

Some thoughts on gender and culture

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In an article which appeared in *Development in Practice*, Volume 5, Number 3, Mike Powell raised many issues about subjective perceptions, mainly those of 'outsiders' who interfere in cultures they do not fully understand. Such dilemmas have implications for 'insiders' as well as 'outsiders', because all development practitioners are in some way intervening in processes of social transformation, and are involved in the business of allocating resources.

I want to explore the issue of gender and culture: areas where the ways in which development practitioners understand and intervene in a situation can further entrench gender-based inequality, or demonstrate the possibility that such inequalities are open to challenge.

In India, I operate within my own society and culture, and so am an 'insider'. But in my work for gender equity, I have often experienced allegations from different quarters that this is against our culture, violates our traditions, and (the worst criticism of all in the Indian context) that it is 'Westernised'. It is common for gender and development practitioners to be labelled in this manner, though the precise allegations may differ from one place to another. Gender relations are viewed as among the most intimate aspects of our cultural traditions, and challenging them seems to challenge the very basis of who we are.

In 1984, I published a book about women and development in India, and undertook a publicity tour in the United Kingdom. Among many presentations I made, the most memorable for me was at the Pakistan Centre in Liverpool. Most of the predominantly male audience were from India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh.

The discussion that followed my talk was lively, to say the least, and abusive at its worst. My book criticised the Indian model of development for working against women's interests, and Indian society for its treatment of women. I was initially taken aback by the reaction, until it dawned on me what was happening. The Indians, Pakistanis, and

Bangladeshis had united (leaving aside, for the time being, their bitter differences on the sub-continent) in a vigorous defence of culture and tradition: a tradition which respected its women, a tradition which was protective of its women, and one in which women were the centre of families which, in turn, were collectivities of co-operation, love, and sacrifice. In fact, they were drawing a simplified picture of gender relations which amounted to a fiction of a monolithic, timeless culture: an immutable, 'South Asian' culture.

I had offended my audience, first by 'turning traitor' to my own culture, and raising doubts about women's position in Indian society. Secondly, I had done so in a Western country which they had decided to perceive, in the interests of preserving their own separate cultural identity, as a culture full of 'loose' women, and broken families.

There was a sequel to this experience: a Pakistani woman followed me out of the hall, and thanked me for my presentation. She had been working with Asian women facing domestic violence, ever since her daughter committed suicide, unable to endure further harassment and torture in her marital home.

I am often asked, usually by expatriate development workers, whether by intervening on women's behalf we are upsetting the gender roles and relations characteristic of the culture. The fear that we may be imposing our own cultural values by promoting gender equity in our development work is a real one. However, it is real largely because we allow our own culture-based assumptions about women to colour our response to alternative visions of gender equality. And we fail to recognise the everyday forms of resistance put up by subordinated groups, because these do not correspond to our experience.

If gender relations are equated with the most intimate aspects of our cultures, and if culture and tradition are assumed to be immutable, rather than the site of resistance from subordinated groups, gender relations soon become a 'no-go area'; and allocating resources in order to redress the imbalance of power between men and women is made politically difficult.

But cultures are not fixed or immutable. Contests to 'fix' the meanings of social entities take place all the time, leading to changes in social practices. Development practitioners have to take sides in those contests which help to dismantle hierarchies of gender and class. By failing to recognise that these are going on, and listening only to the voice of the powerful in society, we are in fact taking the side of the fundamentalists, who render religion uniform throughout the world by

enforcing traditions of hierarchical gender roles and relations, and presenting them as unchanging and authoritative.

There are no hard and fast distinctions between the material world and the world of ideas, values, and beliefs. We must work at both levels to bring about the changes that are supposed to be the purpose of development. I end with a plea for development practitioners to use culture as a way to open up intractable areas of gender relations, and not to regard it as a dead end which prevents us from working towards more equitable relations between women and men.

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