

## **Gender Matters to Whom? Keeping the politics in gender and development**

Wendy Harcourt looks candidly at mainstreaming gender in development and in social movements. She explores the difficulties of bringing gender into development policy and social movements spaces, two areas where she has been actively engaged over the last two decades. The talk will be a critical look at gender 'mainstreaming', but not in the usual sense. It will look at the gender mainstreaming in the area of 'body politics' – the bureaucratizing of gender within population and development policy and in global social movement processes.

**From where am I speaking: reflecting on over twenty years of engagement in body politics in development.**

### **As feminist activist/ activist intellectual in development**

I have been a border crosser between gender and development policy and women's movements activism engaged in debates on: population and development; the care economy; sexual and gender based violence; sexuality and development. I wrote a book called body politics in development critical debates on gender and development where I tried to understand better the embodied experiences of gender and development. My question was why body politics is played out on the fringes of mainstream gender and development policy and yet from my vantage point it deeply marks gender and development practice.

I was interested in the contradictions such a personal, political and theoretical exploration of body politics in gender and development pushes to the surface.

Take the opportunity to push those issues further in terms of questions I continue to ask about gender and development as a practice and institution within development policy and in social movement processes.

### **Biopolitics of my engagement**

Like of many of us here, I spend a lot of times on planes, mostly on the way to conferences, seminars and workshops, with excursions to countries to observe and discuss about other peoples' lives and bodies. Although the topics are often painful about disease, exploitation, violence, death, inequities and injustice the conversations are usually conducted in considerable comfort. I listen to rather than experience the pain. I do not feel it on my body, though I may see, imagine and write about it. Often participants in the various meetings raise questions about the incongruity between the actual places where the subjects of development live, and the places and types of policy discussions that are held about them. It can seem incongruous to speak about pain and violation in decorous workshop settings. The contrast between the lived bodily experiences of the violated women and the comfortable lives of women leading gender and development debates gives an eerie sense of dislocation. And for many it raises questions about whether such gender and development discussions, often held thousands of miles away from the subject

of debate, actually contribute to real change for the women and men so earnestly talk about.

### **Colonialism, racism and feminism**

An often silenced issue in international development is how racism is lived alongside sexism. Indian born now US based academics Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty challenge the unmarked white gaze informing different discourses including in feminist writings. Mohanty warns us to look at the interwoven processes of sexism, racism, misogyny and heterosexism. She specifically points out the need to question the sexist and racist imperialist structures that determine that fertility of women from the Global South as a central focus of development. Mohanty argues that the focus on fertility speaks volumes about the predominant representation of non-western women in social and scientific knowledge underlining gender and development. Both Spivak and Mohanty point out the unresolved tensions between tradition and modernity as instrumental biological representations of women are embedded in neo-colonial development processes where non-western women are largely perceived as an international reservoir of cheap labour, industrial, domestic and sex work.

It is important to recognize how deeply gender and race has been worked into the apparently natural body of biology and science and through those discourses into development. It is also important to contextualize why the interest in bodies, including my own interest, emerged in the 1980s and 1990s along with key political and social changes in demography and age, patterns of disease, new technologies

and feminisms. Female embodiment associated with women's health activism and body politics in 1970s in the Global North (USA, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) is now embedded in state bureaucracies and global processes that determine development. Like all political processes these social construction of female bodies developed through battles between groups for competing political interests.

### **Foucauldian understandings of body, knowledge and power**

Foucault's concept of biopolitics as set out in *History of Sexuality* is an influential text in how to understand female embodiment. Foucault presents modern power not just as hierarchical and oppressive but also as horizontally produced and in complex but hardly visible ways embedded in our language and practice. Biopolitics is the politics of the administering and governing of life through processes that modern western society takes for granted.

Foucauldian biopolitics understand bodies not as static givens, locked into certain biological rhythms but fluid sites of power and political contestation. Population statistics, medical records, thumb prints on our passports, identity cards that state our height and eye colour, magazines that advertise ideal bodies, are all part of biopolitical strategies that categorize modern bodies. In development discourse many biopolitical strategies around the body intersect. The language and practices of family planning, medicine, public health, population and reproductive rights produce gendered bodies as an interesting set of objects and subjects of study.

Another useful Foucauldian concept is biopower. The concept of biopower helps us to go further in understanding how body politics works in modern society. The strategies of biopolitics are by no means neutral. The specific set of meanings is determined by institutions framing how society understands gendered bodies. It is not a vertical use of power, where the US Government, for example, decrees that male security guards at the airport must treat with suspicion all veiled women who come into the airport. Biopower refers to the minute practices of power relations. Foucault sees power as immanent in everyday relationships, including economic exchanges, knowledge relationships and sexual relationships. Micro-level practices of power are taken up in global or macro/level strategies of domination. These power plays are not through centralized power, but through a complex series of infinitesimal mechanisms. These mechanisms of power continually change, linking micro and macro levels of power. Modern administration and government are exercised through a whole range of institutions, procedures, analysis, reflections, calculations and tactics. They compose a complex system employing a variety of modes to achieve a particular end — for example, the oppression of women or also the emancipation of women. A border security guard detaining a veiled woman in a New York airport is caught in biopolitical power play that seems to him, and to the women he is hassling, a natural order of things.

### **Body politics in gender and development**

A Foucauldian concept of biopolitics and biopower give an analytical context to the political struggles around bodies in development. They suggest why body politics is often where women first find themselves mobilizing for their rights and in the

process find their political voice in the field of gender and development. Through body politics the embodied experience of the female body became an entry point for political engagement (fighting for abortion rights, 'reclaim the night' marches, protesting against the use of rape as a weapon of war and protesting against beauty pageants.) Gender differences are marked out on the body in cultural, social, economic and political positioning. Such external markings, be they: bruises and scars from violations; suffering from poisonings and worn out limbs from exploitation in the field or factories; tears and prolapses from too many pregnancies; culturally induced physical restrictions caused by high heels, breast implants or the veil are as much part of a gender political struggle in development as the demand for equal pay for equal work, gender quotas in parliament or drinkable safe water.

The body in development plays at once an invisible and yet also a contested role in development discourse, even if most people working in development would ask what has the body or even gender have to do with trade, security and economics, 'the hard core issues' of development?

In the book I tell very specific stories of gender and development practice around reproduction, caring, violence, sexuality and technologies. Those stories are played out on the much broader panorama of gender and development policy and practice. My major focus was on the policy and practice of gender and development as constructed through the UN arena.

**Gender and development as an evolving strategy**

It is difficult to categorize gender and development as a set of stable institutional arrangements. To begin with, the strategy of having specific gender focal points as well as gender mainstreaming throughout development has led to overburdened and under funded 'experts'. They are on the one hand singled out as doing 'gender', something often not understood by their colleagues, and on the other hand being asked to be experts in all areas of development in order to 'mainstream' gender. Beyond being set a difficult political and technical task, gender and development experts often feel they are marginalized from the mainstream debates and funding arrangements, with little human and funding resources. They see themselves as struggling to survive in an unfriendly environment. Many move in and out of different institutions to survive. At the same time people outside the institutional arrangements of the UN and government or large NGOs are often critical of gender 'experts' inside the mainstream institutions. These groups distance themselves from the gender and development mainstream, yet they accept funding and work with those inside the institutions to negotiate policy. In this sense gender and development in practice is fluid. Though the 'technical' practice and aims of gender and development are set by various conventions at the UN and government level, it has shifting targets, and many of those working on gender and development move in and out of jobs at various levels of engagement.

### **Civil society as an agent in development**

My book covered the twenty-year period from 1988 to 2008, partly because those are the years in which I have been engaged in development but also because this period marked the end of the Cold War and the rise of civil society as a major player

in international development. It was in this period that the women's movements emerged as one of the main protagonists in the UN sphere. Spaces opened up for dissent as the development project first envisaged as state planning to engineer and lift the world from poverty had floundered.

The questioning of the success of development and the failure of the state to deliver, as well as the end of the Cold War opened up entry points for civil society groups to become politically engaged in UN global processes. These movements clustered under the umbrella title of NGOs, emerged in the 1990s as a third actor in the development community.

For women's rights activists this was an exciting period where 'women in development', became a much stronger political force in all the 'human rights' and 'sustainable' development agendas. Civil society-led campaigns over trade, agriculture, water, debt forgiveness, human rights, gender equality, climate, violence and conflict and sexual and reproductive rights became in the UN 'transnational arena' a modern form of political action. It is in these debates, around the UN Conferences and policies that emerged in response to and with women's rights and feminist groups that gender and development policy was framed.

However, I would argue that in the biopolitics of the management of gender, women's rights, the female body, women and gender issues remained as the 'soft' issues of development. So, when it came to why there were no real reforms that took these concerns into account, or even why there was less and less money to



train women, provide health services, counter violence against women, the answer could always be that there were other more pressing concerns to deal with — for example, war, failed states, internal conflict, economic crisis, restructuring, liberalizing markets, security, trade agreements — all of which did not seem, in the end, to have much to do with women's demands, figures and case studies, which were mostly considered still as micro-level adjuncts to the 'hard' macro development issues.

This female body was managed and understood through various mechanisms created in development discourse as engaged in particular types of work with specific health and education needs as well as needing special protection from conflict, violence or unfair work practices and sexual exploitation and domestic injustice.

In this sense the female body (roughly understood in the 'different' characteristics of 'women in' the 'Global South': South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab region, Central and Latin America, East Asia and the Pacific and East Europe) was able to be measured, counted and compared across regions. Discussions were held on what the ordinary woman could expect in the diverse regions from different experiences during moments in her life cycle. In this way development policy could predict, monitor and try to change and better her life with more education, better health, more solid investments and more advantageous markets and trade regimes. Women who lived in North America, Europe and Australasia (the Global North) were not part of this set of biopolitical strategies. Nor were migrants or indigenous women, who

were self-defined as 'Fourth World' women and were largely outside official UN gender and development debates, as were transgender people and by and large queer activists. Women from the 'Global North' were lumped together as the 'developed woman' representing the wealth and values of the West. It was assumed that they did not need 'developing' as they had, more or less, the money, access, rights and the status for which these other groups of women in the rest of the world needed to strive.

### **Body politics in the new social movements**

With the reductionist agenda of the MDGs in the early 2000s, feminist activists shifted their focus away from the UN as the only site of social transformation for women's rights. They began to engage more with social movements, in particular the protest movements against the IMF, World Bank and the G8 that exploded in Seattle in 2002 and continued to meet and grow exponentially in the various World Social Forums. The World Social Forum emerged as one potential site for feminists to engage in the attempt to build an autonomous space for social movements and civil society around campaigns on trade, poverty, climate change, food and security, gender equality and human rights under the slogan 'another world is possible'.

In the World Social Forum process a group of feminist networks met in a series of Feminist Dialogues (FDs) which has positioned the body as central to feminist analysis and cultural, social, economic and political struggle. The focus of the FDs in the World Social Forum has been on the rise of fundamentalism, cultural and economic repression and violence. Specifically, the interest is on understanding the

impact of global capitalism on gender relations and resistance to these hegemonies specifically the George W. Bush US administration, the Vatican, Islamism of Bin Laden, Catholicism of Latin America, East Europe, Hindu fundamentalism in South Asia and how from this analysis it is possible to build a new form of radical democracy. Feminists in the WSF challenge the binaries that simplify complex gender relations into public and private, nature and culture, biology and technology, men and women and the norm of heterosexuality in gender relations.

### **Body politics as counter culture**

Body politics, in this setting, is part of a counter culture that makes visible the invisible and names what is uncomfortable in gendered relations. The body becomes an 'impertinent way of knowing'. Talking about violence in the home, rape, repression, homophobia, challenging 'traditions' that veil women, put their feet in high heeled shoes, condone and institutionalize inequalities in the work place, in the public meeting space that silence women and build on male fears are impertinences to the givens, to the norms and unspoken social and cultural rules.

Body politics is one contribution of feminism to a construction of counter power that confronts hegemonic culture and economy. This hegemonic power has made the body a war zone, violated and plundered in the case of women, children, lesbians, homosexuals and transgenders. Examples of such violations are: women raped in armed conflicts; denial of sexual and reproductive rights; racism that discriminates because of skin colour; ageism that stereotypes and uses young bodies. Body politics

in these struggles emerges as a strong movement of resistance and expansion of rights linking the political dimension of the body with a radical form of democracy.

### **Going beyond the rhetoric**

The dominant thinking about women and development has become mired in a progressive-sounding orthodoxy that fails to engage with the realities of women's experience and aspirations around the world .... feel good talk about women is gaining ground: one that puts women at the forefront of achieving peace, prosperity and democracy. Empower women, the story goes, and they will become the motor of development.

Cornwall's image of gender and development masquerading as the 'real thing' through policies of 'empowerment lite' turns tough feminist questions and policies into a simulacrum. Such policies conflate power with money (the mantra is give the poor money and all is solved) and assume away the difficulties of changing social norms, institutions and relationships that are part of gendered realities.

It is politically important to refocus attention on personal experiences of the women and men who are subjects of development and on what they have learnt from their own travels along diverse pathways of empowerment. I include as subjects of development feminists like myself in the Global North who contribute to the theory and practice of gender and development who share responsibility for its framing, funding, success and failures.

Feminists have long recognised that it is when women recognise their 'power within' and act together with other women to exercise 'power with', that they gain 'power to' act as agents. Feminist experience has shown that this is a process that may take a diversity of pathways, but for which there are rarely the kind of short-cuts envisaged by the proponents of empowerment-lite.

In the book I aim to cut away the tangle of assumptions and stereotypes that have filled the field of gender and development. Starting from the lives of women as they feel and experience political, social, economic and cultural change on and through their bodies the book brings into critical scrutiny the taken-for-granted assumptions of what Cornwall calls gender and development empowerment-lite and democracy-lite.

I argue that gender policy tools for institutional design do little to redress the power issues that lie at the heart of the cultures and conduct of politics itself. Opening up a feminist debate on development means asking new questions about what politics is about. It is not only about getting women and minority groups into power. It is about body politics that is shifting meanings of private and public spheres, reproduction, care and work, sexuality, pleasure, violence, science and technologies.

It means that development has to be much more adventurous and creative. We need to go beyond statements which position women's bodies as occupied, abused, hated and denied. They are, that is true, but as Lady Gaga and many other women, men and trans would declare bodies of all genders can be about strength, fun, pleasure, talent and celebration. A recent gender and empowerment project in which I was involved was mostly conducted on the Web. It brought together any one who defined themselves as feminist and living in Europe. The project tapped into the blogs and e-zines that young feminists are doing, using facebook, mobiles and social media to do their activism. The majority of the ones who joined and put energy into the project, eventually meeting up in Poland in tents, were young feminists under 30 mainly from East and Central Europe. Talking to them about the most exciting activity in which they were engaged, I was told 'Ladyfests'. Ladyfests are community not-for-profit global music and arts festivals with bands, musical groups, performance artists visual arts and workshops. They are alternative political spaces set up and led by 'ladies' (an identity interpreted by the individuals). Those I spoke to attending the Ladyfests were precariously employed, politically engaged in a range of movements, and were travelling in their 1,000s to meet at different venues. There were spaces for women, queers and trans that were challenging the mainly masculine preserve of music and doing their thing. There were many connections and networking on-line in between.

This is not the generation I see engaged and leading development debates. At best they are on the margins looking in. The point for me is to turn the spaces around to get those people into development debates. They would do much to help us get out

of discourses of professionalism that create institutions afraid to open up because they fear argument and difference. This is a time of risk, let us grab it, and open up to the intersections where the multiple meanings of protest, culture, sexuality, politics, gender and power meet.

### **How to bring about change?**

How do we bring in younger women, and conduct feminist dialogues across the borders among the Global North and Global South, global and local, academe and activism, diverse identities and cultures? How do we move from acting as individuals with our own sense of injustice, pain and expectations to work collectively, given all our knowledge of difference? How can feminists living and working in one part of the world connect and partner with feminists living in other parts of the?

Can projects set within gender and development support and strengthen poor women and men's lives without objectifying them? How do projects challenge the unjust economic system that creates the poverty in the first place? Do they address the inequality or are they heterosexist, racist, neocolonial, culturally blind? And what about transgender, intersex? Where is erotic justice?

How can people living and working in gender and development in situations of relative social political and economic power speak out about violent and unfair situations experienced by others in strategic ways oriented towards finding

constructive solutions, public support and resources without deepening marginalization and discrimination?

How can such projects deal with deep bodily pain in a manner that attests to concern and commitment, making a positive difference for all involved?

How can feminists creatively engage in knowledge and network building and not become caught in institutional power games and bureaucratic routines, lost in jargon and over-theorizing, media hype, scientific confusions, individual narratives and romanticism?

And lastly perhaps the main question under which all the others are framed: how can feminists collectively understand multiple differences and asymmetries of power, use the insights from differences, hear the anger, note the silences and keep conviction?

It is important to cut away from the tangle of assumptions and stereotypes that have filled the field of gender and development. Starting from the lives of women as they feel and experience political, social, economic and cultural change we need to bring critical scrutiny to the taken-for-granted assumptions of gender and development. Opening up a feminist debate on development means asking new questions about what is politics. It is not only about getting women and minority groups into power. It is about vision and building on alternatives. It is not about blueprints but about recognition of difference and strategic agreement on how to move forward, one that



is not hampered or weighed down by institutions, management plans, jargon and un-winnable power games. We need to define the rules of the game.

This requires the collective work of transnational feminism fully aware of the intersections of class, caste, race, gender and geographical/post-colonial divisions. Such a GAD agenda needs to be informed by the passionately held hope that collectively we can find inspirational and creative ways to bring about political change. It remains important to engage with the multilateral gender and development agenda. But equally important it is vital for feminists to continue building collective responses to the deep global inequalities; the pain and the passion that informs our world working in coalitions with progressive social movements--anti-war, anti-racist, feminist, LGBTQ, human rights, HIV/AIDS, trade equity.

The intertwining economic, political, cultural and social processes that underpin body politics are not easy to address. We are talking about violated bodies, ravished environments and spiraling poverty despite endless working days. The crude figures of increasing inequality reflect obscene wealth spun out of deepening violence and racism. New images, ideas and visions do not come from staid government solutions. But talking of failure just takes us further from, not nearer to, the goal of gender equality. How do you reach an audience already overloaded in a world of text messages, blogs, instant news on websites, Googled facts, Wikipedia, YouTube, Ipod casts, popular science magazines, competing ads for Viagra, health food, networks of never-met contacts, endless spam, and no doubt surveillance? How to connect to

those people not inter-connected? What justice is there for the nameless people who flash across our screens in images that Hoover up our passions and spew them out in a sense of desperation?

GAD needs to work as honestly as it can with feminists to challenge and engage with structural inequalities that frustrate their work. It is important to historicize and denaturalize the ideas, beliefs and values that underpin the intergovernmental interactions in the UN, governments and other decision-making spaces. Equally it remains important for feminists, inside and outside GAD, to continue building collective responses to the deep global inequalities, keenly aware of differences of lived bodily experiences, yet also unafraid to own and explore those differences. It is both the pain and the passion that allows us to question ourselves and to continue to want to shape in what world to which 'we' all belong.