Development as if Gender Matters

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ABSTRACT Wendy Harcourt highlights the most interesting and contentious issues to emerge during a conversation held among 25 people from key women's networks, UN agencies, research institutions and think tanks at the 54th Commission of the Status of Women (CSW) in New York March 2010. (1) Using charterhouse rules, the dialogue was an attempt to hold a new kind of conversation in the CSW space. The participants candidly held up to scrutiny the key concepts of gender and empowerment in the context of the new development institutions.

KEYWORDS UN; empowerment; private sector; sustainability; action; women's rights; accountability

Opportunity for change

The multiple crises economic, food, climate, care and rights as well as increasing conflicts worldwide gave a heightened sense to why it is important to have honest and open conversations in the UN space. Conflicts are increasing, jobs are being cut, the social sector slashed and in very poor rural and urban areas development institutions are not delivering. A key question is whether the systemic crisis and questioning of development institutions are opening up the possibility to replace the current neo-liberal development model? Could the current crisis force real institutional changes that would uphold gender equality, women’s human rights, social justice, sustainable livelihoods and freedom from oppression?

How can the UN work for peoples’ agendas?

The discussion was marked by a strong sense of disillusionment in the current model but also an equally strong political will to continue the search for ‘out of the box’ solutions. The dialogue reflected critically on the need to recover the dynamism and enthusiasm that marked the transnational gender and development agenda of the early 1990s. With the return to those early notions of sustainable livelihoods, to Alma Ata and primary health care there is a belief once more in alternative development models from below. What continues to be missing is accountability of institutions to deliver. The core principles that informed the big UN meetings held in Rio, Vienna, Cairo and Beijing have not translated into effective institutions for change. Those meetings, notably, were held at a time of systemic collapse of the communist system. But they
engendered a sense of hope around concepts of social justice and the 'peace dividend'. In contrast, today's collapse of economic and financial institutions and social structures around them seem to be pulling us to the edge of an abyss. The UN is trying to hold ground but in reality it is sliding back and in the process gender and women's issues, especially sexual and reproductive rights, have got burned. The UN agenda on women and gender equality has been narrowed down to education, political representation and freedom from violence, there was a broader agenda even five years ago.

There are fewer people willing to name and shame governments and UN institutions to be accountable to their promises. Whether through choice or design, it is harder and harder for critical individual and collective voices to be heard by the real decision-makers of today's current international environment.

If progress is not to be spasmodic but enduring, gender advocates need to find countervailing ways to bring about change. The strategy of gender mainstreaming has been emptied of its political meaning and instead of being seen as a tool, it has become an end in itself. The UN itself is being eroded. Many UN commissions hardly communicate with one another. The Millennium Development Goals as a UN development agenda is left to set targets. The hard issues of trade, finance and economy have been handed over to the World Bank, along with poverty, health and climate. Institutionally the UN agenda seems to have gone backwards. UN provides the norms, standards, and guidance, but the states are the instrument of action. But there is not enough partnership among UN and the G77 countries to enforce systemic change at the country level. Governments do not care for gender equality and other 'soft issues' and at major review meetings such as the CSW 15 years after Beijing, they are hardly renewing commitments.

The process of approving the new gender entity illustrates how the UN is struggling. Without funding the whole process is being gutted. Half a billion is not even a tiny slither of what is needed.

So the question always comes back to where do women and gender advocates engage, where to go? Where are the openings?

**Sustainability, body politics and empowerment**

As sustainable livelihoods comes back into the development discourse it is important that it comes back connected conceptually and in practice with the issues that feminists have been working on around empowerment, the body, intersectionality and violence. If gender advocates join sustainable development or sustainability movements as allies it is important to bring with them these feminist critiques of power including the need to ask political questions around empowerment for whom and or what. Sustainable development without change to gender and human relationships would be unacceptable.

This requires, in relationship to the food crisis, for example, to recognize that women have responsibility for food security and therefore require land ownership capacity and status. Women need to be seen not as carriers of the burden but as decision-makers with rights including property rights and access to assets. Encouragingly, land reforms such as those happening in Sindh in Pakistan are addressing food security and inequity by giving land directly to women in recognition that household security rests with women.

On the other hand, there are worrying power brokering deals being done such as the Afghanistan peace talks in February 2010 where negotiators were proposing that the Taliban return to power, effectively meaning that peace is being made at the expense of women's human rights. Women's bodies should not be viewed as male owned occupied territory but women should be autonomous citizens.

**Em-ment, where is the power?**

As the talks around peace and food security indicate gender, women's rights or empowerment are visible themes in development. There are many institutions from the World Bank to the multinational cooperation such as Nike which are putting women at the centre of investments, of publicity campaigns, and of ways out of poverty. But these are mantras or sound bites that do little
to transform patriarchal gender relations. Not so far below the surface are the stereotypes of either the victim or the heroine, or increasingly the woman as the new consumer who will be saved, or save communities and economies from disaster. Empowerment has been captured by market forces as well as non progressive religious and fundamentalist forces. The term empowerment as it is being used in these multiple ways, needs to be put under scrutiny. Empowerment ‘lite’ sound bites are now part of the hype. We need to reflect on what went wrong in the way the concept was taken up, and in those debates repoliticize empowerment. We need to recontextualize empowerment and re legitimise problematic ideas surrounding it. Why was there no consideration of the institutional and structural changes needed so that it becomes em-ment with power taken out? Whenever we use the term empowerment we need to put it together with what we want empowerment for: for rights, justice, freedom, sexual rights, and make sure we are clear in what context.

It is possible that we need to look for new words, and redefine the ones we are using, like women, gender and empowerment. Gender certainly has to be seen as a much more fluid concept. It cannot refer only to women, nor only to the sexual binaries of women and men. It needs to include transgender, intersex people and the cultural context of gendered beings in different societies and times. Femininities and masculinities flow through all our bodies. There are militarized women, caring men, and people who move in between. We need to deconstruct and destroy the biases and polarities.

**Embracing tensions**

The current crisis brings out tensions around rights, gender relations, development and culture which need to be acknowledged and worked through, not ignored, nor feared. For example the challenge to the human rights agenda particularly around sexual rights could open space for a much more nuanced understanding of rights.

Within the women’s movement we need to understand that there are tensions around voice and institution building. There is an effective women’s voice in terms of women’s rights as human rights. But how does that translate into concrete programmes around the economy, livelihoods, food security and climate? There are strong tensions around the rights discourse and development institutions. There is a tendency to polarize gender related issues into violence and body politics and peace, on the one side, and macro economic, ecology and conflict on the other. It could also be said that the gender perspective tries to look at all the different issues and as a result falls through the cracks.

There are definite tensions around how women are represented often in very schematic symbolic levels as either victims or women as heroes. Like other genders, women are complex agents of change.

This complexity is hard to capture within the development discourse which is focused on quantity, indicators and measurement with a strong evidence based approach. This leads to success being measured by technocratic means as opposed to the quality of programmes being contextualized and valued and owned by the participants engaged in the programmes over time. Shifts in freedoms and equality and access to assets and fulfillment of rights are not easily quantifiable.

Another tension is around public and private. The UN sees the world in terms of nation states. Whereas the private business and philanthropic sector is very active and engaged in development issues, including women’s rights. Bill Gates, Nike and others have been creating a strong marketing agenda to reach women as the new consumers making a lot of money for their organizations.

The most interesting work for gender equality and women’s rights is at the intersections of these tensions. We need to tease out the contradictions in order to see where the intersections are and move forward perhaps in new ways rather than getting caught in today’s binaries, silos and assumptions.

There is a strong politics of unfairness in which we are complicit if we do not question the assumptions, make new alliances and new reflections on the methods of ‘doing’ development. We need to
make a space to disagree and have authentic
discussions that do not essentialize women or
demonize either government or private sector,
nor be afraid to challenge current ways women
are seen and portray themselves.

The invitation is to be ourselves in our deliberations so that the contradictions emerge, we must not stop being diverse. The silencing world of the UN is afraid to address stereotypes, heteronormativity and conventions and to acknowledge the deeper tensions and risks that the world’s business sector are totally unafraid to take on.

**The other elephants in the room**

So if one elephant in the room is how boringly conventional the UN can be, the other elephant is that the UN has embraced unquestioningly the neo-liberal economic agenda. Cultural diversities and the collective rights of people are being eroded in the embrace of neo-liberal economic policy. One strategy is to use a rights-based approach in order to look at economy policy.

Another elephant is the fallibility of governments. Governments are not benign. There are huge regional differences in scope and scale among governments, and governments themselves are government by financial structures which are not democratic nor within the framework of the state. The UN is weak and fragmented because of it hyper federalism, setting norms that are not followed by governments which are corrupt, most certainly including the US government.

So in relation to those working on gender and women’s rights there is a dilemma about where we put our energy. Do we stay with the UN? But the UN is not where the real power making is happening. So perhaps women’s rights and gender should be much more involved in direct action for example against big pharmaceuticals and oil companies work harder at questioning trade agreements, financing institutions and the World Bank.

**New institutions?**

The new geopolitics that is now emerging with the BRICS and emerging economies in the G20 are demanding a voice in world issues. This could be an opportunity to bring concepts of gender and empowerment into this new international architecture formed by the political struggles in the global arena. For example China is a major player in Africa, which presents possibilities for African leaders to say no to the conditionalities of the Global North, even if in terms of human rights and freedom China may not be the best way. We need to engage in a sharper analysis around gender as geopolitics is being reconfigured. We need to hold all institutions accountable so that the norms and policy frameworks are actually implemented and with the necessary allocation of resources. Do we know the institutional arrangements in terms of resources for gender equality? Have we found where the political conversations in these institutions are happening and who can be at those tables?

During the conversation an interesting parallel was made between what was called the sustainability movement and the women’s rights movement. In civil society there are important conversations going on about gender and sustainable development such as the work of La Via Campesina where gender equality is at its heart and sustainable development has been reclaimed to have a much more integrated and holistic approach to livelihoods, food sovereignty, political ecology and climate justice. It was proposed that the two movements could reengage in the upcoming Rio + 20 process and meeting. This could be an opportunity to push forward a new institutional agenda, building on the knowledge and advocacy in which both movements have engaged over the last two decades.

**Conclusion: where is the space for activism?**

There is a strong call for finding the places where power is brokered and for women and gender rights advocates to be there, in order to promote alternatives and to broker out of the box strategies and new visions to create accountable dynamic institutions.

The challenge is for women and gender advocates to play a different role in the UN and change...
the structure and at the same time focus on World Bank, IMF, OECD, DAC and private sector. The UN is still the only space where governments are equal, and there is a culture of engaging with civil society advocates. But the UN is deadly slow and bureaucratic but the other spaces are hard to follow without technocratic knowledge and skills. Women’s rights and gender advocates struggle to engage with financial institutions, security and hard core trade policy agenda. It is a risky business, and women and gender experts are out of their comfort zone, but will fail to deal with the real power structures if they do not engage.

How do we find and work at the intersections without simplifying the different arguments, and given today’s fast changing world of communication. It is hard to have authentic conversations when everyone it seems is looking for a new mantra, and institutions are caught in having to justify and reproduce themselves. Perhaps we need to build very different tools for mobilization, and new ways of making action. What agendas work together? Gender and sustainability? Do those agendas clarify where we are at a global scale and enable us to go out and cope with an unjust world at different communities and states?

We need arguments, honesty and authenticity, and the spark that gets people going in multiple ways to put the power back into empowerment.