



THE POLITICS OF GENDER

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Gender, like any other construct of social demarcation, embodies and perpetuates political systems of oppression. Feminist theory reminds us of the ways that artificial divisions into dichotomies of male and female serve to benefit groups in power. Critical theory implores us to recognize the intersections across gender, ethnicity/race, class, religious affiliation, sexual orientation and more. The underlying issues here concern systems of power, operating through the language and structure of development to bolster prominent institutions and to constrain potential for resistance. Recognizing the connections across various dimensions that mark privilege and oppression, here I focus on gender as one illustration of this larger dynamic.

The language of development articulates social problems, processes and solutions through defining policies and programs, structuring organizational work, and allocating resources. The framing of social issues can be considered in terms of the visibility brought to particular concerns as well as the particular stance legitimated. UN attention to women's issues in the 1970s, for example, brought women's concerns considerably more visibility; yet, the roles accorded to women tended to be defined in terms of women's reproductive and domestic spheres. Initial visibility brought attention to "women" as a critical target, and occasional participant, within the development process. Over time issues of "gender" became more incorporated into the language of development, though how this worked in terms of actual projects was quite varied.

As the rhetoric of "participation" became more closely aligned in some approaches to development, the notion of women as "subjects" and participants of social change rather than targets gained prominence. Situating participation within models of social change advocating resistance, the idea of "empowerment" began to feed into these discussions. Although the potential for empowerment may have been intended by many advocates to connote active agents collectively or individually organizing to fight against oppression, this emphasis coincided with a critical shift in the political-economic structuring of development, in which private funds began to play a larger role in development funding.

There are several issues to consider in terms of the way "empowerment"

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has been used in relation to gender issues. On the one hand, this framework emphasizes the active engagement of women in social, political, and economic spheres. Women's participation and empowerment have been explicitly addressed in many development agencies, including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA). However, there may be a tendency to extend this argument from active agency toward ultimate responsibility. While we should recognize our active roles in engaging in political action, we should not hold individuals accountable for serious structural constraints to change. Blaming the victim is a potential conundrum of development language, when individuals are placed with the ultimate responsibility for social change without attention to the structures and norms that inhibit and propel potential action. We need to understand a critical interplay, bridging individual experiences and actions, with community norms and collective organization, institutional parameters defining resource allocation, political decisions circumscribing actions, and economic incentives propelling individual and organizational behavior.

More recently we have seen issues of gender incorporated more squarely in terms of issues of poverty. An integration of gender with broader concerns of poverty can be explained as a response to external pressures as well as institutional factors. The emphasis on issues of poverty was stimulated in part by official declarations of the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and other dominant development institutions. One might applaud the recognition that gender dynamics should not be considered in isolation, but are directly connected to the inequality of class, ethnicity and others systems of oppression. However, attention to considerable inequities across gender loses visibility as it becomes more politically palatable to avoid feminist critique and instead frame social issues in terms of poverty.

To illustrate, emphasizing poverty allowed JICA staff to continue advocating work in gender when seen as a potentially controversial topic. The shift from issues of women to concerns with gender dynamics was initiated by staff within the organization, but not appreciated by male counterparts in collaborating ministries, who were sensitive to alignments with what they viewed as western radical feminism. As in many other organizations, it became clear to many of the JICA staff that politically it would be more expedient to subsume the potentially contentious issues of gender within the relatively innocuous consideration of poverty. Seeing gender in terms of poverty alleviation and post-conflict situations seemed politically more viable in this context. Even the notion of "empowerment," raised in descriptions of projects, such as micro-enterprise and training programs, becomes explicitly connected to raising the economic status of women in order to address poverty as a central concern.

The politics of language in essence is guided to avoid controversy, particularly in larger development institutions attempting to appease

political constituencies. One way to avoid controversy, according to several development professionals, is to emphasize the technical nature of the development project rather than its moral imperatives. Development projects are then guided by questions of efficiency rather than social justice. The justification to attend to gender issues, in this realm, becomes a technical concern in making the project work better, rather than a central concern with human rights. While there may be legitimacy accorded to both issues, efficiency as well as ethics, the former takes precedence over the latter as a political strategy.

One of the more politically attractive means of securing fiscal support involves leveraging interventions in areas of crisis. The assumption is that USAID emergency relief, to nations such as Nigeria and Angola, would be more attractive to American constituents and the US Congress. One way to allocate resources for women then becomes to work with women in crisis territories. For example, a USAID program in Rwanda targets resources directly to women and women's groups to meet their basic needs for food and shelter. The intervention privileges those women who are widows, particularly with children, and those groups with women officers. Women in crisis become an attractive target for funding. The argument here is not that we should avoid funding programs toward women who are victims of violence and conflict: these programs have the potential to make real differences in people's lives. However, we do need to understand that an emphasis on women as victims offers a political strategy that appeals to constituents wary of feminist critique, undermining constructive programs highlighting women's positive contributions to social, economic and political production.

How we frame women and what women need through language, matters. As the language shifts from issues of women, to gender, to concerns with empowerment and poverty, tracking the actual allocation of resources in terms of fiscal contributions as well as staff devoted to particular topics becomes more difficult. When women's programs first attracted visibility in development, one could monitor the percentage of project funds designated for this type of project. Even this designation was not easily discerned, however, when projects across sectors targeted women without necessarily being seen as a women's project. Resources devoted to gender and empowerment have become even more difficult to track, particularly as these issues have become more integrated into a variety of sectors.

This trend toward integration has been termed "mainstreaming" in several development organizations. "Mainstreaming" gender issues into agency practice means that gender concerns are to be incorporated into programs rather than being considered as a separate issue. USAID, the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) and other development organizations have explicitly engaged in this structural practice, integrating gender concerns into existing areas but also establishing some separate activities, such as gender research, which may not fit existing organizational divisions. Within JICA, the process of gender

mainstreaming has been adopted with varying degrees of enthusiasm. “Mainstreaming” does not translate easily into Japanese. One informant admitted that some of her colleagues wondered why she was still working on gender issues within the organization, when these issues had been “already mainstreamed.”

On the positive side, this mainstreaming approach has the potential to legitimize feminist issues within institutional discourse. Given an identifiable budget and reporting structure, along with equal opportunities, this strategy has the capacity to benefit women, recognizing gender as a relationship of power enacted in social and political communities. However, according to some development professionals it is difficult to track how women benefit and to ensure that women and men have similar access to resources. Some of these professionals believe that mainstreaming gender reflected a political response to those interested in eclipsing feminist issues, and those concerned with reducing budgets. Thus, in practice, by incorporating women’s issues into other development concerns, gender issues lose visibility. Gender integration thereby implies a disintegration of feminist interests.

My final point with the overarching politics of gender in development work concerns the focus of our discussion. Donor institutions spend considerably more energy debating the projected needs of women in “other” communities compared to gender concerns within their own institutions. Feminist critiques are applicable not just in particular situations, defined as targets of need by prominent institutions, but across circumstances. Donor institutions need to engage in feminist debate in a self-reflexive manner, considering not only how development work is engaged as a global activity, but also how gender dynamics within organizations constrain the potential for individual, collective, and institutional growth.

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[1] Editor’s note: JICA is the Japan International Cooperation Agency.

