skilled, educated members working alongside the poorer sections of the community. That was soon to change. Within a year, the educated and the English speaking had deserted their posts for more lucrative jobs in the aid industry. A female 'brain drain' was operating to staff the donor-funded sector depleting existing women's NGOs.

However, these considerations are of minor importance if we consider that the term 'mainstreaming' itself begs the question in Afghanistan. While all efforts were concentrating on ministerial structures and reforms in Kabul, the rule of the government was running less and less in the rest of the country with large swathes of the east and south in the grip of a Taliban insurgency. This led to the cessation or slowing down of reconstruction efforts and NGO activities. The reach of the central state was severely limited and what little of it there was appeared to be plagued by rampant corruption. Informal, local level customary institutions would, as ever, continue to play a central role. Indeed, one school of thought argued that if Afghanistan had not descended into total chaos during the war years this was due to the resilience of sub-national forms of informal governance, relying on customary organizations such as *shuras* and *jirgas*.

Although women are almost totally excluded for participating in decision-making in these bodies and despite the fact that these informal institutions uphold forms of customary practice that violate both international human rights law and the letter of the *shari'a* they play a central role in local governance. In the face of these realities, the 2007 *Human Development* report proposes a hybrid model of justice for Afghanistan combining alternative dispute resolution mechanisms based on non-state informal institutions with compliance with international human rights standards.

Herein lies one of the major contradictions of the gender equality platform in Afghanistan. There are inherent tensions between the goals of state-building according to international norms, on the one hand, and pragmatic accommodations to realities on the ground, on the other. The vast majority of women in Afghanistan have little contact with state institutions, markets or civil society organizations and remain the wards of their communities and households. They are totally disenfranchised to the extent that they have little recourse to formal institutions and the justice system (which, is in any case, heavily biased against female claimants) and are disadvantaged and marginalized in customary law. Ultimately, the blueprint for 'gender mainstreaming' is destined to remain hollow if it continues to inhabit a technocratic space that is almost entirely divorced from political processes in Afghanistan.

The new geopolitics and "feminism-as-imperialism"

Shortly after the September 11, 2001 events, Operation Enduring Freedom, led by US and a coalition of international forces resulted in the overthrow of the Taliban. By that stage, the outrages committed by the Taliban in the name of Islam and, specifically, the public punishments they meted out to women for infractions of their strict rules had become a *cause celebre*. However, far from inspiring an unqualified response of international feminist solidarity the US military intervention provoked a spate of critical reactions triggered by the naked instrumentalism behind the invocation of

abused Afghan women. Judith Butler, among others, remarked that "the sudden feminist conversion on the part of the Bush administration, which retroactively transformed the liberation of women into a rationale for its military action against Afghanistan, is a sign of the extent to which feminism, as a trope is deployed in the service of restoring the presumption of first world impermeability."² Iris Young noted "that feminist focus on women under the Taliban constructed these women as exoticized others and paradigmatic victims in need of salvation by Western feminists."³ The iconic moment of this exoticization undoubtedly came when, after a reading of Eve Ensler's poem "Under the Burqa", Oprah Winfrey, invited a burqa-clad young member of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) on stage and unveiled her to the rapturous applause of a packed New York audience. Quite predictably, this incident added to the already copious literature on the "politics of representation" of Muslim women with their well-rehearsed references to Orientalism and the patronizing designs of imperialism.⁴

What is noteworthy about these debates is that, with few exceptions, their protagonists were Northern feminists and public intellectuals whose primary concerns centred less on the plight of Afghan women *per se* than on the transformation of their own state and society in the aftermath of the 9/11 events. Their writings gave voice to deep ethical misgivings about the consequences of the war on terror. The objectification of Afghan women as "exoticized victims" and their deployment as an instrument of war propaganda was but one item in a noxious mix that included the suspension of liberties through the Patriot Act and new forms of legal impunity around the use of torture and extra-legal detention. A common reaction to the "othering" of women in Afghanistan was, paradoxically, a fulsome recognition of their radical alterity. As Butler put it eloquently "It is not possible to impose a language of politics developed within First World contexts on women who are facing the threat of imperialist economic exploitation and cultural obliteration"⁵

Leaving aside the question of why "cultural obliteration" (a favourite trope of Islamist politics) was being put on the agenda, this begs the question of who precisely we are talking about when we speak of Afghan women. Were these women urban PDPA loyalists? Members of royalist factions residing in the diaspora? Supporters of one or the other *mujahidin* faction? Dispossessed women in refugee camps? Educated professionals? What different imaginaries of Afghanistan did these women hold? Just as the politics of "othering" had transformed the women of Afghanistan into faceless victims, so had the claim that they were representatives of a seamlessly unified culture. The notion that the women of Afghanistan could be as diverse and as deeply

² Judith Butler *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* London: Verso, 2004, p. 41.

³ M.I. Young "The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State" *Signs* 29 (1) 2003: pp. 18-19.

⁴ Some examples may be found in K. Ayotte, and M. Husain "Securing Afghan Women: Neo-colonialism, Epistemic Violence and the Rhetoric of the Veil" *NWSA Journal*, 17 (3) 2005: 112-133;; C. Stabile and D. Kumar "Unveiling imperialism: media, gender and the war on Afghanistan" *Media, Culture and Society* 27 (5) 2005: 765-782; G. Whitlock *Soft weapons: Autobiography in Transit* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

⁵ Butler *ibid.* p.49.

politicized as their male counterparts was becoming increasingly difficult to accommodate.

How can we account for this state of affairs? Lila Abu-Lughod insightfully remarked that the perpetuation of a "cultural" framing of gender relations successfully obfuscated the social and political effects of successive interventions establishing the ascendancy of Islamist parties backed by a variety of foreign patrons.⁶ Nancy Lindisfarne noted, likewise, that it was during the *mujahidin* period that gendered inequality and violence became "naturalized" as intrinsic to "Afghan culture" and "Afghan Islam."⁷ The strategic silence surrounding abuses of human rights, including extreme forms of gender-based violence, in the context of the US-backed Cold War efforts to resist the Soviet invasion of 1979 have undoubtedly reinforced the tendency to consign gender relations to an unchanging (and under theorized) realm of culture. This tendency has, if anything, gained further momentum in the context of donor-led reconstruction and state-building efforts, with numerous policy documents routinely making references to Afghan "traditions" and "culture". So we have a constant veering between asking for compliance with international standard setting instruments on the one hand and talking about cultural sensitivity on the other.

From the outset, the narrow constituency that put its weight behind reforms leading to the expansion of women's civic and political rights did so with the backing of UN agencies and financial support from international donors. Many donors, however, and most particularly the international financial institutions (IFIs) are more than ready to cede on matters of gender equality in the name of "cultural sensitivity". The World Bank, for instance, gave its backing to gender mainstreaming most guardedly stating clearly this should be done only "along the least confrontational lines."⁸ The common platform that both the government and the IFIs could sign up to was the improvement of women's basic literacy and maternal health in the service of national development and meeting the targets set by the Millennium Development Goals.

In the struggles for power among different ethnic and religious constituencies the inevitable item of compromise may concern women's civic and political rights and the regulation of their public presence; indeed, the term "compromise" might be a misnomer since this may constitute the main plank of a populist consensus.

⁶ L. Abu-Lughod "Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others" *American Anthropologist*, 104, (3) 2002: 1-8. C. Hirschkind and Mahmood are also alert to the geopolitical context but fall into the trap of making invidious and quite unnecessary comparisons between the levels of violence against women meted out by the *mujahidin* and the Taliban, declaring the latter to offer greater security to women. Hirschkind and S. Mahmood "Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency" *Anthropological Quarterly* 75 (2) 2002: p.339-354. A similar exchange among French feminists on the relative cruelty to women of the Taliban vs. the *mujahidin* may be found in Françoise Causse "Les dangereuses theses de Christine Delphy" <http://www.afghana.prg/html/article.php?sid+2473&thold=0> accessed 6/11/2007

⁷ Nancy Lindisfarne "Starting from Below: Fieldwork, Gender and Imperialism Now" *Critique of Anthropology* 22 (4) 2002: 403-423.

⁸ World Bank, Interim Strategy Note for Islamic Republic of Afghanistan for the period FY07 ó FY08. (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2006).

Constitutional gains notwithstanding, and despite an impressive female presence in the legislature- a quota of 25% in the *Wolesi Jirga*- women have an extremely tenuous hold on the public sphere that is constantly contested and exposes them to persistent danger and intimidation.⁹ (The confirmation of this observation came on the very day I delivered this talk with the passing of a new law through both houses of parliament to apply to Shiite women- the law legalizes marital rape and prohibits women leaving the house without a male relative except under very exceptional circumstances. This is in breach of both the Constitution and the various international conventions the government is a party to).

In conclusion, the triangle of influences I alluded to in the opening section of my talk namely; the growing gulf in priorities and vocabularies on matters of gender between North and South, the technocratization of gender issues by the international donor agencies and the politicization of gender in new and detrimental ways as a consequence of the war on terror have, in combination, created a particularly adverse conjuncture to the pursuit of feminist agendas.

⁹ Anand Gopal Afghanistan: Women Lawmakers Battle Warlords
<http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=46028> accessed on 10/3/09.