**DSA Gender Policy and Practice study group and International Gender Studies at Lady Margaret Hall meeting on feminist research in development,**

**April 4th 2017. Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford University**

A group of almost 30 women and one man came together for a few hours on April 4th to explore the challenges, opportunities and realities of working in development taking a feminist perspective in research and women's empowerment programmes. There was a serious attempt to focus on our own roles, power and positions within these processes and the importance of this 'reflexivity' recurred throughout the workshop. Attendance included women from Universities and a range of INGOs all committed to working to ensure women's rights through promoting their participation and representation in political processes.

The presentations raised many questions as well as providing some rich insights into what research and programmes are doing and what is being achieved – or not. Multiple questions were raised around how to work from feminist perspectives in global contexts of intense competition, pressure for measurable quick results, and often  a lack of time and space to work with women themselves. The need to challenge our position as people of relative power and privilege as well as to answer questions about why we are doing our work - for whose benefit, how to ensure those involved have a say over setting agendas, analysing data and shaping final reports or papers – felt urgent.

The discussions were serious but also full of humour and warmth. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive highlighting a need for reflective space at a time where work pressures are so intense. People appreciated being in a room with unashamed feminists, where they could let down their guard, connect with others and share their thoughts and experiences; having a few hours together away from multiple internal demands was important. Connecting to others experiencing similar challenges was enjoyable and much was learned.

The presentations are all to be found alongside this short report, as is the introduction to the day and the context for the meeting. There is more information on women's empowerment work, participation and voice, on the websites of Trócaire, Womankind, Oxfam and Lady Margaret Hall as well as the DSA website. This report simply highlights a few of the questions raised and  the ideas shared:

- there is a huge body of good feminist research and experience built up over many years, there are strong grounded methodologies and examples of positive approaches, yet so much of the work currently undertaken to improve the lives of women and girls ignores these. What are the barriers to using feminist knowledge and why is a landscape committed to funding women and girls often so hostile to learning from long experience?
- The lack of time to stop, think, reflect and share is a real problem for everyone working in development now, squeezing out analysis and thinking.

While there is a focus on women and girls there is a shift away from a rights analysis and approach and often highly instrumentalised approaches to concepts of 'empowerment'. These are often individualized and removed from concepts of solidarity, social movements and collective action

- Measurements of success are often far removed from what is needed to enable social change or deep learning to take place. Metrics are often trivial and proxy –one example was of teaching quality being measured by the speed of repayment of fees by students post study. Results based metrics do not capture the complexity of what is required for women to become empowered, make decisions and participate in public spaces

- Women are so often the objects and not subjects of the work; there is only limited work on co-creating knowledge, though the Trócaire research was an example of trying to do this in three diverse and complex environments

- The need for alliances is clear yet competition and the need for individual/institutional profile can cut across finding ways to work together

- Feminism emerged from resistance and activism, yet so much work currently on 'gender in development' and 'mainstreaming' avoids addressing issues of power and conflict and focuses on technical and technocratic ways of 'including women'. Women from the global south are not informing much of the debate or practice here in UK and ways of linking to environmental, black and other movements are largely lacking

- Trocaire's research grew out of a concern about the lack of women's voice and participation and the limited evidence about working with women in their programmes. They worked over three years with staff and partners in three countries to find ways to enable women's voices to be heard and to work with the complexity of their lives around 'journeys of women's empowerment'. While the contexts created very different enablers and barriers for women, some common themes were identified including the role of violence in controlling women, the strength of patriarchy and the institutions and norms of patriarchy, the heavy burdens of care often refereed to but then ignored in development work. The time needed to building women's confidence and skills to engage and speak out to men and to the state around inequality is significant and some women will start the journey while few will be able to learn to speak out publically or lead.

- Womankind Worldwide focused on their shift from gender back to women's rights and the need for WK to be outward facing and find ways to focus on linking with and supporting women's movements. This is a recent shift in strategy and is requiring many changes, including working in fewer countries in more collaborative ways. They discussed several pieces f research that showed that certain approaches and ways of working do achieve good results for and with women, including around preventing violence and building safe spaces for women. They are challenging themselves and others about what is the role of research in a women's rights programme and how does research help women to change their lives? Given the accepted findings that women's rights have been driven by women's organisations in the south research must contribute to supporting and extending their work and not meeting discrete UK agendas for e.g.

campaigning or fund raising.  It must involve partners and be of value to women themselves. It is hard to get this kind of research 'heard' in advocacy sadly because for now evidence is usually defined as quantitative and large scale; it is also hard to get women's voices 'in the forefront' because advocacy agendas are set often in UK or globally and women's own priorities may not easily fit these. These relationships highlight critical issues of power and also how flexible and responsive different agencies can be in the light of their own priorities

- Oxfam has worked for a long time of women's rights and it remains 'at the hear of all they do', though operationalizing this commitment is challenging. The keys for those working on gender in Oxfam are: women's leadership, ending VAWG and promoting gender justice, especially economic justice. They have run several different programmes, which try to address the structural and well as individual barriers facing women; worling with men to promote change; building women's leadership and ensuring women know their rights. Their work is often translated into practical guides for staff, partners and  other agencies to use. Like other speakers they have a focus on power and issues of accountability and recognise the need to analyse and work with the power of those working for Oxfam especially when promoting collective action. Their key questions were what are we trying to do and how are we trying to do it? This again raised issues identified by others: leadership for what; how to work with unequal power relationships; who decides and who sets the agenda; how to work collectively?

This is just a snapshot of some of the issues raised by the presentations. Participants spent an hour in three groups discussing these and other issues raised by their own experiences and concerns. Again just a few of these are presented here – notes of the three discussions can be shared on request.

- the pressure to do quantitative measures of change is squeezing out the time, space and skills needed to work on qualitative participatory ways of working, often essential to exploring and hearing about women's lives, experiences, aspirations and challenges.
- donor agendas are driving much programming and research- how topush back and reclaim some spaces for different and feminist ways of working and undertaking analysis?
- National research and local bodies are being overlooked as increasingly funding is for UK agencies and agendas to be pursued; development is moving away from solidarity and participatory ways of working back to top-down directed work with agendas set in the north
- How to be an activists in the current cultural and normative contexts of Universities and NGOs in UK now? The relative isolation felt by many feminists can result in burn-out /cynicism. The participants emphasized that self care is something that needs to be understood as a collective activity, rather than reduced to individual responsibility.

- What kind of evidence can be convincing from using feminist approaches? How to get this accepted and heard?
- How much time should go into research and to achieve what? Good feminist research takes time, and this is often squeezed by the context of research in development projects.
- How to cope with
- The need to get much better at sharing data with different audiences, feeding back to those most affected and ensuring data can be used by women themselves as well as agencies. The need to reach out across multiple audiences using different media platforms to get messages and voices hard
- Issues of the best methodologies to use to engage women were raised as was the challenge of letting women set their agendas in contexts of high donor/Trustee pressure
- Whose knowledge is valued and why and how to shift this?

In summing up these rich and diverse discussions a few points were highlighted:

- who is owning the research? Do women themselves even know our findings let alone own or use them?
- There are multiple agendas, how to find the time to meet them all?
- Never forget the importance and diversity of contexts- there will never be a 'one size fits all'
- Partnership is central to working on women's righs and empowerment- how to find ways to really work well with partners, properly taking power and control into account throughout and at all levels?
- There is a need to work on both structural and individual inequality and to address issues of power- externally but also without our organisations: We need to look at ourselves and our practice
- We need to find collective spaces to work together, including with the women we are wanting to support. We need more time with each other as feminists, to learn, get encouragement and feel 'we are not insane'!
- How our ideas are created relies on the women and men we work with, and participatory space in research is required to enable feminist ideas and research. This is something sorely missing in many NGOs and universities, and yet is crucial for understanding the lives of women and the many challenges they still face
- Let's celebrate all our achievements as well as keep pushing to improve and change things, especially in what are quite hostile environments currently

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