



REPORT ON:

Where do we stand? How can the development community navigate current pressures to deliver development for women?

Meeting run by the Development Studies Association (DSA) and the Gender and Development Network (GADN), 3 November 2011

9.00-1.30 at Amnesty's Human Rights Action Centre,

Introduction

The purpose of this joint meeting was to bring together members of the GADN and DSA to look at the issues facing development at a time of multiple changes, especially around the issues of women and girls, and to explore how well different players –academics, researchers, consultants and development agency staff – were responding to the pressures and opportunities these changes provide. The meeting had three broad aims, to:

- look critically at dominant approaches to gender equality and women's rights in the current aid environment
- better understand how these approaches fit – or clash – with realities for women on the ground and what impacts they are having on the practice of women's organisations in the global south
- share frustrations, pressures and constraints to working on gender and reflect on how to pursue a more critical approach in our work on gender, to respond to the concerns of women's rights NGOs and to work more effectively in partnership with them.
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The presentations

Almost 70 people met at Amnesty International UK for a morning of discussion. Amongst familiar practitioner and research faces, the audience also included a large number of young people or, more specifically, young women.

Framing Women in International Development was the second of two DSA events aiming to open up a forum on some of the questions that aren't typically being widely discussed across the sector; creating

a safe space for people to express their views and debate some of the contentious issues around the positioning of women and girls in development, the relationship between INGO's and the corporate sector, and the possibilities which exist for creating change within organisations. For the GADN this meeting was a continuation of earlier discussions on how to address the challenges raised by the current donor focus on girls, which while welcome is not necessarily addressing the core gender issues facing young women and girls.

Starting with a look back at historical conceptions of women and girls, Andrea Cornwall, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Sussex, was first of the three speakers to the podium. She claimed that there is often an unwillingness to "look back" and learn in development yet what has gone before significantly affects the language and objectives of today's agenda. It is therefore hugely important to be aware of how various approaches have evolved.

From the Development Act of 1929, she traced the way in which the attitudes towards women have shifted since the transposition of European gender norms during the colonial era, where women were excluded from economics and politics, through to the emergence of gender myths and an understanding of "the good woman", which is currently being mobilised by the women and girls narrative.

The latest trend positions girls as an "investment" or a magic bullet for economic growth, with women often framed as morally superior to the opposite sex. There is a distinct absence of men or, where they do appear, they are presented as hazardous or useless. This "neo-liberal empowerment", as she refers to it, is less about transforming gender power relations than equipping women with tools to compete on the market. Power, in this context, has become something which can be given or bestowed whilst sexuality - along with many of the things which matter in women's lives - aren't represented or discussed at all.

Andrea suggested that there are a number of themes which have continued to resurface over time: that of domesticating women, focusing on individual women rather than the wider context, a sense of the need to protect women's virtue and a silence around women's resistance. She closed with a film entitled Save Us from Saviours, a short documentary about a female sex worker collective in India, which challenges some of these notions and offers an alternative showing what it is that these women want and need in order to empower themselves and their families.

The next person to speak was Dr Tina Wallace, from International Gender Studies and convenor of

the DSA group, who brought the focus to the present, and the multiple ways in which the corporate sector relates to development NGO's in the UK.

Presenting some provocative ideas and raising some questions around this issue - which at times drew reaction from the participants – Tina emphasised that her concern wasn't to offer an academic exploration of the issue, but to ask questions and initiate a call to action: we need to start seriously investigating and analysing what the implications of the commercial and development sector working so closely together are, who benefits and who is really “calling the shots”.

The relationship between the INGO's and the private sector is becoming more complex, and the boundaries between the two increasingly blurred. Large companies are engaging with charities at many different levels, from finance to communications, whilst previously internal NGO operations are now outsourced. Worryingly, the scale of their involvement and the money involved often hard to track.

One result, Tina claims, is that the language that is being used within development has changed dramatically, reflecting a shift towards a more corporate agenda. And the use of language is critical and does start to reshape the way concepts and ideas are developed and communicated; is there enough attention being paid to the way development agendas are now being framed and shared and at what point do the PR agencies stop simply helping development organisations promote their identity and begin distorting the way that the organisations define and understand themselves, simplifying complexities in favor of catchy strap-lines and column inches. What happens to the voices and realities of the women, girls and the people used in the communications? Do they shape the way they are represented? Do they feel comfortable with it? Are they still able to shape the work that is being done for them and in their name? The constituency INGO's represent is very far away, do not see what is being shown and said and as a result can't comment about what is being said about them.

Who decides what a good result is? She asked whether by bending to an approach which is primarily financially and target driven may be forcing INGO's to gradually compromise on their values and ethics, and where these discussions are taking place within the sector.

Helen Dixon, a Feminist Practitioner who has spent the past 23 years living in Nicaragua, was the last to speak. Taking a couple of moments to compose herself, she explained that having just come back from working with women in the field for a sustained period of time what she had heard so far had deeply unsettled her. As far as Helen is concerned, the gap between a corporate agenda and the needs of real people is insurmountable and she is therefore terrified by the current level of private

sector involvement. For her, it is time to completely transform the paradigm of development aid; she suggested many women activists would share this view as they care where money comes from and who decides how it is spent. Intermediary organisations are often pushed to go in directions women themselves do not want to go.

Helen arrived in Central America at the beginning of the eighties, where she co-founded a women's collective in the north of Nicaragua. In doing so, she broke out of the typical organizational structure. Her advice to the audience was that when thinking of approaches to development begin from the self. Be clear where you are situated as an activist (for her as a feminist), reflect, take action, reflect again and learn. She was clear that she was not at the conference to represent anybody but that she saw herself as part of a movement. It is important, she went on, to distinguish between the places we work, who we are and how we can affect change.

Her work with a feminist movement in Nicaragua was fascinating, intense, challenging; the approaches they used included participatory research, education methods, art, drama and movement (including marches) and organisational development. Feminism in that context was standing as a critical movement against corporations (closely tied to the military), globalization and right wing agendas. She saw a lot of aid money going into gender work that was depoliticised and institutionalized, reporting to Government, and asked how does this build strong social movements for change? Women are involved in very stark and harsh realities because of global financial systems and she saw the impact and the need for resistance and struggle.

The only way to resist the system is to feed resilience, she claims, and referenced a group of Columbian women who are joining together to question and resist the structure of violence which exists within the country. United, they moved around in a caravan of converted buses, driving through paramilitary checkpoints and spreading energy for change. Women cannot 'be empowered' but they can use their power to enable and take on daring and other actions. A holistic approach is needed, going well beyond the current categories and labels that dominate much aid spending.

Plenary discussion

Following the presentations there was discussion in plenary, which highlighted some tensions and anxieties around what had been presented. Some felt that the work of gender staff in agencies was being undervalued while others saw much more potential for working well with the corporate sector. Some appreciated the time for standing back and analysing issues but others were more concerned to

seek practical answers and focus on a way forward, feeling the pressure of day to day work. While there is space and time in some INGOs for open debates and discussions, for many there is little or no time to stand back, discuss and reflect.

Discussion groups

The audience then broke off into discussion groups selected at random. The groups were asked to consider a number of points during this time: to share initial reactions on the presentations, identify what was useful, to consider what the implications would mean in terms of their own organisational practice, to share their personal realities and experiences, and talk about the possibilities - as well possible constraints - in affecting change.

Discussion Group 1

- The presentations offered a lot of “Food for thought”, raised a number of relevant questions which are sometimes easier to avoid contemplating. It is very refreshing to have these conversations.
- It was interesting to see that this meeting has prompted heckles, whereas the DSA meeting earlier in the year did not. There must be a way to navigate these types of issues without people feeling it is personal, because it is not.
- Some organisations are creating that space to debate these types of issues but even in these contexts, people are constrained by internal and external pressures; it can be easy to despair at times.
- There is a question as to whether it is better to do something as best you can within the funding guidelines or completely challenge what is being asked.
- Surely men received invitations to the event but there was only one male present.
- In relation to the video that Cornwell showed, the implication was that the women had made a choice to be sex workers. This may not necessarily be the case.
- The crossover between Public Relations and development is “terrifying”. Agencies which have little understanding are handling accounts for INGO’s and starting to shape their agenda.
- This year has been an important one for gender and a lot has been happening, yet there is an implication that people should feel “grateful” that gender is even on the agenda. It is important not to become complacent. It is great that people are talking about this but we need to see this as a starting point and not the end goal.

- Tina talked about the need for more research into the relationship between the private and development sectors, yet academics are also constricted by funding.
- It is not necessarily that companies in the corporate world are intrinsically evil, but ignorant. Meanwhile, the development sector is very small in comparison to the corporate. Therefore, if we INGOs can harness this power in order to do what they need to do, the two can effectively work together.
- More is sacrificed by trying to integrate into popular culture rather than existing as a dissident voice. The likelihood is that our voices will be consumed by a private company who wields the power and we will end up working on their terms.
- The perceived necessity for INGO's to secure grants, brand themselves and achieve "cut through" is extremely divisive and can prevent organizations from working together. Perhaps it is time to refocus away from these things and look at alternative ways to work effectively and consider action which does not rely on huge amounts of fundraising and publicity. The example Dixon gave of the women in Columbia is reflective of the way in which people can work together to create change with few material means.

Discussion group 2

- There is a gap between how we know things should work and the environment INGOs have to work within. This is not unique to discussions around gender, but is broader than that. How can we start to shift the boundaries? How can we make what we know works a reality?
- For mainstream organisations, the debates individuals within them have to have are quite different from organisations with a women's rights mandate.
- We have mainstream alternative development organisations that look at poverty from a rights perspective. Within these organisations, many staff members find it difficult to look at women's rights but feel comfortable looking at race issues, for example.
- Women's rights organisations still need funding and donors (e.g. DFID) who have bought into the dominant narratives want to see simplistic narratives. These organisations have to survive in order to do the work, so they can't be too radical. Constraints still exist.
- We can learn from each other. We could define an overall objective then develop a strategy depending on the environment one works in.
- With communications, there is a temptation to swing into either pole of heroine/victim. However, the priority is to fund women's rights activists in the South and we need to provide a robust response to the WAG agenda without resorting to the heroine/victim dichotomy. We need to know how to tell the stories without undermining Southern women's achievements.

- Women as agents of change – collective action: The new agenda talks about women as economic agents of change but there is no mention of women as political agents of change. Talking about agents of change without a structural analysis or collective action for change reverts back to the neoliberal argument.
- The challenges have changed and there is a new context; our vision of what we would like to support hasn't. The next step is turning it into something more tangible. We need guidelines to creating an alternative narrative.
- Today raised useful points around complacency and the traps we can fall into, for example how we need to expand the groups to include trans and gay women.
- M&E: It is all very well to push back against putting things into boxes but we need to be clear about measurable results and what timescales we are working to. The new agenda is about demonstrating impact and results. We may not measure in the way DFID are asking for but how do we measure empowerment? We need to play the game but our way. Donors do seem to be open to other discussions, including around participative M&E and social returns of investment.
- Corporate agenda: We need to be careful not to be too purist or binary. Where does the 'private sector' start and end? Relationships are permeable. The top line is who is taking the political decisions and making the priorities?
- What we actually want is for people in the South to be setting the agenda themselves. NGOs need clear lines of accountability in the communities and beneficiaries then corporates have to work to the same standards. If we can be better at this then this is something we can push the corporates on.
- Andrea highlighted things that we often miss, such as women's leisure time and pleasure. As development organisations we should have a clear remit on what allows people to achieve/follow their own desires. We often lose sight of the fact that the ultimate aim is women's' well being. Quite often the ultimate aim becomes the resource transfer.

Discussion Group 3:

- There seems to be some confusion about what we are trying to achieve, especially when presenting messages to a wider audience. How to you reconcile a need to raise money with oversimplifying and distorting the message?
- Is the priority to raise money, or to educate people? By promoting a campaign in a particular way, you may achieve the financial goal but in presenting the women or girls who feature in

these stories in a certain way, you undermine the complexity of the work but also these individuals.

- The alternative to simply following along with an organisational agenda you disagree with is to find solidarity with those who have similar concerns and organising resistance. To struggle.
- In relation to the point that Helen Dixon made about starting from the self, it is interesting that during the conference people were introducing themselves as the NGO for whom they work. This professional identity is not necessarily a reflection of who people are: it isn't the identity we have as people, as mothers, feminists and activists.
- When considering the possibilities for reacting against the way things are run within an organization, one has to think about the issue of job security. If an individual decides to take a personal stand against handling money which has come from the corporate sector, the INGO – or the employer - will quite possibly replace you with somebody who will.
- There is a frustration with the short-term results approach. There needs to be a recognition that projects dealing with gender equality and women's rights cannot offer quick fix solutions.
- At the moment, the hot topic is definitely women and girls, and a focus on the need to "invest in girls". But what happened to investing in equality? Will this girls focus result in a back-lash?
- Development agencies need to address "gender" not just women and men. It can, however, be difficult to engage men in the process without targeting them specifically. There need to be women only spaces but there also needs to be a degree of inclusion and balance.
- Seems in a sense we have 'othered' DFID and that there is a growing sense of "us" and "them". It is important not to make generalisations and to be careful about creating binary distinctions. There will be those within DFID who think one way, and others who do not.
- INGO's need to get a lot better at doing institutional analysis and interrogating the dominant paradigms, but this is very difficult to do in isolated organizations.
- DFID's approach seems to be about women and girls, not about their rights. Is it different from what came before? Big terms such as "equality" mean different things to different people. Is it time to consider how and why we use the terminology that we do and what it signifies, as Cornwell suggested.
- Perhaps INGO's have stagnated ideologically. They may have lost touch contextually, both from community's abroad and in the UK, and risk existing in a bubble, which is potentially sucking the energy out of social movements.

Discussion Group 4:

- Constraints around funding need to be carefully considered. Which donors should INGO's be

dealing with from an ethical point of view and what are our objectives? Considering what success looks like needs to be more central to the debate

- If questions are being raised around working on campaigns which centre around women and girls as victims, what should INGO's be focusing on?
- How do you communicate complexity to donors, members of the public and the constituency we work with. There is a lot of pressure to continually simplify the message. A clear vision is needed for each NGO.
- INGO's need to look critically from within the organisation at the layers of funding, whilst internal space to discuss practice and power dynamics are also important.
- It is too common that men are not engaged in these sort of theoretical discussions (only one man attended the conference); there is still a misconception that gender is about women. As a sector, are we guilty of homogenising men: "men do this... , men say this...."
- Presumption is that if you involve men it is better. Action Aid is investigating questions like "Can you show when, in what ways and to what extent it works to involve men?"
- Programmes are instrumentalist in using women to lead to economic improvement and that this is resulting in neglect of boys. At points it is difficult to see whether girls are being empowered by contemporary working practices or are being used as the instrument with which to secure funding in line with the current trend.
- Maybe it is time to change the emphasis, as Helen Dixon suggested: a relationship and a movement
- Time constraints and working behind a desk can make things stale. In order for things to change, we need to make time for discussions like these.
- INGO's are not talking about the quality of programme work. The language is focused around securing funding, risk management and business planning. At the level of what drives larger organisations the language of business is used.
- Concern that people were feeling defensive as opposed to using this space to share and discuss.
- Need for tools which can be utilised practically in the work place in order to instigate change. Difficulty in talking about these things in the abstract.
- There is an opportunity here, rather than being bogged down in organisational roles, to start from the self.
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6th December 2011.