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Publication date:
2004

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Parpart, J. (2004). *Gender, Power and Governance in a Globalizing World*. Institut for Historie, Internationale Studier og Samfundsforhold, Aalborg Universitet.

Gender, Power and Governance in a Globalizing World

Jane Parpart

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Jane Parpart[*]

Governance has become one of the watchwords of current development discourse. It has developed out of the growing concern for the corruption, venality and incompetence of many Third World (and Northern) governments and their inability/unwillingness to meet the challenges of providing for their citizens in an increasingly competitive global political economy. The failure of development efforts to stimulate effective, efficient governance in the South has become a concern both for the voters who pay for Northern development efforts and for those who administer these efforts. Consequently, earlier reluctance to interfere in sovereign states has been replaced by deliberate efforts to improve governance. Indeed, in the mid-1980s, 'good governance' became one of the conditionalities for those who seek development assistance (Stiglitz 2002). Democracy and accountability continue to be a prime concern of development agencies, albeit complicated by the growing power of global governance institutions such as the World Trade Organization and other rule setting bodies (Held and McGrew 2002).

However, the concern with governance has largely ignored both gender and power. For the most part, governance has been seen as a gender-neutral concept. Participation in the structures of governance, particularly political parties, bureaucracies, the military and economic institutions, is regarded as generally available to all citizens. Even non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which had been increasingly recognized as key pressure points for good governance, have too often been seen as gender-neutral actors (Meyer and Prugl 1999; Rai 2000). Yet all too often, even NGOs do little to challenge gender bias, either within their organizations or in society (Desai 2002). Writings on governance in our globalizing world still tend to focus on the people (ie men), who run the ship of state, the economy and key institutions (Prakash and Hart 2000; Scholte with Schnabel 2002). Gender comes as an after thought, an add- on, rather than an integral part of the process. This chapter argues for a different approach, one that takes account of both the gendered nature of governance and the need for new thinking before effective, more gender-equitable governance can be achieved.

For this task, feminist theorizing has much to offer. However, an eclectic approach to theory is required, one that draws on both materialist and discursive analyses. Governance is shot through with power. It is also highly gendered. Creating

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policies and practices that will ensure more gender-equitable, fair and effective governance is a difficult business. Encouraging good governance requires more than just evaluating the practices and language of government officials. It requires close attention to the broad political and economic structures, cultural assumptions and discourses, notions of human rights, laws and practices in which women (and men) seek to ensure or at least struggle for (or against) more gender-equitable, accountable governance at all levels of society. Moreover, these struggles occur in many different sites and practices, from the personal encounters of daily life to involvement in formal and informal organizations. And of course, all this is further complicated by the processes of globalization.

WHY GENDER AND GOOD GOVERNANCE?

The business of government has been seen largely as a male affair, and indeed, statistics bear this out. Around the world, men dominate executives, parliaments and cabinets. They run the civil service, create most policies and carry them out as well. Women are often there, but largely in a subordinate role (Enloe 1990, 1993; Rai 2000). Thus, if one takes a neo-liberal, or even Marxist approach to the issue of government and state power, it is clear that we live in a very gendered world (Parpart and Staudt 1989; Peterson and Runyan 1993).

The gendered (male) nature of state power has led to a preoccupation with women's representation and participation in government structures, and the consequences of their minimal participation for governance practices. This is important work that has inspired women (and some men) around the world to lobby for more women in political parties, parliaments and bureaucracies, particularly in command positions (Rai 2002). This effort has been frustratingly slow although some improvements have taken place. While an important strategy, one cannot assume that women in politics are inevitably committed to improving women's lot – witness the policies of Margaret Thatcher. Nevertheless, many women in representative governments do carry some of their personal concern for women's rights into the political arena (Rai 2002a). Moreover, improving the gender balance in government is an issue of women's rights and human equality as well.

At the same time, governance does not operate only at the highest levels of state power. Relations of power and dominance occur in many sites. All relationships are shot through with power, and the pervasive patriarchal character of many/most relationships – whether in state government, local government, NGOs or the family – plays a crucial role in the way governance is constructed and experienced by individuals and groups. We thus need to understand the workings of power, and its

intersection with gender, if we are to understand the way gender affects (and is affected by) governance structures and practices at all levels of society.

GENDER AND EM(POWER)MENT

In order to think about power and em(power)ment in new ways, we need to explore its diverse and complex history. While Paulo Freire (1973) did not use the term, his emphasis on education as a means for conscientizing and inspiring individuals and groups to challenge social inequality inspired social activists concerned with empowering the poor and marginalized. Intellectuals and activists in the South, and to a lesser extent the North, drew on Freire and others to expand the concept of power and empowerment. Social activists focused on local, grassroots activism as a means for empowering the poor so they could/would challenge the status quo. Others took a more reformist position, seeing empowerment as a way to improve productivity and effectiveness within established structures. Mainstream development agencies adopted this approach in the 1990s, when they too began to use the language of empowerment, participation and people's development (World Bank 1995).

How can we explain these different, even contradictory definitions? The explanation may lie in the fluidity of the term 'power'. To empower implies the ability to exert *power over*, to make things happen. It is an action verb, suggesting the ability to change the world. It has a transformatory sound, an implicit promise of change, often for the better. Consequently, empowerment has often been the watchword of crusaders trying to make the world a better, more equitable place – generally through revolution or at least, fundamental social transformation (Wolf 1999: 4–8). Others adopt a more benign view of power, one that emphasizes the potential for rational discussion and evolutionary change within modern societies. Associated with liberal arguments about modernization and democracy, this approach assumes even marginalized people can bring about social transformation by mobilizing to convince the powerful of the need for change. While apparently different, both perspectives are captured by the notion that power is largely the ability to exert *power over* institutions, resources and people (Held et al 1999).

In order to understand the limitations of these approaches to empowerment and power, we need to explore various thoughts on the subject. In the 1970s, Steven Lukes rejected the notion that power is simply control over institutions and resources, and argued instead that power also involves controlling the agendas and thinking of others (1974: 23–24). Michel Foucault pushed the analysis further. Rejecting the notion that power is something held by individuals or groups (and not others), he argues that it permeates society. It is fluid, relational and exists only in

the everyday relationships of people, both individually and in institutions. Such power can lead to repressive practices that are expressed in disciplined bodies, actions and thoughts/discourses. While much of Foucault's work has centered on the disciplinary, disempowering nature of modern power, he recognizes that relations of power inspire resistance as well (Foucault 1979, 1991; McNay 1992). In this regard, Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson's reading of Foucault is useful, particularly the point that Foucault did not see resistance 'in a disembodied duel with power' (1997: 19), but rather as a complex interaction. People are empowered and changed through resisting disciplinary power relations, but this very action/agency may also strengthen their incorporation into the status quo. While this analysis illuminates the workings of power (and empowerment) at the individual and institutional level, Foucault has less to say about the impact of larger political and economic structures. Moreover, his analysis is relentlessly European and male-focused. A more feminist and global analysis is required if we are to rethink women's empowerment in comparative perspective.

Since the 1980s, feminists have in fact contributed important insight to these debates. Most feminists have started from querying the concept of power as simply *power over* people and resources. Some have found Foucauldian theory useful to challenge the dominant assumption that power is a possession exercised over others within familiar boundaries of state, law or class. They have been attracted to his focus on bodies as sites of power and to his notion of power as fluid, relational and embedded in struggles over meanings/discourses (Hekman 1996). Others have used the expanded boundaries of power that Foucauldian thought opens up to query the concept of empowerment itself. Anna Yeatman, for example, worries that the term reproduces the hierarchy between the powerful protector [the state, the elite] and the powerless (i.e., women, children and the poor) who are seen as helpless, passive and needy. She would rather use the term 'empowering', which is interchangeable with 'capacitating' or 'enabling' (1999). Other feminists argue that Foucault's vision of power encourages a relativist position where all transformative politics became suspect (Fraser 1989; Hartsock 1990).

Black and Third World feminists approach empowerment somewhat differently. Most regard the issue of participation as central to empowerment. They argue that participation in challenges to hegemonic systems and discourses has often inspired both greater self-understanding and political action in women's private and public lives. Involvement in the politics of subversion is thus empowering in itself, even if it does not immediately transform dominant power relations. As Patricia Hill Collins points out, 'change can also occur in the private, personal space of an individual woman's consciousness. Equally fundamental, this type of change is

also empowering' (1991: 111). At the same time, individual conscientization does not necessarily lead to progressive politics. The language of women's empowerment has been used by right-wing political groups and parties to inspire Hindu women to resist the 'pseudo-secularism' of the male, Westernized elites who have granted Muslims and other minorities 'concessions' not available to the Hindu majority (Butalia and Sarkar 1996). While this rhetoric has inspired Hindu women's agency in defense of the *dharma* (faith), such empowerment obviously poses important questions for other communities, as well as for Hindu women who do not subscribe to this interpretation.

These different approaches/arguments need to be brought together if we are to think about empowerment, power and gender in new ways. Foucault's exposition of power allows us to move away from more traditional notions of power as the ability to exert *power over* structures, people and resource. He reminds us that power is fluid, relational and connected to discourses/knowledge. This is an important insight for feminist analyses of power and empowerment. However, the relationship between structures, agency and discourse is crucial (Deveaux 1996: 230–37). We need to integrate concerns with the limitations (and possibilities) set in place by structures and discourses of power, with attention to individual consciousness/understanding (*power within*), and its role in collective action (*power with*). This broader understanding is necessary if women are going to successfully organize and exert *power to* challenge gender hierarchies, both in daily life and in state and local governance (Rowlands 1997: 13).

Efforts to improve governance in the South have become the business of development agencies as well as various world bodies such as the United Nations and other international institutions. These efforts are shot through with power and highly gendered. This chapter is particularly interested in the attempts by development agencies (both mainstream and alternative) to foster good governance and the possibility that gender could be brought more squarely into this process. This requires further examination of the intersection between em(power)ment, gender and development, both in theory and practice.

EM(POWER)MENT, GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT
Initially development was a largely gender-blind endeavour, but by the 1970s some practitioners had recognized the need to help women, albeit rarely questioning existing relations between the sexes. The limitations of this approach inspired a shift to a gender and development (GAD) approach that highlighted the role of culture as well as political and economic factors in women's subordination (Young 1993; Sen and Grown 1988). Nevertheless, this approach remained largely captured

by Western notions of development, with its focus on economic solutions to development problems (Hirshman 1995).

By the late 1980s, activists and theorists from the South, and to a lesser extent the North, began to discuss the need for a new approach, one that emphasized the importance of empowerment as well as economic well-being. Gita Sen and Caren Grown used the term in their landmark book, *Development, Crises and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives* (1988). They offered a vision of empowerment rooted in a commitment to collective action to challenge the specific problems and contexts facing women (and men) in the South, economic, political and cultural. While rather utopian in tone, the book calls for a collective vision that would inspire social transformation through 'political mobilization, legal changes, consciousness raising, and popular education' (1988: 87).

Writings on empowerment and gender as an approach to development have become increasingly dominant in the alternative development literature, especially from the South. In 1994, for example, Srilatha Batliwala warned that 'empowerment,' which had virtually replaced terms such as poverty alleviation, welfare and community participation, was in danger of losing its transformative edge. She called for a more precise understanding of both power and empowerment, one that sees power 'as control over material assets, intellectual resources, and ideology' (1994: 129). For Batliwala, empowerment is 'the process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power' (1994: 130). It requires political action and collective assault on cultural as well as national and community power structures that oppress women and some men. Like Batliwala, Naila Kabeer (1994) emphasizes collective, grassroots participatory action – the *power to* work *with* others 'to control resources, to determine agendas and to make decisions' (1994: 229). More concerned with action than theory, she continues to explore practical, measurable ways to empower women, especially at the local level (Kabeer 1999).

Jo Rowlands (1997, 1998) brings a broader analytical perspective to the discussion of gender, empowerment and development. Drawing on Foucault and feminist thinking about power and gender, she argues that 'empowerment is more than participation in decision-making; it must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions' (1997: 14). It is personal, relational and collective. She recognizes that empowerment is not only a gender issue, but also a development issue affecting women and men. While acknowledging the complexity and difficulties of empowerment as a concept and a practice, she remains convinced that the key to empowerment lies in mobilizing

marginalized people, especially women. She cautions, however, that empowerment is a process rather than an end product, neither easily defined nor measured. At the same time, she believes 'there is a core to the empowerment process … which consists of increases in self-confidence and self-esteem, a sense of agency and of "self" in a wider context, and a sense of *dignidad* (being worthy of having a right to respect from others)' (1997: 129–30).

These debates around gender, empowerment and development have influenced both mainstream and alternative development practitioners and scholars. The language of empowerment and participation was particularly pronounced in what is often called alternative development approaches (Pieterse 2001; Munck and O'Hearn 1999). Robert Chambers (1997), for example, has crafted a participatory, people-first approach to development known as participatory rural appraisal (PRA). This set of methodological tools is both easily understood and user-friendly, particularly in poor, grassroots communities. While not deliberately aimed at women, his approach targets the very poor, many of who are women. Amartya Sen has contributed to these discussions as well. He sees human capabilities/development as a process of developing individual capacities through gaining education and skills that can empower individuals and improve their quality of life (1990; 1995). Sen argues that poverty reflects poor people's inability to meet their basic needs, whether material or more intangible -- what Sen calls 'agency achievements' – of participation, empowerment and community life (Dreze and Sen 1989). Sen criticizes development economics for emphasizing quantity, such as longevity, rather than the quality of lives led (Crocker 1995: 156). He points out that women in particular face social as well as physical problems and that 'the remedies sought have to take note of the nature of the constraints involved and extent to which they can be removed' (Dreze and Sen 1989: 44). While one may quarrel with Sen's lack of attention to the political processes required for equitable resource distribution, he raises some important issues for the study of empowerment. However, both Chambers and Sen focus on the local, arguing that empowerment most often occurs at the point where most people live their lives (Parpart 2002).

Initially, mainstream development agencies ignored discussions of empowerment, but as top-down development failed to alleviate poverty in the 1990s, especially among women, empowerment began to enter the lexicon of mainstream women and development discourse. For example, The Beijing Platform of Action states emphatically women's empowerment is 'fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace' (UN 1996: para.13). The Canadian International Development Agency's (CIDA) 'Policy on Gender Equality' includes women's

empowerment as one of the eight guiding principles for its policy goals (1999). Of course, mainstream development agencies generally interpret empowerment for women as a means for improving productivity within the status quo, rather than challenging and transforming established structures and practices (World Bank 1995). Nevertheless, mainstream development 'experts' increasingly use the language of empowerment when discussing women/gender and development, albeit largely within the rubric of small-scale, grassroots community development (Friedmann 1992; Craig and Mayo 1995; World Bank Report 2001).

The link between empowerment and local communities has encouraged development practitioners and many scholars to ignore the crucial relationship between empowerment and national and global structures and discourses. Jane Parpart, Shirin Rai and Kathleen Staudt, in their recent collection, *Rethinking Empowerment* (2002), argue that empowerment is an empty term if it ignores these factors. Indeed, they claim that the tension between agency and structures, and their interrelationships, lies at the heart of the empowerment debate. While Caroline Moser's (1993) warning that challenges to structural power will alienate mainstream development agencies is well taken, one also needs to reflect upon how the agency and empowerment of women (and poor men) can be achieved without some transformation of existing power relations (both structural and discursive). Anne Phillips has addressed this question by pointing out that empowerment must include the ability to challenge the distribution of power and goods (1999: 17). Negotiations with, and challenges to the state (and global forces) then become an important part of collective action leading to women's empowerment. As David Marquand points out, only an empowered and active citizenry can make progress towards social equality (1997: 41). Thus, both agency and structures need to be held together, sometimes in tension, to understand the nature of change through the politics of collective (and individual) action at all levels of political institutions – whether in formal institutions, NGOs or more informal activities, at local, national and global levels. This requires attention to the specific historical struggles (and capitulations) of women (and some men) determined to challenge the way particular structures and discourses of power operate to reinforce gender-biased, unequal social and political systems.

EMPOWERMENT, GENDER AND GOVERNANCE IN A GLOBALIZING WORLD
How do these debates relate to issues of gender and governance? Adopting the framework suggested by Parpart, Rai and Staudt in *Rethinking Empowerment* (2002), I believe governance and gender cannot be understood without addressing the question of empowerment. Unfortunately, the literature on empowerment often

ignores national, regional and global forces. While recognizing that local political struggles are important for understanding larger questions of gender and governance, we also need to pay attention to gendered struggles at the national, regional and global level as well. In our rapidly globalizing world, economic and political issues cannot be understood separately from the global. The growing power of global corporate and financial forces in an increasingly unequal world has been a double-edged experience for women. Free trade and global shifts in productivity have led to casualization and feminization of certain labour sectors, resulting in additional burdens on women and tensions within the family as gender relations get reconfigured (Staveren 2002; Marchand and Runyon 2000; Ehrenreich 2001). However, new opportunities for women are emerging as well, albeit often affected by race and class. Professional women inhabiting the world of international finance or involved in international bureaucratic machineries are positioned very differently to white Russian women looking to improve their life chances by consenting to become 'catalogue brides', and still more differently from Filipina domestic workers in North America and Europe (Gardiner Barber 2002). Thus globalization is a two-edged sword for women – many are losing, but some have gained and are now in a position to negotiate better conditions – albeit more often as individuals than as a group (Marchand and Runyan 2000).

Consequently, some women should be in a better position to push for more gender equitable governance practices, and many more may be able to exert pressure through collective action. Yet discussions about governance remain largely gender neutral (Rai 2002). The current debates focus on whether governance in an increasingly global world is best achieved at the global, regional or national levels. Some 'globalists' argue that the state's regulatory role is being taken over by multilateral organizations. They look to international organizations and legal instruments for solutions, pinning their hopes on the regulatory effect of the United Nations, the World Court and bodies such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). However, recent protests at the WTO meeting in Seattle and the World Bank/IMF meeting in Washington reveal a growing skepticism about this option. Although some authors argue that recent protests demonstrate the capacity of citizen activists to reign in global institutions (Liebowitz 2000: 41; Finnegan 2000, Naim 2000), others believe these global organizations are no longer accountable to citizens of nation states, but more to global civil society. None of this discussion attends to the gendered implications of global governance.

Increasingly, scholars and activists are looking to the nation state for solutions. Nation states, of course, vary markedly in their ability and/or desire either to

confront and/or negotiate with global forces, corporations and finance. And within states, considerable variation exists in the degree to which democratic accountability exists to all or most people, who are never monolithically equal in political and power terms. Class, geography and gender are notable factors determining access to and/or experience with state power. Nevertheless, national politics is increasingly seen as a key arena for struggles against poverty and marginalization. Not surprisingly, good governance and the empowerment of citizens and groups so they can ensure responsible governance, is beginning to become a more central issue for some scholars and activists (Stiles 2000, Staudt 1998).

At the same time, it is important to remember that states have historically institutionalized male interests (see for example, Charlton *et al* 1989; Parpart and Staudt 1989; Rai and Lievesley 1996). This is reflected in the small numbers of women holding decision-making positions in state structures – a mere tenth or less of women legislators is the global norm (UNDP 1995; Staudt 1996). Such minority positioning often constrains women legislators from raising strategic issues for women. Challenges to this situation are being pursued at several levels. First, greater participation of women in national political bodies is argued for as part of the processes of democratization. Second, some call for mainstreaming gender in both national and global policy making and institutional politics (see McBride-Stetson and Mazur 1995; Rai 2002). Empowerment in this context depends upon the space women are able to create within political structures, as well as the issues they are able to raise (or not) in their own strategic interests. Third, some of the most successful challenges to poor governance by women have come from women (and sympathetic men) in non-governmental organizations. These organizations have ranged from international organizations committed to women's rights, to national women's groups to small-scale community-based organizations working for local change. For example, international NGOs such as the Planned Parenthood Federation have supported women's demands for better health services for women (Stienstra 1994). Women's groups in Chile played a key role in challenges to military rule, yet once democracy had returned, these same groups resisted pressures to reassert patriarchal practices (Bodur and Franceschet 2002). In South Africa, the national and local women's groups that fought for democracy are now pressuring the government to protect women from violence and AIDS (Mail and Guardian, April 25-May 1st, 2003; Mangaliso 1997). Women's movements have challenged the World Bank neo-liberal agenda (O'Brien, Goetz, Scholte and Williams 2000). In order to understand these various efforts, we need much more careful, historically specific analyses of women's attempts to develop political strategies and networks that challenge male power structures and improve state

responsiveness to women's issues in a rapidly globalizing world (Cockburn 1999).

IN CONCLUSION
There is much to be done, and this chapter is more a call for action and reflection than a list of guidelines for engendering governance in a restructuring global political economy. However, certain issues are clear. Governance is highly gendered, and women's participation in positions of authority within governance structures at all levels, is problematic. However, if we focus entirely on formal positions of authority, the opportunities for altering this imbalance is minimal. The literature on gender, power and empowerment suggests the need for a different approach, one that acknowledges the fluid, relational and pervasive character of power and the need to interrogate the workings of gender and power at all levels of society. Women who are held hostage in family structures are scarcely going to be able to come together to effect change. Cultural practices that inhibit conscientization about gender inequality often inhibit the chance that women and sympathetic men may understand and feel inspired to act for change (Afshar 1998). Without individual conscientization and commitment, transformation of national and global governance is unlikely.

At the same time, we need to know more about the factors that enable women and men to press for change, to take the risks involved in fighting for a more gender equitable community. Collective and individual actions at the community level, even in the poorest, most remote places, are key building blocks for engendering governance. A political culture that demands gender equity, and holds local actors accountable, is essential for improved gender relations at all levels. Similarly, the national level is a place where gender, power and governance intersect in many subtle ways. It is not enough to count the number of women working in bureaucracies. We must understand the many ways women have pressured bureaucracies and political parties for more gender equitable practices – and the many ways they have not (or have tried and failed).

The lessons of history allow us to learn from the past and to construct a new future. Past experiences, the stories and strategies from struggles for gender equality at all levels, can inspire action as well as warning against easy promises and quick fixes. For example, gender mainstreaming is often presented as the panacea for more gender-equitable governance. Yet do we know enough about the way these policies have worked out on the ground? The lessons of the past call for critical assessment and in-depth analysis of the successes and limitations of this 'solution'. Moreover, a more fluid, relational notion of power also helps to move beyond simply counting numbers of women in institutions to a more creative and nuanced evaluation of

policies such as gender mainstreaming (Gibb 2001; O'Brien et al 2000: chapter 2). Often empowerment happens in unexpected and apparently trivial ways. Yet it can make a difference. For example, in South Africa the women's budget campaign has not effected much legislative change, but it has highlighted the gendered nature of most government budgets and created a rallying point for women in a number of countries (Budlender 1996).

Finally, globalizing issues of governance, as well as networking globally to challenge hegemonic institutional politics within the local/national space are also critically important elements in the struggles for women's empowerment. Some women (and more men) have gained opportunities and power through their position in the global economy. Their skills and connections have provided an avenue of advancement. Yet many women (and men) are floundering in an increasingly competitive world economy; their lack of skills and connections is leaving them ever further behind. Efforts to empower women that ignore the way women (and men) are situated in an increasingly global world economy are bound to fail (Rai 2002: Marchand and Runyon 2000). Some can challenge global restructuring on their own. Others must work together in groups and some need assistance to discover both their own knowledge and ways of mobilizing to effect change.

However, none of these efforts can be understood separately. Gender struggles occur in many places -- in the home, in the community, in NGOs, in institutions such as the media, schools and churches, in the workplace and in national and global structures. While the limits on personal and institutional energies often constrain action to particular arenas, it is essential that all efforts to challenge gender hierarchies understand the multi-leveled nature of the struggle. Only then will we begin to discover ways to bring about more gender equitable, accountable governance structures and practices at all level of society. This is a challenge facing all of us who believe that good governance that ignores gender equity is not an acceptable strategy for achieving a fairer, more accountable world.

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