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Feminisms in development

Contradictions, contestations and challenges



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1 | Introduction: feminisms in development: contradictions, contestations and challenges

ANDREA CORNWALL, ELIZABETH HARRISON
AND ANN WHITEHEAD

This book explores the contested relationship between feminisms and development and the challenges for reasserting feminist engagement with development as a political project. Its starting point is pluralist – there are feminisms, not feminism, and 'development' covers a multitude of theoretical and political stances and a wide diversity of practices. Our contributors represent some of this diversity. They include those who have been involved with key conceptual and political advances in analysis and policy, feminist 'champions' from within development organizations, and researchers and practitioners engaged in critical reflection on gender generalizations and their implications for policy and practice.

Most of the chapters in the book derive from a workshop held at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, in July 2003. Entitled 'Gender Myths and Feminist Fables: Repositioning Gender in Development Policy and Practice', this workshop was designed to encourage reflection and taking stock. It drew together people from across diverse sites of thinking and practice that constitute contemporary engagement with questions of gender in development. One widely shared perspective was the sobering recognition of the enormous gap between feminists' aspirations for social transformation and the limited, though important, gains that have been made.

Gender inequality has proven to be much more intractable than anticipated. In several arenas women's capabilities and quality of life have worsened, not improved; legislative reform is not matched by changes in political and economic realities to enable women to use new laws; gains in one sphere have produced new, detrimental forms of gender inequality; women everywhere are having to fight to get their voices heard, despite new emphases on democracy, voice and participation. At the same time, arguments made by feminist researchers have become denatured and depoliticized when taken up by development institutions. For many, what were once critical insights, the results of detailed research, have now become 'gender myths': essentialisms and generalizations, simplifying frameworks and simplistic slogans.

contributors to this collection provide several examples of critical struggles for voice, representation and resources through forums such as these. As new forms of political space, they have succeeded in lending visibility to demands for change, creating constituencies that span diverse contexts, and alliances between those working at different sites of development policy and practice. It is through them that many real gains have been made.

The project of social transformation demands not only activism but also engagement with the content and processes of international development policy – not least because, despite the failure of most states to meet the target of 0.7 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for their aid budgets, spending in aid and loans has been rising in the last twenty-five years. For many very poor countries this now constitutes a major source of government revenue. A central element of that engagement has been the development and proliferation of the concept of 'gender mainstreaming', discussed in several chapters in this book.

Officially first adopted by the UN at the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing, gender mainstreaming was seen by many feminists as a response to the need more fully to 'integrate women' in development policy and practice. However, once adopted within development institutions, the practice of gender mainstreaming has led to further disappointments – as Gouws puts it: 'While the driving force around gender activism used to be women's experience, mainstreaming turns it into a technocratic category for redress that also suppresses the differences between women' (2005: 78). Arguably, the ready adoption of gender mainstreaming by development institutions may itself reflect the fact that working with a technocratic category may be a more attractive proposition than achieving gender justice.

Reflecting these themes, the book is structured as follows. Chapters in the first section explore the origins and status of some of the gender orthodoxies that have become embedded in gender and development advocacy and programming. Some interrogate particular axioms, locating them within struggles for interpretative power that shape policy processes and politics. Others explore how policy fields have been constructed in specific ways in particular places. They address the making and shaping of the language of 'gender' in development.

Part two turns its focus more directly on development institutions. Contributors examine the ways in which changing constructions of 'gender' have framed the objects of development and set the parameters for debate and intervention. Speaking from different locations within development organizations, contributors analyse the institutional dimensions of efforts

This introduction sets out three interconnected themes that our contributors explore to illuminate these disappointments. These are also reflected in the structure of the book. First, we highlight the struggle for interpretive power as a core element of feminist engagement with development. Moves from 'women' to 'gender' and the creation and critique of specific gender myths signal what has been a continual battle over interpretation – a battle that is embedded in a politics of engagement in which the initial power quotients are unequal. Second, we scrutinize how the way that development institutions function undermines feminist intent. Bureaucratic resistance plays a major role here, but the ways in which this takes place are complex, reflecting power both inside and outside of institutions. Lastly, we explore a major challenge in the project of repoliticizing feminism in gender and development; that of how to achieve solidarity across difference, because there is no simple 'us' in feminism, let alone a single diagnosis of either problems or their solutions. This is especially demanding in a context of shifting development policy preoccupations, changing aid modalities and ever more polarized geo-politics.

Thirty years of feminist engagement with development has led to the distinctive and plural field of inquiry and practice of gender and development. This field includes an institutionalized set of practices and discourses within development institutions which goes under the acronym GAD, but it is not confined to this. The wider field of gender and development also refers to the innovations in research, analysis and political strategies brought about by very diversely located researchers and activists. There has been no shortage of reflexive engagement within gender and development research, writing and activism (Kabeer 1994; Goetz 1997; Miller and Razavi 1998). The collection edited by Cecile Jackson and Ruth Pearson (1998), *Feminist Visions of Development*, critically reflected on changing orthodoxies, and on issues of positionality and representation. And a growing and increasingly sophisticated literature exists on the experience of gender mainstreaming (for example, Macdonald 2003; Rai 2003; Kabeer 2003; Prügl and Lustgarten 2005). This book engages with these debates through a particular lens, that of the narratives that gender and development has done much to popularize. It is situated firmly in the changing global context, in which new myths and struggles for interpretive power are emerging.

Feminists work towards social transformation and in doing so create new political spaces. The influence of forums such as DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era) and AWID (Association for Women's Rights in Development), and the many international networks of researchers and activists, has been vitally important in stimulating debate and engagement on the challenges of redressing gender inequalities. The

to make incautious claims. But they may also be based on the soundest of fieldwork, the most scrupulously rigorous research design. This in itself has little bearing on whether or not they make suitable material for myth-making. What makes them 'myths' has nothing to do with what they tell us about the world. It is the way in which they encode the ways of that world in a form that resonates with the things that people would like to believe, that gives them the power to affect action (Sorel 1999).

Narratives advocating GAD have done a great deal within development institutions. They have facilitated the dedication of resources, the production of policy spaces, the creation of a cadre of professionals and a body of organizations of various kinds whose work is to deal with issues of gender. 'Discourse coalitions' (Hajer 1995) constructed around particular feminist insights (for example, that households are sites of conflict as well as cooperation; that women face a double burden of productive and reproductive work) have involved those working inside development institutions and feminist activists and lobbyists, grassroots practitioners and feminist-academics who do not. 'Gender' has been foundational, both as an organizing principle and a rallying call, for these discourse coalitions. This concept has been put to myriad uses in attempts to redefine and reshape development intervention. Researchers have used it to generate insights into the relational dimensions of planned intervention that development policy and practice had ignored. Activists and advocates have used it to frame a set of demands and to challenge, and reframe, assumptions.

In many ways, the generalizations that are now part of the currency of GAD therefore represent a success story. Originating in the discourses of a minority of politically motivated advocates, they are now taken for granted and espoused by people occupying many different spaces in a multitude of development institutions. But the extent of change in women's lives does not match this discursive landslide. The equation of women and poverty does not seem to have had much effect on reducing women's poverty. And all but the most stoic defenders of 'gender mainstreaming' would admit that for all the effort that has been poured into trying to make mainstreaming work, many agencies would be hard pressed to boast much in the way of effects in terms of institutional policies and practices.

There has been an increasing sense among many involved in the feminist struggle to put 'gender' on the agenda in development institutions that the term itself has been effectively eviscerated of any of its original political intent. Represented to technocrats and policy-makers in the form of tools, frameworks and mechanisms, 'gender' became a buzzword in development frameworks in the 1990s. In more recent times, it has fallen from favour and has a jaded, dated feel to it. Diluted, denatured, depoliti-

at gender transformation. Several look closely at how gender mainstreaming has affected progress towards gender equality and the power of the gender agenda within development institutions. Lastly, Part three moves beyond the often insular world of development institutions and debates to the social and political contexts in which development interventions are located. We consider issues emerging from the new frames through which development has come to be 'read' - such as the efflorescence of talk of 'rights', 'citizenship', 'inclusion' and 'democratization' in recent years. Contributors set feminist engagement with development on a broader geopolitical terrain, capturing dilemmas, struggles and conquests, as well as new ambivalences and uncertainties.

The struggle for interpretive power

The adoption of the language of 'gender' and of phrases associated with feminist activism to address women's subordination and gender inequality within gender and development policy and practice is a not entirely palatable fruit of a long-run struggle. In the course of it, lessons learnt from particular places have been turned into sloganized generalities: 'women are the poorest of the poor', 'women do most of the work in African agriculture', 'educating girls leads to economic development', and so on. Simplification, sloganization even, have been understood as necessary to get gender on to the development agenda. Some of these gender myths have provided extremely useful Trojan Horses to lever open debates and to mobilize support. Others have been deployed as a kind of catchy shorthand to capture the policy limelight, generating in their wake popular preconceptions that gain an axiomatic quality that becomes difficult to dislodge. Women appear in these slogans, fables and myths both as abject victims, the passive subjects of development's rescue, and as splendid heroines, whose unsung virtues and whose contributions to development need to be heeded.

The word 'myth' is often used as a synonym for 'not true'. In development writing, articles about 'myths' are often concerned with busting them, showing their falsity, enlightening readers to the 'facts'. Myths may be bolstered by what economists call 'stylized facts'; they may be nurtured with selective statistics, with case studies, with quotes, with vignettes. In using the term 'myth' here, our intention is not to join in the 'myth busting'. It is, rather, to inquire into how the stories about 'gender' have drawn on feminist research in ways that may be dissonant with the original intentions of the authors, or with the realities they describe. These stories are not necessarily based on untruth, nor on faulty data. They might well extrapolate from one setting to another, use partial and cautious findings

ized, included everywhere as an afterthought, 'gender' may have become something everyone who works for an aid organization knows that they are supposed to do something about. But quite what, and what would happen if they carried on ignoring it, is rarely pungent or urgent enough to distract the attention of many development bureaucrats and practitioners from business as usual. An aid bureaucrat from a bilateral agency considered by many to be one of the most progressive summed it up: 'when it comes to "gender", everyone sighs' (Cornwall, fieldnotes).

The term 'gender' initially offered sufficient scope, despite the potentially disparate meanings that different actors might give to it in practice, to bring them together in a transformative project to which all were able to subscribe. But despite tangible, material positive effects, when taken up and used by development institutions, 'gender' has clearly proved to be a double-edged sword. Why is this so? Making sense of these dynamics calls for a closer look at the ways in which development institutions make use of research, and at the politics of the policy process itself.

Development agencies are continually in search of clearly put, policy-friendly stories that tell them what the problem is and how it might be solved. Analysis of policy processes has recently focused on the 'framing, naming, numbering and coding' (Apthorpe 1996: 16) that underlies development policy, and on the way particular narratives come to be produced and reproduced in the process, sometimes in the face of glaringly contradictory evidence (Keeley and Scoones 2003; Mosse 2005). What this rich body of work highlights is the extent to which the use of particular representations of those whom development seeks to assist are worked into 'story-lines' that come not only to frame, but also to legitimize particular kinds of intervention and forms of knowledge (Hajer 1995; Keeley and Scoones 2003). Emery Roe's (1991) analysis of development policies as narratives offers important insights into this process. By framing development dilemmas in ways that invoke heroic interventions that rescue those in need and provide the means to a happy ending, policies imbue particular pathways for action with moral purpose. Yet while these narratives encode particular meanings of concepts like 'gender' or 'participation', other meanings come into play as policies are translated into practice; they may frame, but never completely contain, alternative interpretations.

The struggle over meaning occurs and has occurred in a constantly changing discursive landscape. Cecilia Sardenberg's chapter provides a detailed analysis of the debates among feminists in different geographical contexts that gave rise to the adoption of 'gender'. The use of particular terminology may represent either depoliticization or repoliticization – which in turn has implications for policy. In Brazil, the concept of gender has

been used in ways that fit the perspectives of competing institutions and individuals. This has often had the result of erasing its more radical implications and making women's interests less visible. Sardenberg argues that redefining and reclaiming the category women 'may be not only desirable and feasible, but also fundamental to granting greater visibility both to women as well as to the relevance of a gender perspective in development' (Sardenberg, this volume, p. 49).

Some of the most contested discursive terrain in today's development discourse is around 'women's empowerment'. As associations with collective action and more radical transformative agendas are sloughed away to make the notion palatable to the mainstream, 'empowerment' has been reduced from a complex process of self-realization, self-actualization and mobilization to demand change, to a simple act of transformation bestowed by a transfer of money and/or information. Srilatha Batliwala and Deepa Dhanraj's chapter shows the troubling convergence between certain ways of thinking and doing 'gender', and pervasive neo-liberal policy narratives that reduce the complex social and political processes that constitute empowerment to individualized 'choices'. They take the example of self-help groups in India, favoured for their association with 'empowerment', and suggest that they may not only have deepened the immiseration of poorer women, but that they have also deflected their energies away from other forms of engagement, not least the political.

Sylvia Chant offers another powerful example of the use of simple slogans to frame development intervention, analysing the widespread association of female-headed households with poverty. The story-line of the brave, suffering, female household head as poorest of the poor gains its mythical appeal for its capacity to galvanize action, precisely because her image is of someone who exists in a state of lack that development can remedy: lack of a man to look after her, of money to feed her children, of the possibility of a life beyond the everyday struggle to care for her family. As Chant shows, this association is based on some grain of truth: female household heads *may well be* poor. But the reasons for their poverty may less often be those contingently associated with the myth of the impoverished female head: that they have to cope without the male breadwinner who is the person responsible for the relative affluence of male-headed households – as if, of course, all male heads are breadwinners and that it takes a man to be a breadwinner of any substance. Chant argues that the myth of female-headed households as the poorest of the poor may not necessarily do women in this position a disservice: even if not *all* female heads are poor, there may be some net benefit to be gained from their pervasive representation as the poorest of the poor – not least

being the target of certain kinds of benefits. The myth of the female head in development narratives is relatively benign, after all: the very image of poverty, in soft focus, in stark contrast to the image of the feckless 'single mother' in northern policy narratives.

Where this analysis takes us is in highlighting the extent to which the struggle for interpretive power is waged through the juxtaposition of words and images in the production of these story-lines. Rosalind Eyben's chapter explores precisely this. It describes the period when the UK government's Overseas Development Administration (ODA, now Department for International Development, DFID) had just embarked upon producing what was to become a series of booklets about women in development. Her analysis charts how particular images and phrases came to be inserted in these booklets, and how they came to reflect incremental shifts in the framing of 'gender' and its salience within the development debates of the moment. In the process, she shows, certain ways of representing women came to be naturalized through the choice of photographs and emphases; shifting policy frames were encoded in iconic images that captured what advocates within the organization saw as the most salient entry points for change.

Other chapters contain less benign examples, telling cautionary tales about instrumentalism and the ambivalent benefits of alignment with discursive framings of mainstream development. If the struggle for interpretive power is one in which mythical images come to be deployed alongside other narrative devices to create room for manoeuvre or to open policy space from within development institutions and discourses, or enable those outside them to insert the thin end of the wedge to lever open such space, what happens when this struggle gives way to the wholesale stereotyping of gendered power relations? This is powerfully evoked in Everjoyce Win's account of the use and abuse of the stereotype of the African woman, whose discursive position as perpetually poor, powerless and pregnant works to place African women in general as illiterate victims of national systems of resource distribution and disadvantage. They are, as a result, reduced to such abject positions, so lacking in agency and in such political and economic deficit, that only development can rescue them. Powerlessness described in this way by outsiders simply serves to reinforce it.

Yet, as Nandinee Bandyopadhyay's chapter shows, mobilizing to reclaim identities as agents from the most damning of stereotypes offers not only scope for change, but for hope. The coalition of Indian sex workers described by Bandyopadhyay succeeded in undermining deeply entrenched stereotypes about both sex work and trafficking in novel and challenging ways. This work involved providing channels for women's own ability to

gain control both over their lives and over others' perceptions of them, particularly to move away from the situation in which sex workers are stigmatized and vilified. For them, carving out a space in the public arena is an important part of presenting alternative perspectives. They remind us that feminisms' struggles for interpretive power have changed language, have altered perceptions and have created new popular and analytical landscapes of meaning.

Working within development insitutions

Several contributors to this collection are preoccupied by the question of how 'doing gender' became something different from 'doing feminism', as Sardenberg puts it. One recurring theme is that of the ways in which the political project of gender and development has been reduced to a 'technical' fix: something that is ahistorical, apolitical and decontextualized and 'which leaves the prevailing and unequal power relations intact' (Mukhopadhyay, this volume, pp. 135-6). But how did the essentially political - and at the same time, deeply personal - issues of gender get rendered technical in ways that narrow, rather than widen, the scope for transformation? The chapters in Part two of the book focus particularly on the politics of institutional location - of what kind of institutions one is working in or for - and on the dilemmas of institutionalization. Among our contributors are several who reflect on their work within powerful international agencies, for example within bilateral donors or UN organizations that interface with multilateral donors. As feminists they have sought to make a place for new ideas and objectives in institutions whose organization, resource distribution, cultures and power relations are not of their own making. Together with other chapters, these accounts provide powerful reflections on the complex processes of making policy, and provide highly nuanced accounts of becoming a player at powerful tables. Running throughout this section of the book is a consciousness of the contradictions involved in seeking to bring about radical social change by engaging with those who hold the power and resources in international and national arenas.

Hilary Standing's chapter takes this as one of its main themes, and argues for the need to understand the mandates of different kinds of development institutions and actors in order to assess whether they should be held responsible for the social transformatory goals of feminism. She points out that the policy objectives of government ministries are centred on the services they are charged with delivering, such as health and education. Standing's chapter is an account of the perils of decontextualized and top-down gender mainstreaming. She poses a clear question: Why do we expect sectoral ministries to be the sites of the policy objectives of gender

framings of those who hold the purse strings. Making sense within or to these institutions, as well as to the multiple actors on whose cooperation the success of projects or other innovations depends, may, as Sardenberg suggests, involve recourse to the very notions that one might otherwise be at pains to avoid (see also Porter and Judd 1999). Yet it is still possible to find ways to work with gender that are congruent with transformational agendas. The chapters giving detailed accounts of how feminists have worked in different institutional sites contain some pointers as to how this can be done.

Anne-Marie Goetz and Joanne Sandler consider how bureaucracies respond to changing mandates through reflection on their work as gender equality advocates within UNIFEM, the UN fund for women. Their argument is a sobering one; that the problems facing UNIFEM in effecting change, and indeed in *even being listened to*, are a product of the fact that, 'When it comes to gender equality and women's rights, both the threat and the opportunities are low' (Goetz and Sandler, this volume, p. 166). Goetz and Sandler argue forcefully that, in accepting 'mainstreaming' as the way to address the challenges of women's rights, feminists have made an important error. They have underestimated both the ways in which bureaucratic logic disarms threats, and the fact that there is much more to being an advocate for gender equality than merely becoming a 'gender focal point'.

Feminists engaging with development in different parts of the world have very different experiences, which come from the ways in which their nations and regions are positioned, materially, politically and discursively. This is a point made particularly effectively by Amina Mama. Her chapter describes the difficult conditions in which feminists work on gender at the under-resourced universities of Africa. The largest department of gender/women's studies in the continent, the Gender and Women's Studies Department at Makerere University in Uganda, struggles with demands from competing constituencies; donors looking for training and quick-fix consultancies, the need to develop academic research, and the pressures of teaching over a thousand students.

In a powerful indictment of the development industry, Everjoice Win shows how difficult it is to exercise agency as an educated African feminist working as a policy advocate when the only African woman portrayed as having legitimate 'voice' is a grassroots woman, who is all too often resented in stereotypical ways as 'poor, powerless and pregnant'. Win's message is softened with humour but, together with that from Mama, these are telling accounts. They reveal the alienating and limited social, political and research identities available to African women in a world dominated

transformation? She suggests that many feminists have remained naïve about the nature of policy processes and institutional change.

Certainly, a linear approach to policy-making has tended to inform explicit attempts to change policies. Yet there is also a broad recognition, as Goetz (1997) pointed out, that what policy-makers and bureaucrats *want* to know will make for a very selective uptake of insights produced by feminist researchers or lobbied for by feminist advocates. In Standing's account, the slippage occurs when donors take a top-down approach to their partners and insist on gender mainstreaming, gender training and gender goals as part of the establishment of externally demanded gender commitments and gender credentials. Standing argues that gender interventions associated with externally imposed mainstreaming have become a stick with which to beat government bureaucrats.

Where 'gender' comes to be represented in the guise of approaches, tools, frameworks and mechanisms, these instruments become a substitute for deeper changes in objectives and outcomes. The fit between the worlds they describe and any actually existing relationships between women and men is often partial. This emerges in Prudence Woodford-Berger's powerful account of the ways in which particular readings of 'gender' come to form part of the representations of donor agencies, no matter how little their Eurocentric perspectives fit with the realities of women's and men's lived experiences and relationships in other cultural contexts. Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay and Ramya Subrahmanian describe the disjunctions and dissonances that have accompanied the mainstreaming agenda as it has taken shape. Mukhopadhyay asks how possible it is to enforce gender equity commitments if institutions do not have the promotion of gender rights or gender justice as their objective. Drawing on the instructive example of gender in education policy in Australia, Subrahmanian argues that it is necessary to get things right in many different political arenas to create the kind of synergy that will enable feminists working within government bureaucracies to be successful.

Gender and development has become another technical fix simultaneously with its professionalization and institutionalization. These processes of embedding loosen the link with feminism, at the same time as providing feminists with livelihoods, work and, indeed, identities. Commonplace aspects of feminists' experience of their working lives, such as insecure conditions of employment, dwindling research funding and barriers to promotion, all produce pressures for complicity with bureaucratic norms. These need to be acknowledged more openly. 'Complicity' may also arise from the understandable desire to get resources for progressive work and projects, when it is often essential to accept some of the objectives and

by development institutions and development discourses. Feeling fawned upon by the ways in which development actors and initiatives want them, and ignored because they are seen through distorting and rigid stereotypes, their accounts remind us of the power of labelling and the continuing importance of geo-political position.

'Gender' comes, with this, to be located in a broader terrain of contestation over the framing of development priorities and the politics of intervention by foreign governments and development agencies. This point is raised explicitly by Islah Jad, who explores the multilateral agencies' support for Arab women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) within the context of the US- and UK-backed war of words, weapons and resources unleashed against particular Arab nations. This funding is touted as part of a broader project of support to 'bottom-up' democracy, but is also a form of increasing dependency on the West, which Jad argues is changing the character of women's mobilization. She accepts that the proliferating Arab women's NGOs may have a role to play: in advocating Arab rights in the international arena, providing services for certain groups, and developing policy and information bases. Her research suggests, however, that many of these NGOs have limited objectives, low membership and unaccountable directors. She contrasts them with local women's social movements whose mobilization in pursuit of gender justice roots the impetus for change in forms of engagement that go beyond projectized interventions and offer the prospect for more meaningful and lasting change.

International feminism in troubling times

Gender and development originated in a particular era of feminist thinking that was embedded in the politics of the time. Revisiting feminist agendas and their relationship with development calls not only for taking stock of what has happened with gender in development, but also for a broader view that takes in the much-changed global setting. New global economic relations underpin several of the chapters. Maxine Molyneux's account of child-centred anti-poverty programmes in Brazil and Mexico explores the new politics of social policy in these changing times. In the programmes Molyneux describes, cash is paid to mothers on condition that they both ensure their children attend school and health clinics and fulfil other obligations, such as cleaning schools and clinics and promoting the programme. The net effect, she argues, may do little to trouble existing gender inequalities, serving to further entrench a division of labour that loads women with additional responsibilities.

Ruth Pearson's chapter places today's GAD debates about the relation between empowerment and work for women within an empirical con-

text in which 'Being exploited by capital is the fate of virtually everyone in today's global economy' (Pearson, this volume, p. 211). Arguing that increases in wages will not on their own make women either more powerful, Pearson urges minimum income, labour rights and proper social policy as key feminist expectations from states, which should resource the collective provision of services and recognize women's reproductive responsibilities. However, this is in a context where increased formalization of the labour market, in both North and South, makes such provision doubly problematic. This informal employment is not a transitional phenomenon; Pearson argues that there is considerable statistical, empirical and analytical evidence to indicate its increased consolidation, both driven and supported by patterns of economic globalization.

Rethinking feminist engagement with development is, it becomes clear from the analyses in this volume, not simply a matter of thinking anew what 'gender' is, and of finding new ways to engage with development institutions. There is a more urgent need to explore a feminist response to the dark international political climate of the new millennium that could both respect and bridge difference. Deniz Kandiyoti's reflections on 'democratization' in Afghanistan and Iraq illustrate just how narrow the political space for international feminist solidarity work might be and the need for highly nuanced and contextual responses to support national and local women activists. The geo-political context she identifies is that of the new politics of armed democratization and regime change within in-aptly named failed states – those that are war torn, lack governance and whose political economies are based on illegal trade in drugs, arms or high-value commodities.

Along with Jad, Kandiyoti questions the effects of the good governance, democratization and women's rights 'trinity' at the core of international development policy for the new US-dominated regimes. Emphasizing that prospects for Afghani and Iraqi women depend on the outcomes at the national level of struggles over constitutional and citizenship rights, she suggests that 'the promise of democratic consolidation is itself compromised in contexts where security remains the key issue. An expansion of women's formal rights cannot be expected to translate into actual gains in the absence of security and the rule of law' (Kandiyoti, this volume, p. 197).

Echoing themes raised in Bathiwa and Dhanraj's chapter, Molyneux also reflects on the troubling state of feminism in the context of a resurgence of ideologies, meta-narratives and the exercise of power from the right. She affirms a stronger sense of the value of feminisms in today's political climate, suggesting that excessive soul-searching about the value

of feminism as ideology, vision and form of organizing may be displacing vital energy. Her assessment is based on a balanced and cautious assessment of the 'data' on women's progress over the last half-century. Despite positive signs according to many standard indicators (education, access to political life, health), Molyneux notes important qualifications. Importantly, change in the private sphere remains slow, with the gender division of labour scarcely changing. Income gaps are still significant, and violence against women is apparently on the increase. As Goetz and Sandler note, though, the fact that up to 6 million women die of gender-related violence every three years still fails to generate the outrage that it deserves.

As Dzodzi Tsikata points out, when economic decisions are increasingly taken outside the effective control of the nation-state, it may be a strategic error to identify the state as the primary site of accountability that can deliver on rights. Tsikata's chapter records her profound misgivings concerning the adoption of rights language by UN agencies and international donors and lenders. She remarks on two coincidences: first, that the requirement by international agents that Southern governments guarantee more rights for their citizens coincides with their promotion of economic policies which restrict access to basic services; and second, that these requirements are being made at the same time as US and UK governments have denied their responsibility to international law to pursue the so-called 'war on terror' and are eroding their own citizens' civil and political rights and some women's rights.

Without understating the importance of rights and rights talk for feminists, Tsikata suggests that there is little reason to believe that top-down rights approaches will be any more likely to deliver gender justice than previous top-down approaches, especially given the great difficulty the majority of women have in accessing any forms of justice at all. A particularly important variable here is what scope for sovereign decisions is left after the effects of 'democratization' enforced by either arms or heavy aid dependency.

For others, however, rights-based approaches represent a considerable advance. As Mukhopadhyay argues, talking about rights privileges women's identities as *citizens*, rather than simply as mothers, wives and daughters (Lister 2003; Meer with Sever 2003). The language of rights lays claim to public space for women. After all, as Molyneux reminds us, women's movements in a number of continents have used the instruments of human rights as a basis for their struggles, countering a 'thin' utilitarian version of rights with a wider ethic of socio-economic justice to provide a new normative and analytic framework for fighting discrimination and injustice. For Win, rights talk has further implications: it requires a critical shift that

'would see us moving beyond our favourite African woman, to strategic engagements with those other women who not only need support, but who can be strategic allies and leaders in development' (Win, this volume, p. 85).

What would it take to make the kind of 'strategic engagements' that Everjoyce Win calls for possible? Perhaps the most pressing task for feminist engagement with development in these troubling times, Kandiotti reflects, is that of finding an 'appropriate politics of solidarity' (this volume, p. 192). Feminist engagement with development, we suggest here, has required the embrace of simplifications, in order to make strategic alliances and some inroads in the intensely political arena of policy-making. Reflecting years of effort to achieve gender justice and get new ways of working taken on by development agencies, contributors advance a diversity of critiques of how such simplified gender ideas have been understood and policies implemented, and provide different understandings of the way in which institutions influence outcomes, as well as different views of the pitfalls and compromises of political engagement. As Woodford-Berger argues, alliances are always made at some cost, because they are made with those who share some, but not all, political goals; and while many can agree on the need for such alliances, it is much more difficult to agree on the point at which compromise becomes defeat.

When do 'some costs' become costs that are just too great? Molyneux's chapter points to several commentaries that suggest that the transformative agenda has been 'neutralized where not excised', not because of technification or bureaucratization, but from 'a theoretical position that sees integration into or even negotiation with governments and international institutions as, *in itself*, an abandonment of the broader, "critical" and, at least implicitly, revolutionary goals of much second-wave feminism' (Molyneux, this volume, pp. 232-3). This book attempts to put clear water between GAD, as a particular form of gender and development practice and rhetoric, and the many different kinds of practices and discourses which make up the multiple field of feminist practice in gender and development. We argue that this is an essential move to repoliticize radical, feminist engagement with development.

The utility of certain ways of thinking about women's disadvantage - and the associated gender myths, feminist fables and stylized facts that have been used in different institutional and discursive contexts to promote or defend them - has become much clearer through the mixed successes and failures of feminisms in the last twenty years. Inevitably, the history of that period is also a history of debates, disputes and dialogues within feminism and between feminists. The struggle for interpretive power is not simply

a struggle *against* and a struggle *for*, it is also a struggle *within*. By this we mean that the myths, stories and fables are also part of the discursive work feminists do to make sense of the world. Discourses are not just tactical, but are powerful forms of interpretation for ourselves as well as others. They enable feminists to act. The final lesson of this collection is that these feminist discourses and feminist actions are above all diverse, differentiated and themselves sites of contestation. We have shifted and changed our discourse and analysis in response to the histories of our own engagements with development and with each other and in plural sites and changing times. While we have learnt much from the experience of acting tactically in different discursive and policy arenas, we have also learned from trying to make sense of our own political and personal commitments, not only in the contested arenas of development institutions but also in the contested arenas of multiple and diverse feminisms. Forging appropriate forms of solidarity across difference has never been more important than in the precarious geo-political realities of today's world.

The meaning of 'gender' and the content of gender analysis and political and policy objectives *must* remain contested within feminism, at the same time that they *will* continue to be particular objects of contestation when applied and advocated within bureaucracies. Working within them, feminists are constantly frustrated when they come up against barriers to any exercise of power. The links that can be made with other feminists, locally, nationally and internationally, become vitally important. Advances in technology mean new forms of connectedness, from fast and independent communication with local political actors, to access to knowledge about movements and practices around the globe. The difference this has made for feminist engagement, from within and outside development institutions, is significant. For these strategic engagements to flourish, new forms of partnership are needed that are sensitive to the differences that have divided us and the dangers of the polarities that the very notion of development constructs. It is through finding new ways of working with difference, expanding the possibilities for building appropriate forms of solidarity to create new alliances for influence and action that bridge old divides, that feminist engagement with development can begin to meet some of the formidable challenges that we all now face.

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2 | Gender myths that instrumentalize women: a view from the Indian front line

SRILATHA BATLIWALA AND DEEPA DHANRAJ

Religious fundamentalism and neo-liberal economic reforms are converting poor grassroots women in India into both agents and instruments in a process of their own disempowerment. Though these forces are not necessarily acting in concert, they are none the less reconstructing both gender and other social power relations. While we have analysed this dynamic elsewhere (Dhanraj et al. 2002), in this chapter we examine certain gender myths¹ – or rather, myth complexes – that are being used to convert poor women into instruments of both neo-liberal and fundamentalist agendas in India. The operation of these myths is analysed in the context of a government-initiated rural poverty alleviation programme in southern India and the constitutionally-mandated reservation of seats for women in *panchayats* (local elected councils).

At the outset, we wish to emphasize that we do not offer this critical analysis as academic observers, or deny our own participation in these processes. Indeed, the choice of examples is guided, at least partly, by our own involvement, and that of many close colleagues. We have both been complicit, through our past roles in grassroots activism, feminist training and advocacy, in promoting various gender myths and feminist fables that we have only recently begun to recognize as such. Thus, it is not our intention to point fingers or place blame. This analysis has emerged from critical examination of our own as well as others' past assumptions and interventions. We believe this is an historic moment when all feminists – whether activists, policy advocates or researchers – must interrogate past assumptions and strategies, or risk becoming completely marginalized and/or instrumentalized by the forces of resurgent patriarchy, religious fundamentalism and unregulated neo-liberalism.

Gender myth complex I

Giving poor women access to economic resources – such as credit – leads to their overall empowerment This myth arose out of successful feminist efforts to shift economic resources into women's hands, gain recognition for women's roles in household economies and support women's leadership in local development. Feminist efforts were rooted in empirical

data and an understanding that economic power and access to productive resources would weaken traditional gender and social roles and empower poor women to demand further change. But as these strategies began to demonstrate the wisdom of investing in women's entrepreneurship, they were quickly converted into a new development mantra: poor women became a sound economic and political investment. At the international level, the World Bank, USAID, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and other bilateral and private donors have embraced and enthusiastically promoted the new formula. At the national level, both central and state governments and rural banks have begun actively to promote self-help groups and women's savings and credit programmes through schemes such as the Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA), the Indira Mahila Yojana and Swayamsidha. The creation of special directors for micro-credit within many provincial DWCRAs tells its own story.

The conceptual ledgermain achieved here is neatly summed up by Mary John. She observes that a nationwide study like Shramshakti (National Commission on Self-Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector 1988) recorded an enormous amount of evidence of the incredible work burdens stoically borne by poor self-employed and informal-sector working women in India; but in the hands of neo-liberal advocates, 'these findings are no longer arguments about *exploitation* so much as proofs of *efficiency*' (John 2004: 247, emphasis in original). Poor women were gradually seen as harder working, easier to mobilize, more honest and better credit risks. They would selflessly work for the betterment of their entire families and communities, and were thus great poverty alleviation agents. Politically, they were soon imagined as loyal voters and excellent anti-corruption vigilantes. Obviously, many of these stereotypes were basically true. But the myth-making arose when qualities born out of women's struggle for survival were turned to political and economic ends, rather than the feminist commitment to their empowerment.

In India, one of the most high-profile propagators of this myth was the former Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh state, Chandrababu Naidu. His affinity for hi-tech corporate management systems had earned him the epithet 'The CEO of Andhra Pradesh'. From 1999, his regime launched an economic restructuring project, and Naidu decided to use rural women as key instruments in his political strategy for staying in power. The restructuring project included a major poverty alleviation component to appease the mass of poorer rural voters, who were unlikely to benefit from the deregulation, improved investment incentives and removal of bureaucratic hurdles that facilitated the urban affluent classes. Naidu's *modus operandi* was to create government-owned NGOs (amusingly called 'GONGOs' in some

quarters), administered by elite Indian civil servants. Naidu made it clear to both his party cadres and government functionaries that implementation of the anti-poverty programme would be *solely* through grassroots women's groups. In the Indian *realpolitik*, this signalled that the only political constituency he was interested in building was women, and he conflated women with 'poor', 'rural' and 'community'.

Thus it was that the largest poverty alleviation programme in the state focused entirely on rural women: the World Bank-funded District Poverty Initiatives Project (DPIP), with a budget of 26,000 million Indian rupees (US \$533 million; UK £333 million) in twenty districts of the state. Headed by hand-picked officers of the elite Indian Administrative Service, the project began with the identification of all formations of women at the village level (self-help groups, *Mahila Mandals*, *Bhajan Mandalis*).² Simultaneously, NGOs were asked to conduct training for the women's groups in gender issues, income-generation activities, and financial skills such as accounting and bookkeeping.

Although the project was initially designed to enable the women's groups to determine and create local projects based on their own priorities (including building community assets such as drinking water pumps), it was rapidly reduced to distributing loans to individual women for income-generating activities. Very poor women soon fell through the net because they could not pay the weekly contribution required to retain membership of the self-help group. In a short while, only women with some stable earning capacity remained in the groups. The project also tried to improve women's access to and relations with markets. For instance, women who gathered and sold tamarind were often being swindled by middlemen who drove down purchase rates and used falsified weights and scales. An internet-based system was therefore introduced to check market rates on a daily basis, in order to give women more bargaining power. But many women could not exercise that power since they were heavily indebted to the buyers. The self-help group was simply not a powerful enough structure from which to challenge weights and measures or purchase prices, as a cooperative or trade union might have been – particularly since rights awareness and strengthening the capacity for collective struggle were not part of the organizing strategy for such groups.

The project's community organizers also began to press women to take multiple production loans; and the number of hours they were working increased dramatically – there was no other way to keep pace with their mounting debt. Older daughters had to pick up the slack by leaving school in order to perform the domestic subsistence tasks their mothers could no longer do. But if one converted their profits from all these enterprises into

wages, not one of them was netting an income above the minimum daily wage. At a workshop on 'Rethinking Micro-Credit', held at the recent World Social Forum in Bombay, rural women from different parts of the country spoke passionately about their multiple debt burdens and how repayment had increased their workloads to inhumane levels. Yet, such projects continually cite these women as models of entrepreneurship – not surprising since the only indicator they use is monthly cash turnover. Meanwhile, men in project villages became sullen and resentful. Women handling so much money had become a source of humiliation; they neither understood nor acknowledged the women's onerous workload, or the debt trap. Thus, apart from being overworked and anxious about mounting interest and repayments, women had to deal with this growing hostility (and possibly violence) from men.

Far more problematic, however, was the assumption behind the project's strategy: that once money was handed over to women in the form of loans, they were responsible for improving their lot, and the state's role had ended. At the same time, this munificence would earn the ruling party rural women's allegiance, and secure its political future. The women's political agency has been reduced to the privilege of being agents, consumers and beneficiaries of state-controlled credit and micro-enterprise programmes, with no other resources for improving the condition of their daily lives. There are no investments, for example, in providing cooking fuel, water close to the home, or daycare for younger children, so that older daughters can go to school. Women are so preoccupied with earning income to repay loans that they have little time or energy to participate in other public affairs, or organize to address other issues.

Ironically, this is the same region of India that once saw massive participation by poor women in large-scale political movements (such as the armed struggle in Telengana, see Sanghatana 1989; Sen 2000: 24) for land, for minimum wages, in protests against the rise in prices of basic commodities, and against the sale of country liquor that beggared families while filling state coffers with revenue. How ironic that the women of this same region were converted into passive instruments of the regime's single-point anti-poverty programme, with little or no capacity to negotiate for a different agenda or approach.

It is no wonder, then, that Naidu's Telugu Desam party suffered a humiliating rout in the May 2004 state elections in Andhra Pradesh. Electoral data showed that both men and women from rural areas had voted almost *en masse* against his party, demonstrating a vehement rejection of his political strategy and policies. Clearly, the poor women of the region had reclaimed their political agency through the ballot box. Since then, the

DPIP continues to function, but in a very low-key way. The message sent by women (and men) has not been lost on other political parties, including Naidu's successors.

This kind of narrow approach is not unusual in credit-focused strategies. A decade ago, staff of BRAC, a Bangladeshi NGO famous for its very large-scale women-focused poverty alleviation programme, acknowledged the same in a review of the gender impact of their work:

The evidence suggested that participation in BRAC's programs had strengthened women's economic roles and, to some extent, increased women's empowerment measured in terms of mobility, economic security, legal awareness, decision making and freedom from violence within the family. However, widely acknowledged among BRAC staff was the fact that the imperatives of credit delivery were eclipsing the objectives of social change. (Rao et al. 1999: 43)

Programmes to alleviate poverty are obviously rooted in ideological frameworks. The DPIP and the oppressive manner in which it was implemented demonstrate the heavy influence of the neo-liberal paradigm. It ensured that people (for which read women) participated in their economic upliftment in the most apolitical and disempowering way imaginable. As Lucy Taylor argues, the neo-liberal agenda requires the state to keep those who have not forgotten their politicised past ... busy and out of harm's way, distracted from wider political considerations and submerged within the minutiae of issues in their own backyard' (1996: 785).

The neo-liberal agenda, Taylor suggests, requires citizens to accept the reformed identity of the state as facilitator, not key agent, of social and individual betterment. It also demands the twin identities of citizen and individual – i.e. the active, socially responsible citizen and the active, socially responsible individual who is in charge of her own destiny. The neo-liberal rules for the new woman citizen, as evidenced in the Andhra Pradesh project, were quite clear: improve your household's economic condition, participate in local community development (if you have the time), help build and run local (apolitical) institutions like the self-help group; by then, you should have no political or physical energy left to challenge this paradigm. These rules sustain a sort of depoliticized activism at the local level – one that inherently does not build upward momentum. It is a matter for celebration that the women of Andhra Pradesh refused to be so diminished and instrumentalized.

Readers may wonder why we are so concerned about this attempt at depoliticizing poor women. Isn't it a good thing if poor women gain greater access to productive resources? The answer lies a few hundred kilometres

away. It is the experience of Gujarat state, with some of the oldest and largest networks of women's credit and income-generation groups, that challenges such complaisance. It is here that totalitarian, fundamentalist, anti-poor ideologies and their Hindu cadres, largely undisturbed and unchallenged, have waged their violent politics at the grassroots level, culminating in the horrifying and organized carnage against the Muslim minority (the worst since the partition of India in 1947, with Muslim women being particularly targeted) of early 2002.

Despite extensive grassroots-level women's economic empowerment programmes, mostly operated by NGOs who claimed to promote a tolerant, unifying value system, neither Muslim nor Hindu members of these networks seem to have been aware of the approaching carnage, or brought up for discussion the vicious hate campaigns that had been afoot for at least a year before the pogroms (Khan 2002). In the very neighbourhoods in which these women lived, the aggressively fundamentalist Vishwa Hindu Parishad had been actively mobilizing other women into *Durga Vahinis* (women's militias), and providing arms training (to defend themselves against the insatiable sexual appetite of minority men). It seems incredible that none of this came to the attention of women in the micro-enterprise or self-employed groups that dot the state, or to the NGOs who organize them. Was this because, as in the BRAC case, they were so narrowly absorbed in their economic activities that they never sensed the political winds blowing through their very villages and neighbourhoods? Or was it because the discussion of larger politics was never included on weekly or monthly women's group meeting agendas?

What we are seeing is a troubling picture. On the one hand, the state and its international allies are promoting not just narrowly-conceived self-help programmes for poor rural and urban women, but a model of citizenship and participation that is highly instrumentalist, dissipating women's political agency. On the other, fundamentalist organizations and political parties are actively mobilizing women of all classes to advance their agendas. It is frightening indeed to contemplate the fact that, in India, the only force currently interested in empowering poor women as political actors is the Hindu fundamentalist movement.

Gender myth complex II

If women gain access to political power, they will opt for politics and policies that promote social and gender equality, peace and sustainable development. Thus, quotas or other methods of ensuring high proportions of women in elected bodies will transform these institutions. Women will alter the character of political culture and the practice of public power. It

is not hard to understand how this fable came into being (at some time in the 1970s, we think). Male domination of public power and politics had led to the destruction of life, humanity and the earth itself. Even in so-called 'liberal democracies', the notion of democracy itself had been reduced, as the late Claude Ake pointed out, to a minimalist version, where the main privilege enjoyed by citizens is that of some protection from state power (Ake 1996). As feminists from the North and South began to expand and deepen their understanding of the roots of gender discrimination, they argued that women's access to power and decision-making authority in the public realm was as critical to achieving gender equality as changing power relations in the private sphere of households (UN Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Strategic Objectives G.1 and G.2). Looking back, and again having been part of this process, we believe there were several implicit and explicit assumptions underlying this analysis, including:

- that the transformation of both the *position* and *condition* of women (Young 1988) – i.e. meeting both their practical and strategic needs – could only be achieved and sustained in macro terms through political change (facilitating policies, legislation and the protection and enforcement of women's rights)
- that women representatives in local, national and global political bodies would advance the cause of gender equality and women's rights and sustain the momentum for such change over time
- that a critical mass of women in political institutions would also initiate policies of development and international relations that would advance social and economic justice and peace, by fostering and promoting non-violent conflict resolution, sustainable and socially just development, access to and protection of the full body of human rights, and placing people and the environment above profits
- that a critical mass of women in political institutions would transform the very *nature of power* and the *practice of politics* through values of cooperation and collaboration, holding power in trusteeship (power on behalf of, not over) and acting with greater transparency, honesty and public accountability; in other words, there was a belief that women would *play politics* differently and *exercise power* accountably.

With the wisdom of hindsight, we can see how these assumptions reflected our then limited understanding of citizenship, and of how citizenship was constructed in not just gendered ways, but through other categories of social power. We assumed that citizenship was a fixed and bounded terrain, rather than that 'like power relations, citizenship rights are not fixed, but are objects of struggle to be defended, reinterpreted and extended' (Meer

with Sever 2004: 2). We believed that once women had access to political power, they would act for greater justice and equity.

The push for getting women into politics became strong and visible in many parts of the developed and developing world by the mid-1970s. By the 1990s, several European countries, the USA, and developing countries such as India, the Philippines, South Africa, Uganda, Brazil, Chile, Mexico and many others had large numbers of women in their political parties and governing institutions at various levels. In some contexts – notably India and South Africa – ‘pull’ factors such as quota systems were used; in others, such as the USA and some parts of Western Europe, ‘push’ strategies (mainly pressure from women’s movements) worked effectively to increase the number of women elected as representatives. Over time, feminist struggles to promote women’s greater representation and participation in politics were picked up and encapsulated into modules and templates by international donor agencies and other institutions that began to promote the new ‘good governance’ agenda, particularly in the South.

It would be a grave disservice to thousands of courageous women to say that all the assumptions about their impact on public policy, politics and power have been belied. But the experience of the last two decades forces us to confront some troubling realities and recast our vision for transformation through political power. The most worrying phenomenon at the present time is that the expanding space for women in politics has been seized far more effectively by right-wing, conservative and fundamentalist parties and agendas. In the USA, for instance, while the Democrats boasted of having fielded the largest number of women candidates for both Congress and Senate, Republicans are rapidly closing the gap. Although American women have been more progressive voters (the ‘gender gap’ in US parlance), tending to vote for more liberal and progressive candidates and parties, this trend is gradually shifting. Christian fundamentalist groups, with their close affiliation to conservative political agendas, have successfully mobilized poor and middle-class grassroots American women voters in the Bible-belt and ‘middle America’, not the progressive movements or parties. In the 2004 US elections, in fact, fewer women voted for progressive John Kerry than had voted for Al Gore in the 2000 election. Conservative forces have polarized women and the general public by reshaping issues such as abortion rights, and focusing on the ‘average’ grassroots women the progressives have neglected or taken for granted.³

In South Asia, the mass mobilization of women by religious fundamentalists, including the fielding of women political candidates, is nothing short of frightening. In India, the extremist Vishwa Hindu Parishad has

launched special training camps for young Hindu women to act as ‘Pro-tectors of the Faith’, including training in the use of swords and other weapons. Muslim fundamentalists in neighbouring Pakistan and Bangladesh use very similar rhetoric to muster women’s support. The Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka had rallied Tamil women to their cause and even constructed an image of the ‘*Pudumai Peni*’ or ‘new woman’, who would raise militant children and selflessly dedicate them to fight for the cause.

Let’s look more closely at the Indian case to see how it challenges this gender myth. Fundamentalist organizing of women first became evident in the late 1980s when the media flashed images of thousands of Hindu women across the country joining the marches and the symbolic carrying of construction material to the Babri Masjid. This was the ancient mosque that was eventually destroyed by Hindu fundamentalist mobs in 1992, purportedly to rebuild the Ram temple that was allegedly destroyed when the mosque was built. The images of women’s participation became more aggressive during the anti-Muslim riots in Bombay in 1993: hundreds of Hindu women made petrol bombs that their men then hurled on Muslim shanties. The pinnacle, however, was reached before, during and after the anti-Muslim pogroms in Gujarat state in early 2002, when thousands of Hindu women, both poor and middle class, actively supported the attackers, joined in the looting of Muslim shops, and marched in massive numbers in the political rallies and processions that were held in support of the state’s fundamentalist regime. Before the 2004 Indian general elections, there were four women Chief Ministers of various Indian state governments, the highest number since Independence – and *all* of them were members of the ruling Hindu nationalist party, or its close allies.

To dismiss these phenomena simply as a result of false consciousness, or the instrumentalization of passive women by shrewd and sinister leaders, is a grave mistake. The defeat of the Hindu nationalist regime in the 2004 general elections was not by a wide margin, and should not cause complacency. Seen from close up, women’s participation in these movements is far from passive or blind, but very much through their active agency. As we have argued elsewhere (Dhanraj et al. 2002), the fact is that fundamentalist movements have created a genuine *political space and role* for women. They have given them the possibility of being real political actors, an active sense of being architects of a momentous social and political project. Regrettably, this is something which none of the so-called ‘progressive’ forces has done on the same scale or with the same deadly sense of purpose – neither other political parties, nor the labour movement, nor radical social movements (including feminist women’s movements). It is unfortunate but true that, currently, Hindu fundamentalists are the

most effective and deliberate in deploying mass mobilization strategies, and have the most conscious programme of women's mobilization within them. And progressives, rather than waking up to this fact, continue to instrumentalize women as convenient, passive tools whenever a mass protest or event requires their presence!

Meanwhile, India boasts of over one million elected women in its village and town councils, about a quarter of whom are from the poorest communities. This is thanks to the passing of the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India – in which, incidentally, Indian feminists had little role. The amendment made it mandatory for 33 per cent of all positions in local councils to be reserved for women. There were also reservations for Dalit (scheduled/untouchable caste) and tribal people. This was brought about by well-intentioned Gandhian advocates and bureaucrats who envisaged a form of local governance and decentralization that would transform rural India, a social revolution that could redress centuries of marginalization for both Dalits and women, orchestrated by the state.

The discourse on the impact of this unprecedented structural change, the largest-scale experiment of its kind anywhere in the world, is banal at best. It is also quite polarized, between gloomy stories of women representatives' subordination, cooption or subversion on the one side, and cheering protagonists on the other, who dismiss criticism or any analysis that is less than laudatory. Both positions are often derived from anecdotal evidence and ideological positions, rather than a serious inquiry into what is happening on the ground. There are, of course, some large-scale and highly quantitative studies, but these fail to capture many of the complexities and nuances of the reality. They tell us little about what this change has meant for elected women and men from poor castes and communities, how they are negotiating their new roles, or about the nature of grassroots political culture and dynamics.

What we have witnessed on the ground – as documented in Dhanraj's film *Taking Office* – is a complex picture, where both patriarchal and feudal/semi-feudal gender and social power relations are being simultaneously challenged, changed, accommodated and modified. A landless Dalit woman labourer is elected to and becomes the chairperson of a village council in which her upper-caste landlord (or his wife) is also an elected member. Dalit, tribal, other oppressed caste and minority women and men elected representatives have to negotiate a vast and dangerous minefield of religion, class and caste politics, patronage networks and affiliations, while the social and economic bases of their lives outside the *panchayat* remain unchanged. We know of elected women who have been placed under virtual house arrest for attempting to challenge budget allocations;

they have been beaten up, threatened, bribed and cajoled into supporting dominant caste or class agendas in the councils.

On the other hand, we know many hundreds of women who have triumphed amazingly over these odds and managed to deliver needed resources to their constituency. Indeed, most of the elected women with whom we have interacted are far from passive puppets. They show remarkable resilience in repeatedly trying to exercise their agency, to fulfil their responsibilities, to flex their political muscles, or simply to function autonomously. The problem, we find, is that since most women have entered these institutions without any kind of political or ideological training, skills or experience – they have not been members of a political party or cadre, for example, or have only the limited apolitical experience of their participation in a village self-help group – they are forced to learn and acquire these skills in the most arduous ways and at great cost. We have seen women devote all their time and energy simply to learn how to steer through the maze. But far too many fall victim to their inexperience and the pressure to become corrupt or expedient.

A major handicap is that these women struggle in the absence of any alternative models of power. As Anne-Marie Goetz (2003: 3, 5-6) points out, their images of leadership and experience of the exercise of power are gained within the family/household, from the feudal and caste-based social and economic structures they live in, and the few state and non-state institutions they have interacted with in their lives: schools, local government officers, and maybe rural NGOs and development organizations. None of these is exactly a model of alternative politics, much less an innovative practitioner of power. Feminist activists have attempted to create these alternatives in a few locations – but more often, women's groups are quick to stigmatize these elected leaders for becoming coopted or corrupted by the dominant political culture, rather than supporting them to create an alternative. Apart from celebrated examples – Indira Gandhi, Benazir Bhutto, Margaret Thatcher, Jayalalitha – there are growing numbers of 'Women with Moustaches', as Latin American feminists have called them, in politics at all levels today: hard-nosed, tough, aggressive and sometimes corrupt women politicians. We believe it is much too simplistic to dismiss this as the result of male consciousness masquerading in female bodies. Nevertheless, in a country like India, there are very few successful elected women to serve as mentors or models.

Conclusion

The above analysis of the operation of two major gender myths seems to suggest that a larger project is at work in India – one that is constructing

and then utilizing women as particular types of social, economic and political citizens.

On the economic front, the myth of women as the most effective anti-poverty agents and the mass-scale creation of women's self-help groups seems to be nurturing a form of depoliticized collective action that is completely non-threatening to the power structure and political order. These groups, forced to focus all their energies on their productive activities, their loan repayments and the survival of their collective, seem to be rendered oblivious to the ideological/political mobilizations going on under their very noses. Lucy Taylor's analysis of the reinterpretation of civil society and citizenship in Chile in the dictatorship and post-dictatorship years, where the 'twin strategies of incorporation and marginalization' (1996: 780) were used, demonstrates not only how self-help groups were the policy instruments of this agenda, but that this strategy is not unique to India.

We are not suggesting that economic empowerment programmes for women are either disempowering or unmitigated failures. The successes of micro-credit for women are well documented (see ILO 1998) and there is little purpose in raising yet another paean to them here. Our purpose, rather, is to highlight the manner in which such interventions are being designed and delivered in increasingly disempowering ways, instrumentalizing poor women, and being distorted to serve other agendas.

On the political front, far from women transforming politics, evidence of the reverse is mounting. Particularly disturbing is the way in which fundamentalist parties have fostered women's political participation to advance their agenda. At the grassroots level, we are witnessing both this kind of instrumentalization and the marginalization of women elected representatives in multiple ways, in a manner very similar to what is happening in other parts of the world (Goetz and Hassim 2003). As one analysis puts it, 'the system of representation that gives women "authority" through holding an elective post has not transformed into actual "power"' (Vijayalakshmi and Chandrasekhar 2001).

What is clear, however, is that the myths regarding women's capacity to transform both politics and public power have been central to all these processes. We clearly underestimated the power of existing modes of power and politics to corrupt, coopt, or marginalize women, or how it would compel or manipulate them to compromise their goals for narrow party interests. And we failed to address the possibility that women would be proponents of reactionary, sexist, racist, elitist or fundamentalist ideologies.

Thus, if we combine the mobilizations of women by the fundamentalist agenda, the depoliticized forms of collective action promoted by state-

sponsored micro-credit programmes, and the subversion of the agency of elected women in *panchayats*, what emerges is a deeply problematic and bounded construct of women's citizenship – a construct that must be seriously analysed, challenged and reframed.

But this is also a serious learning moment for feminists. We are clearly at an historic juncture where the marginalization of feminist critiques and corporatization of feminist strategies forces us to recast our analyses and approaches. This cannot be achieved without looking closely at what is happening to women on the ground. Using the lens of gender myths helps us unearth the deeper, more fundamental processes of restructuring power and politics that are afoot – the ways in which resurgent patriarchy, neo-liberal economics and fundamentalism are combining to construct a new kind of female citizen. The challenge now is to move towards more nuanced and contextualized approaches that can, it is hoped, begin to confront and contain these formidable forces.

Notes

1. For the purpose of this chapter, we are treating gender myths as the 'feminist insights [that] become mythologised as they become development orthodoxy', and feminist fables as assumptions and analyses that informed strategies advanced by feminists themselves. Some of the most problematic of today's gender myths are not single ideas but a web of interlinking beliefs and views.
2. These are women's clubs and the equivalent of Western choral societies.
3. It was interesting to note, for example, that African American women were the single largest constituency opposed to the war on Iraq, yet have never been significantly mobilized by any progressive movement in the USA after the civil rights era.

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3 | Dangerous equations? How female-headed households became the poorest of the poor: causes, consequences and cautions

SYLVIA CHANT

The idea that women bear a disproportionate and growing burden of poverty at a global scale, often encapsulated in the concept of a 'feminization of poverty', has become a virtual orthodoxy in recent decades, despite the dearth of reliable data on poverty, let alone its gender dimensions (Moghadam 1997). Yet this has not dissuaded a large segment of the development community, including international agencies, from asserting that 60-70 per cent of the world's poor are female, and that tendencies to greater poverty among women are deepening. In broader work on poverty, and especially in policy circles, the poverty of female-headed households has effectively become a proxy for women's poverty, if not poverty in general, a set of 'dangerous equations' which have been increasingly challenged (Chant 1997, 2003; Jackson 1996; Kabeer 1996).

The fact that female-headed households are a visible and readily identifiable group in income poverty statistics' (Kabear 1996: 14) provides fuel for a range of political agendas. In one respect, it serves neo-liberal enthusiasm for efficiency-driven targeting of poverty reduction measures to 'exceptionally' disaffected parties. In another vein, highlighting the disadvantage of female-headed households has also catered to Gender and Development (GAD) interests by providing an apparently robust tactical peg on which to hang justification for allocating resources to women (Chant 2003; Jackson 1996).

This chapter explores some of the tensions emanating from growing equivocation over the links between female household headship and poverty. Setting out the principal reasons why women-headed households have traditionally been regarded (and portrayed) as the 'poorest of the poor', the chapter examines evidence that has been used to support or challenge this orthodoxy. It then proceeds to focus on social and policy implications, from the problems of targeting to the need to maintain high visibility of gender in the face of shrinking resources for development and/or social assistance. The chapter concludes with reflection on the potential outcomes of surrendering a conventional wisdom that has undoubtedly helped to harness resources for women.

How women-headed households became the 'poorest of the poor'

Key rationales In the last ten to fifteen years, pronouncements about women-headed households being the 'poorest of the poor' have proliferated in writings on gender (see Chant 2003 for examples). Often made without direct reference to empirical data, the assumption in such statements that women-headed households face an above-average risk of poverty is by no means groundless. Indeed, there are persuasive reasons why we might expect a group disadvantaged by their gender to be further disadvantaged by allegedly 'incomplete' or 'under-resourced' household arrangements. This is especially so, given the assumption that female household headship is prone to arise in situations of economic privation and insecurity.

The factors responsible for the 'feminization of poverty' have been linked with gender disparities in rights, entitlements and capabilities, the gender-differentiated impacts of neo-liberal restructuring, the informalization and feminization of labour, and the erosion of kin-based support networks through migration, conflict and so on. However, a primary tenet has been the mounting incidence of female household headship, and in some circles the 'culture of single motherhood' has been designated the 'New Poverty Paradigm' (Thomas 1994). The links so frequently drawn between the 'feminization of poverty' and household headship derive from the idea that women-headed households constitute a disproportionate number of the poor, and that they experience greater extremes of poverty than male-headed units. An additional element, commonly referred to as an 'intergenerational transmission of disadvantage', is that the privation of female household heads is passed on to their children (Chant 1997), purportedly because female heads cannot 'properly support their families or ensure their well-being' (Mehra et al. 2000: 7).

Moghadam's (1997) extensive review of the 'feminization of poverty' identifies three main reasons which, *prima facie*, are likely to make women poorer than men. These are, first, women's poverty-inducing disadvantage in respect of entitlements and capabilities; second, their heavier work burdens and lower earnings; and, third, constraints on socio-economic mobility due to cultural, legal and labour market barriers. Lone mother units are often assumed to be worse off than two-parent households because in lacking a 'breadwinning' partner they are not only deprived of an adult male's earnings, but have relatively more dependants to support. On the one hand, female heads are conjectured to have less time and energy to conserve resources, such as by shopping around for the cheapest foodstuffs. On the other, women's 'reproduction tax' (Palmer 1992) cuts heavily into economic productivity, with lone mothers often confined to

part-time, flexible and/or home-based occupations. This is compounded by women's disadvantage in respect of education and training, their lower average earnings, gender discrimination in the workplace, and the fact that social and labour policies rarely provide more than minimal support for parenting.

In most parts of the South, there is little or no compensation for earnings shortfalls through 'transfer payments' from external parties such as the state, or 'absent fathers'. As Bibars notes in relation to non-contributory poverty alleviation programmes in Egypt: 'The state has not provided women with an institutional alternative to the male provider' (Bibars 2001: 86). While in many places legislation governing maintenance payments has now extended to cover children born to couples in consensual unions, levels of 'paternal responsibility' are notoriously low and men are seldom penalized for non-compliance (Budowski and Rosero-Bixby 2003; Chant 2003). Men may be unable, but also unwilling, to pay. In Costa Rica, for example, men tend to regard 'family' as applying only to women and children with whom they are currently involved, and distance themselves from offspring of previous relationships (Chant 1997).

Another reason offered to account for their poverty is that female heads have smaller social networks, because they lack ties with ex-partners' relatives, or because they 'keep themselves to themselves' in the face of hostility or mistrust on the part of their own family networks or others in their communities. Indeed, lone mothers may deliberately distance themselves from kin as a means of deflecting the 'shame' or 'dishonour' attached to out-of-wedlock birth and/or marriage failure, not to mention, in some instances, stigmatized types of employment such as sex work. Some female heads are unable to spare time to actively cultivate social links and/or may eschew seeking help from others because they cannot reciprocate (*ibid.*). Yet, as discussed in more detail later, we cannot necessarily assume that women heads lack transfers from external parties, that women's individual disadvantage maps directly on to the households they head, or that living with men automatically mitigates women's risks of poverty.

Challenges to the construction of women-headed households as the 'poorest of the poor'

Challenges to 'poorest of the poor' stereotyping have gathered increasing momentum on a number of grounds.

Lack of fit' with quantitative data There are actually very few 'hard data' – even on the basis of aggregate household incomes – that reveal consistent links between female household headship and poverty. More

critically, perhaps, there does not appear to be any notable relationship between trends in poverty and in the incidence of female headship over time. Although in some countries, such as Costa Rica, poverty among women heads is on the rise, Arriagada asserts for Latin America as a whole that: 'the majority of households with a female head are not poor and are those which have increased most in recent decades' (Arriagada 1998: 91). Research in this and other regions also indicates that children in female-headed households can actually be better off than their counterparts in male-headed units (see Chant 2003 for discussion and references).

Such findings clearly need to be balanced against research indicating that women-headed households are likely to be poorer than male-headed units. One of the most ambitious comparative reviews to date, based on over sixty studies from Latin America, Africa and Asia, concluded that in two-thirds of cases, households headed by women were poorer than those headed by men (Buvinic and Gupta 1997). Nevertheless, given conflicting and often tenuous evidence for any systematic relationship between female household headship and poverty, blanket generalizations are unhelpful. In fact, given widespread economic inequalities between women and men, it is perhaps more important to ask how substantial numbers of female heads succeed in *evading* the status of 'poorest of the poor'.

Heterogeneity of female-headed households That links between female household headship and poverty may not be as definitive as suggested by 'feminization of poverty' orthodoxy owes in part to the heterogeneity of women-headed units. This heterogeneity, which can have important mediating effects on poverty, hinges on variations in women's routes into headship – for example, by 'choice' or involuntarily, and/or through marriage, separation, widowhood and so on. Other axes of diversity include rural versus urban residence, household composition, stage in the life course (including age and relative dependency of offspring) and access to resources from beyond the household. While female heads as individuals may have to contend with discrimination, above-average work burdens and time constraints, their personal disadvantage as women may be compensated for by contributions from other co-resident individuals as well as migrant family members. One strategy is to invite co-residence by extended kin, which can increase productive and reproductive labour supply, bolster earning capacity and reduce vulnerability (Chant 2003). As Wartenburg (1999) notes for Colombia, the manner in which female-headed households organize themselves can help to neutralize the negative effects of gender bias.

Intra-household resource distribution Feminist research has revealed that households are sites of competing claims, rights, power, interests and resources, with negotiations frequently shaped by differences according to age, gender, position in the family hierarchy and so on. Popularized most widely in the shape of Amartya Sen's 'cooperative conflict' model, this perspective requires abandoning the notion that households are intrinsically cohesive, internally undifferentiated entities governed by 'natural' proclivities to benevolence, consensus and joint welfare maximization.

Acknowledging the need to avoid essentializing constructions of 'female altruism' and 'male egoism', a remarkable number of studies have found that women devote the bulk (if not all) of their earnings to household expenditure, often with positive effects on other members' nutritional intake, healthcare and education. Men, on the other hand, are prone to retain more of their earnings for discretionary personal expenditure. In some instances, men's privileged bargaining position allows them to command an even larger share of resources than they actually bring to the household (Polbre 1991). Along with reducing the resources available to other household members, irregularity in financial contributions can lead to serious vulnerability and 'secondary poverty' among women and children.

Even if female heads have lower incomes than their male counterparts, then, relative disadvantage may be mediated by the extent and manner in which income and assets are converted (or not) into consumption (and investments) which benefit the household as a whole. In this light, the absence or loss of a male head may not precipitate destitution so much as enhance the economic security and well-being of other household members. Many women in Mexico, Costa Rica and the Philippines, for example, stress that they feel more secure financially without men, even when their own earnings are low and/or prone to fluctuation. They also claim to be better able to cope with hardship when they are not at the mercy of male diktat and are freer to make their own decisions (Chant 1997). Critically, therefore, even if women are poorer in *income* terms as heads of their own household, they may *feel* they are better off and, importantly, less vulnerable. As Davids and van Driel put it, 'a lower income may even be preferred over a position of dependence and domination' (2001: 164).

Poverty as a multidimensional and subjective concept That *command* over resources may be deemed more important than *level* of resources in determining gendered experiences of poverty is further highlighted by 'social deprivation' thinking about poverty which calls for holistic, multidimensional conceptualizations which incorporate people's subjectivities (Razavi 1999). Taking on board the multidimensionality of poverty provides

important inroads into explaining why some low-income women make 'trade-offs' between different forms of privation which, at face value, may seem prejudicial to their well-being. One such case is where female heads refuse offers of financial support from absent fathers in order to evade ongoing contact and/or sexual relations. Another instance is where women forfeit assets such as their homes or neighbourhood networks in order to exit abusive relationships.

It is also significant that while financial pressures may force some women to search for new partners following conjugal breakdown, others choose to remain alone rather than return to ex-partners or to form new relationships. As noted by Fonseca for Brazil, women who live without partners often do so not through lack of opportunity, but by choice. In many cases these are older (post-menopausal) women, who, having gained a moment of respite in the battlefield of the sexes' (Fonseca 1991: 157), prefer to rely upon sons than spouses. Recognizing that not all female heads have access to financial help from sons or other male kin, and that a 'high price' may have to be paid for independence (Jackson 1996), benefits in other dimensions of their lives may be adjudged to outweigh the costs.

Female headship is far from being a 'panacea for poverty' (Feijóo 1999: 162). It is clear that some women's individual endowments and household characteristics make them more vulnerable than others. Recognizing that poverty is multi-causal and multifaceted, and that, in some ways and in some cases, female household headship can be positive and empowering, is no justification for lack of assistance from state agencies and other institutional providers. How female heads might be best aided, however, needs serious consideration.

Implications of competing constructions of female household headship and the links with poverty

There is little doubt that the 'feminization of poverty' thesis has been powerful in pushing gender to the centre-stage of international forums on poverty and social development, with women's economic empowerment now widely seen as crucial not only in achieving gender equality but in eliminating poverty. Indeed, seeking to alleviate poverty *through* women seems to have become one of the most favoured routes to ensuring all-round developmental benefits: 'Economic progression and improvements in the quality of life for all people is more rapidly achieved where women's status is higher. This is not simply a focus on a single individual, but because of women's communal role positive effects will be seen in the family, home, environment, children, elderly and whole communities and nations' (Finne 2001: 9).

While notions of 'returns' or 'pay-offs' from investing in women can clearly serve to secure resources for women, such naked instrumentalism leaves much to be desired. Moreover, whether linking poverty and female household headship is an appropriate part of the equation is another question. As Moore argues: 'The straightforward assumption that poverty is always associated with female-headed households is dangerous, because it leaves the causes and nature of poverty unexamined and because it rests on the prior implication that children will be consistently worse-off in such households because they represent incomplete families' (Moore 1994: 61).

Female-headed households as the 'poorest of the poor'

Over and above the little substantive evidence that exists to suggest that women-headed households are the 'poorest of the poor', a number of undesirable (if unintended) consequences result from seeing them as such. One is the suggestion that poverty is confined to female heads alone, which thereby overlooks the situation of the bulk of women in general (Jackson 1996). Davids and van Driel note: 'The question that is not asked ... is whether women are better-off in male-headed households. By making male-headed households the norm, important contradictions vanish within these households, and so too does the possibly unbalanced economical [sic] and social position of women compared to men' (Davids and van Driel 2001: 162).

Lack of attention to intra-household inequalities in resource allocation, as we have seen, can also draw a veil over the 'secondary poverty' often experienced by women in male-headed units (Chant 1997; González de la Rocha and Grimspon 2001), as well as wider structures of gender and socio-economic inequality.

Persistent portrayals of the economic disadvantage of female-headed units not only misrepresent and devalue the enormous efforts made by female heads to overcome the problems they face on account of their gender, but also obliterate the meanings of female headship for women. As Davids' and van Driel assert: 'Female-headed households appear as an objective category of households in which the subject position of the female head vanishes completely as does the socio-cultural and psychological meaning that their status has for them personally' (Davids and van Driel 2001: 166).

Last, but not least, the tendency for static and universalizing assumptions of the 'feminization of poverty' thesis to produce policy interventions that either target women in isolation or focus mainly on those who head their own households can neglect vital relational aspects of gender which

are likely to play a large part in accounting for gender bias within and beyond the home (Buvinic and Gupta 1997; Jackson 1996). Some of these issues are discussed below in relation to the pros and cons of targeted programmes for female-headed households.

Consequences and cautions of de-linking female household headship from poverty While there are many persuasive reasons to de-link female household headship from poverty, this can undermine the case for policy attention. Denying that households headed by women are the 'poorest of the poor' potentially deprives them of resources which could enable them to overcome some of the inequities faced by women in general, and lone mothers in particular. Is this wise in a situation of diminishing public funds for social expenditure and increasing market-driven economic pressure on households, especially given that many female-headed households have struggled under the auspices of a 'survival model' requiring high degrees of self-exploitation, that now looks to be exhausting its possibilities (González de la Rocha 2001)?

The answer here is probably no, but *how* female-headed households should be assisted merits more dedicated attention. One response to date has been to target such households in poverty programmes, as has occurred in various forms in Singapore, Cambodia, Iran, Bangladesh, India, Honduras, Puerto Rico, Chile, Colombia and Costa Rica. Although targeted initiatives remain relatively rare, they have grown in number in the last two decades. This is not only because of the momentum built up by 'poorest of the poor' stereotyping, but because neo-liberal 'efficiency' strategies have favoured streamlining as a means of reducing public expenditure on universal social programmes.

Pros and cons of targeted programmes for female-headed households living in poverty Recognizing the empirical limitations of few 'test cases', Buvinic and Gupta's (1997) review of the potential benefits and drawbacks of dedicated initiatives for female heads of household identifies three major arguments in favour of targeting. The first is that in situations where data on poverty are unreliable, isolating households headed by women is likely to capture a significant share of the population 'in need', especially where there are substantial gaps in male and female earnings and where subsidized childcare facilities are limited. Second, targeting assistance to lone mothers may be effective in improving child welfare given widespread evidence that children fare better where women have resources at their own disposal. A third potential benefit is greater equity in development spending between men and women.

Arguments against targeting include the fact that female-headed households may become male-headed over time through remarriage or cohabitation, thereby resulting in a leakage of benefits to male-headed households (Buvinic and Gupta 1997). Another potential slippage of benefits is to non-poor households given that not all female-headed households have low incomes, and some may receive support, albeit periodically, from men. Further problems arise from difficulties inherent in screening processes whereby some female-headed households may not be classified as such due to cultural norms of naming men as heads of household, even if they are largely or permanently absent, or make little contribution to family life and welfare. Tactics for determining which types of female heads are most in need may also be problematic.

On top of this, many women may not want to be identified as lone mothers given the stigma attached to the status. They may also feel that taking public money will increase antagonism against them. In Egypt, for example, Bibars (2001) notes that whereas the predominantly male beneficiaries of mainstream contributory aid and welfare schemes are perceived as having 'rights', the recipients of non-contributory programmes (who are mainly female), are regarded in the disparaging light of 'charity cases', especially given the build-up of a 'distrustful, punitive and contemptuous attitude towards female-headed households and the poor in general' in recent years. Buvinic and Gupta (1997) further highlight how targeting can alienate male household heads, especially where female heads are beneficiaries of assistance not perceived as 'female-specific' such as housing subsidies and food coupons.

Another argument against targeting, particularly common among government bodies, is that it may produce so-called 'perverse incentives' and encourage more households to opt for female headship. Fear of this has been so pronounced in Costa Rica that when the Social Welfare Ministry established its first programme for female household heads in 1997, a specific declaration was made in the supporting documentation that there was no intention to promote increases in lone motherhood. Moreover, subsequent programmes of a related nature, such as *Amor Joven* for adolescent mothers, have been oriented as much to preventing rises in lone parenthood as assisting the client group (Chant 2003). Bibars comments for Egypt that free and unconditional assistance is thought not only to increase the numbers of female-headed households, but to encourage them 'to relax and not work' (Bibars 2001: 67).

Finally, we have to acknowledge the limited impacts of targeted schemes for female household heads when the resources allocated are small and/or where broader structures of gender inequality remain intact. It is instructive

that in Cuba, where although Castro's government has resisted providing special welfare benefits to female heads, policies favouring greater gender equality in general, high levels of female labour force participation and the availability of support services such as daycare, have all made it easier for women to raise children alone (Safa 1995).

Alternative strategies to address the 'feminization of poverty' Targeted approaches recognize barriers to well-being in female-headed households and should not on this count be abandoned. Efforts to address the putative 'feminization of poverty' could, however, be more effective if they were to acknowledge that women in male-headed households also suffer poverty. As Bradshaw suggests, women's poverty is not only multidimensional, it is also 'multisectoral', namely, 'women's poverty is experienced in different ways, at different times and in different "spaces"' (Bradshaw 2002: 12). One of the main differences between women in female- and male-headed units is that the former tend to face problems of a limited asset base, while the latter's main challenge may be restricted access to and control over household assets (Bradshaw 2002). Accordingly, gender inequality needs to be addressed *within* as well as *beyond* the boundaries of household units.

Interventions to reduce women's poverty, whether as heads of household or otherwise, have taken a number of forms. These include investing in women's capabilities, through education, health, vocational training and so on, and/or enhancing their access to assets such as employment, credit and housing. While such interventions potentially go some way to narrowing gender gaps in well-being, and have arguably moved into a new gear given increasing experimentation with 'gender budgets' at national and local levels, the 'private' sphere of home and family is often left out of the frame. This relative neglect of 'family matters' is surprising given the common argument that it is families who benefit from reductions in women's poverty.

Conclusion

It is paradoxical that, despite three decades of rhetoric and intervention to reduce gender inequality, women's poverty is said to be rising. Yet, while to talk of the 'feminization of poverty' as an ongoing and/or inevitable process, and as intrinsically linked with the feminization of household headship, is arguably overdrawn, this should not detract from the fact that the 'social relations of gender predict greater vulnerability among women' (Moghadam 1997: 41). Williams and Lee-Smith argue: 'The "feminization of poverty" is more than a slogan: it is a marching call that impels us to question our assumptions about poverty itself by examining how it is

caused, manifested and reduced, and to do this from a gender perspective' (Williams and Lee-Smith 2000: 1).

While consensus on different tenets of the 'feminization of poverty' thesis remains elusive, debates have drawn attention to the problems of generalizing about women's poverty, and of engaging in superficial dualistic comparisons between male- and female-headed households. Even if it continues to be impossible to pin down exactly how many women are poor, which women are poor, and how they become and/or remain poor, unpacking the 'feminization of poverty', and problematizing some of its core assumptions, broadens prospects for change. This not only signifies interventions to redress gender inequalities in different spaces, such as the labour market, legal institutions and the home, but those which confront different dimensions of poverty and inequality in ways which are personally, as well as pragmatically, meaningful to women.

Note

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6 | Not very poor, powerless or pregnant: the African woman forgotten by development

EVERJOICE J. WIN

The appeal of the myth of the poor and powerless African woman

For decades now, the development industry has thrived on the stereotypical image of an African woman who is its 'target' or 'beneficiary'. Always poor, powerless and invariably pregnant, burdened with lots of children, or carrying one load or another on her back or her head, this is a favourite image, one which we have come to associate with development. From the United Nations, to large international agencies, to multilateral/bilateral donors, to small non-governmental organizations (NGOs), most of us have used and abused this image time and time again. Like the fly-infested and emaciated black child that is so often used by international news agencies, the bare-footed African woman *sells*. Without her uttering a word, this poor woman pulls in financial resources. Any researchers worth their salt have to go to the 'most remote' village to find her for their statistics on issues like access to water to be valid. Similarly, the gender programme officer in any institution always has to demonstrate that her work is about the very poor and marginalized woman for her to be regarded as legitimate.

But is this image an accurate one? Does it tell the full story of black African women's complex realities? And does this image encompass all levels of 'marginalization' and 'disempowerment' that development work must deal with? In this new era of rights-based approaches, is this the only woman that development organizations should be concerned about? Is resource poverty the only lens through which we should look at women's rights denial and violations? As one of those women often forced to negate my own needs and experiences in the work that I do, I seek to challenge this image and consequent focus.

HIV/AIDS: the new lens

If there is one good thing to say about HIV/AIDS, it is the fact that it has finally enabled feminists like me to articulate more clearly all the issues that I have often raised which did not seem to make sense to others. And this is by focusing on an issue that I have personally experienced as a middle-class woman that I am able to demonstrate adequately my frustration with the way the development industry constantly delegitimizes my voice and