

Gender in development: a long haul – but we’re getting there!

Josefina Stubbs

The women’s and feminist movements have revolutionised the concept of what constitutes the public and private, and have brought to the understanding and business of politics the need to recognise individuality and to see diversity as something legitimate. These are fundamental contributions to building democracy. While we cannot ignore the downsides of aid, the political and financial support provided by the international development co-operation agencies has been important in helping to consolidate and ‘globalise’ feminist agendas within civil society, within governments, and within these agencies themselves.

With a wealth of achievements but also of frustrations, the women’s movements, women’s NGOs, and international development co-operation agencies all suffer the painful paradoxes that have accompanied the advances that have already been made, as well as the challenges brought by the new economic, political, and social realities now being experienced in both the South and North. These stumbling-blocks are not insurmountable. However, they do demand a clear-sighted analysis of our supposed victories and a measured review of the mistakes made along the way. The situation calls for a new generation of women who, on the basis of their own needs and contexts and within their domestic and work spheres, can articulate appropriate strategies and take a fresh approach to the continuing struggle for equality and equity between men and women.

In the following paragraphs I will talk about my experience as a feminist woman working for an international development co-operation agency. I will try to identify the successes as well as the setbacks and the

stumbling-blocks that have impeded us from making a greater advance in gender equity and improving women's quality of life. I also analyse the paradoxes that are peculiar to international co-operation agencies as they incorporate a gender perspective in their strategies and development programmes. My information, reflections, and experience essentially relate to Latin America and the Caribbean. Aware as I am of the cultural and historical differences that give specific forms to women's resistance in other parts of the world, I in no way assume that women who do not share my own background should necessarily identify with or feel represented by these reflections.

Feminism, or the world seen from the inside looking out

The feminist movements of the last three decades have revolutionised the concept and practice of politics. Women have sought to create a new social subject, whose stimulus for political action, both collective and individual, is defined by the prohibitions, exclusions, and violence that they experience. Taking this reality as their jumping-off point, feminists have drawn on their inexhaustible energy for change to question the State, governments, and the political economy of the generally repressive régimes that were in power throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. There has been no social, political, public, or private space where women have not raised their voices against discrimination and exclusion, and for equality. During the 1980s and 1990s, countless women's organisations sprang up. And, from within their own, autonomous, forums, they began to demand that their rights be fully recognised, both in the public and private domain, 'in the streets and at home'.

The late 1990s were marked by a profound diversity of social identities, and also by the diversification of the forms and rationales around which women are continuing the struggle for meaningful change. They were also marked by a breakdown in the ways in which the women's movement and its demands had been structured in the past, particularly in the NGO sector. As Virginia Vargas puts it, 'one can go on talking about feminism, but this is no longer in the singular but in the plural, and is expressed through myriad forms and in myriad spheres. Feminist ideas have experienced a diffuse but increasing and consistent expansion in their scope of influence' (Vargas 1999: 1). This reality, which at one and the same time overturns the idea of a single, centralised, and hegemonic movement, incorporates an extraordinary richness of potential

strategic alliances within the women's movement and between the women's movement and the rest of society, something that may well bring about significant changes in both the public and private lives of women and their wider contexts.

Despite the difficulties and tensions that this very diversity meant for the feminist movement of the 1990s, women have once more put on the table the importance of these differences and the need to recognise these, not only for women but also for society as a whole, stressing that each individual should be recognised, and respected, as unique (Melucci 1989). Without a doubt, this represents an enormous contribution that women have made to establishing a new definition of democracy that goes beyond the formalities of electoral systems, which are dominated by very same political parties in which many women were active (and indeed some still are) but from which many women have distanced themselves, following bitter battles to establish space for their ideas.

Women's social action and its entry into the public domain have taken many forms. One of them, perhaps the overriding one, was the establishment of women's NGOs. In the following section we will consider the advances and dilemmas that this way of structuring their organisation has meant for women and for taking forward the agenda of gender equity.

Women's NGOs

At key moments, all social movements need some form of structure in order to lend public visibility to their battles. NGOs served to provide openings for the expression of women's demands and facilitated the task of getting the feminist agenda and its ideals out to women from the poorer social sectors and later to officialdom, through a variety of means.

This way of doing things was made possible through the increase in private and bilateral international aid, in some cases initially intended to cushion the worsening poverty levels throughout Latin America that had resulted from economic structural adjustment programmes. This was accompanied by the corruption and lack of transparency that characterised most governments in the region, and by the corresponding lack of trust in the capacity of officialdom to fulfil the aims and objectives that the development co-operation agencies were proposing. The fragmentation of the left-wing parties and the efforts made by many social and political activists to get closer to ordinary people through popular

education created the necessary conditions for the development of new openings and institutional formulas for political action.

The NGO model also allowed access to the material resources that facilitated the grassroots development of the women's movement. In a context where it was difficult simply to survive, the women's movement could never have built itself up on the basis of militancy and voluntary action alone (Figueiras 1995).

Thus, women's NGOs were operating in a situation which required them to engage in permanent negotiation – sometimes even hard struggle – with the aid agencies to secure funding for their activities. At the same time, the NGOs were trying to work with women from very different walks of life and from a diverse range of women's groups, all within a hostile context of *machismo* and patriarchy. Within the creative tension fostered by this kind of triangle – the international co-operation agencies, the women's NGOs, and women's groups on the ground – the latter two were able to establish themselves, consolidate, and expand.

In order to acquire social and political legitimacy and to be able to function in hostile public domains, women's NGOs had to temper their demands with moderation. As their legitimacy grew, they appeared to be a building-block of the NGO model. I share the view of some feminists that the work of women's NGOs was increasingly concentrated on addressing basic needs, focused on key themes, specific sectors, and concrete objectives; and that their impact was aimed at small groups whose relationship with the wider civil society was often somewhat limited. These behaviour patterns are in turn the logical outcome of the funding relationships between women's organisations and development agencies (Figueiras 1995), something to which I shall return below.

By the early 1990s, and more so by the middle of the decade, the outer limits defining the women's NGOs became almost like ramparts holding back their own development. They were caught in the conflict between the need to have an acceptable, open, and transparent institutional purpose, and to be simultaneously accountable to many stakeholders, on the one hand; and, on the other, having to function as a movement with the capacity to create horizontal alliances among (by now very diverse) groups of women. The result was that many NGOs descended into deep institutional crises. On top of this, many development co-operation agencies began to shift their funding policies, and rapid changes were taking place in the global economic and political order. Only those women's NGOs that managed successfully to handle the dual demands of being part of a movement – and so seeking to consolidate more

democratic institutional practices – while also readjusting to the external context have been able to keep going.

The discussion about the institutionalisation of the women's movement is one of the most critical dilemmas facing the feminist movement. I agree with authors like Virginia Vargas (1999) that the fundamental problem is not the institutionalisation *per se*, but rather the lack of discussion and reflection on themes such as power relations, hegemony, and the difficulties that women's NGOs were encountering as they tried to build more horizontal alliances with other women's sectors, with civil society in general, and even with the State.

Successes and dilemmas

The women's movement has been active at various levels. First, at the symbolic level, in having succeeded in getting the idea of gender equity and the right to equality into the collective and individual consciousness. Second, and in more practical and tangible terms, we can see the material and visible changes in women's daily experiences (responsible motherhood, freer sexuality, inclusion in the labour market) and in macro-economic issues.

The work of women's NGOs has been tremendously successful in integrating the concept of equality, and of gender equity; as well as in pushing for it to be incorporated in the discourse of institutions that rule and reproduce society. However, there are natural frictions between this symbolic level and its translation into concrete actions and policies, which are in turn reflected in increased economic, social, and political well-being for women, above all the poorest.

Notwithstanding numerous difficulties, NGOs have been pushing forward the frontiers of the *status quo* in terms of issues such as violence, abortion, reproductive health, reproductive and domestic work, among others. Whatever the advances, however, the statistics show that women remain the poorest of the poor: and that, despite symbolic progress, with women in many countries having reached higher average education levels than those of men, this is not reflected in greater employment opportunities for women, or in equal pay for men and women doing comparable work.

This situation suggests that one of the challenges of the women's movements is to improve our understanding of how the economy and labour market work. The economic changes that are occurring as a result of the processes of globalisation, and the speed with which they are

proceeding, are posing a threat to the openings for women's participation that had already been won. That said, there are also new opportunities of which we are as yet unable to take advantage and which could benefit women and promote equality between men and women.

These challenges compel us to redefine the role and ways of working of women's NGOs, and to look afresh at the new threats and opportunities that are arising from changes in the social, political, and economic context, not least since these changes will have a fundamental influence upon social organisations and institutions.

It is worth mentioning the acceptance on the part of governments, multilateral agencies, and some of the financial institutions (such as the World Bank) of the need to advance equity and equality of opportunity between women and men. Despite their limitations, these advances are of major political importance. In a globalised world, which is increasingly governed by multilateral structures that will have an incalculable impact on the political and economic life of every country, the concern for women in these organisations is of utmost relevance.

Similarly, though we might find it difficult to accept, these agencies succeeded in putting pressure on national governments, some of which were hostile to policies to promote equity. The governments that signed up to the agreements resulting from the conferences of Beijing (1995) and Cairo (1994), and the standards introduced by the Convention to End All Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, formulated in 1979) defined general guidelines to measure the advances of national and international policies and action on violence and reproductive health among others. The implementation of these agreements will be successful as long as governments have the means to facilitate it. However, this also demands a capacity on the part of women and women's movements to make alliances and to link their actions with sectors beyond the movement itself. It will be essential not only for women's groups but also for civil-society organisations with which women are forming strategic alliances to develop the capacity to monitor the implementation of policies that are geared to promoting gender equity.

The paths we have already trodden, the progress that has been made, and challenges we now face, also oblige the development co-operation agencies to reflect on their structures and work practices – the subject of the next section.

Private development co-operation agencies

Stemming from their role in eradicating the causes of poverty, international development co-operation agencies have played and continue to play a crucial role in supporting the advance of women's protests and proposals for building more equitable and just societies for both sexes. However, these agencies have to face up to serious weaknesses.

First, there is a lack of coherent analysis and clear thinking in relation to the perspective of gender equity within the framework of development work. The debate on the incorporation of women in development began in the 1970s, reaching a watershed in 1975 with the UN Decade for Women. To some extent, this shaped the agendas that would define how women should be integrated into the ambit of development. The Women's Decade and the work that ensued put the issue on the table at the international level and encouraged the Decade's concerns to be taken up by various bodies and development co-operation agencies. From this point on, we see the issue of women in development (WID) being incorporated into agencies' efforts to strengthen social development – so it was not a spontaneous, organic, internal process, but the agencies' response to external events. The integration of 'women's issues' found agency staff devoid of the required conceptual tools, strategies, and methods to underpin their work on gender, women, and development.

Faced with these limitations, specialised departments and gender units sprang up within many co-operation agencies. The agencies then began to develop meaningful categories of analysis, to review certain practices, and to define general and thematic policies for work with women and/or with a gender perspective. For instance, in Oxfam GB, an institution-wide gender policy was adopted that embraced not only the funding of programmes and projects, but also the agency's overall work. Other co-operation agencies also made important advances in this direction.

To a great extent, the definition of an institutional policy on gender, which had grown out of extensive internal consultation, as well as consultation with key counterparts and with external sectors, raised the expectation that the integration of the analysis and practice of gender-sensitive work would follow on automatically. It was assumed that the issue was legitimised, and that its implementation would therefore be incorporated across the board within everything the agency proposed or did.

It seems as if the recognition of gender as a cross-cutting dimension in fact became a kind of veil that masked the real gender-related issues and so precluded an analysis of power relations and essentially thwarted the genuine integration of a gender perspective into our programmes. For me, the biggest lesson of all is that so-called 'mainstreaming' does not happen automatically. For this to happen, we must be prepared to overturn the existing theoretical frameworks and create new paradigms for our own work – for development and planning are profoundly political processes and not purely technical or technocratic ones.

Second, as a result of what I have described above, private development co-operation agencies have not made progress in reforming their working practices or revising the administrative procedures that basically dominate the institution's internal dynamics. The project, until very recently, was the quintessential administrative unit for anything to be funded, also serving as the means to demonstrate progress and impact. It remains the unit of work *par excellence*. Obviously, this has led to working methods that are based on discrete sets of activities; methods which by their very nature preclude a more holistic vision of the interconnectedness between any concrete action and the strategic changes which are taking place at the macro level.

Third, there is the weakness in any agency's own identity in negotiating with women's organisations from a clear institutional standpoint. Naturally, agency representatives and many of their Southern NGO counterparts share the same opinions on the ultimate objectives of social change. But, in the context of the women's NGOs, this gave rise to tensions and contradictions between supporting the strategies of the women's movement as such, and finding a way to advance the mutual interests of the women's NGOs and the aid agencies.

I agree with the criticisms that many women have made (Figueiras 1995) about the way in which women's agendas and the style of working of many of their organisations echo the form and work priorities of the funding agencies. In the process of negotiation that took place between the international agencies and the local women's NGOs, the latter essentially assimilated the working practices, priorities, and strategies favoured by former.

Over recent years, the development co-operation agencies have undergone major changes in their focus and ways of working. These relate mainly to the move away from the project as the unit of planning to programmes which are based on wider strategic analyses and geared to effect changes at different levels. Different ways of working are leading

to programmes that have a more global perspective, are better integrated, and in which the need for changes at both the micro and macro levels is seen as being necessary to bring about real social change. There is an understanding of the importance of policies as well as direct beneficiary-led action in addressing the underlying causes of poverty. In addition, development co-operation agencies are feeling the pressure from their own donors and other stakeholders to account systematically for the results and impact of the programmes and projects that they are funding.

In spite of what has already been achieved, there are still many challenges and problems to overcome. We need to make progress in refining the frameworks and strategies, as well as methods for putting them into practice. These conceptual frameworks and strategies need to respond to what is going on in the economic and political context within which programme and projects are being implemented. At the same time, important internal changes need to be revived and catalysed within the agencies themselves.

New opportunities for a new role

We can afford no further delay in updating the conceptual framework and methodological tools used by development co-operation agencies in relation to the work on gender and development. The changes that are resulting from the re-organisation of the world economy should be seen as an opportunity for a new analysis that takes account of the changing social, economic, and political circumstances within which the countries and sectors supported by these agencies are having to function.

Without wanting to suggest that the agencies revert to their old ways of responding to their weak spots on gender issues, it is vital that they take on staff who are specialised in gender, women, and development, while at the same time putting more effort into a debate which is trying to pull together what has been learnt, in order to develop new and updated ways of working. These efforts are needed both within the agencies themselves and in relation to their dealings with women's groups.

We need also to 'systematise' the accumulated experience about the women's regional and international networks which have made it possible to build new development models, new forms of South-South and South-North relationships, and establish inter-institutional links to take forward policy reforms and legal frameworks. In view of their experience and contact with organisations across a range of different countries at any one time, development co-operation agencies have

encouraged and supported the creation of national and international women's networks. These have served as spaces for discussion, for the sharing of experiences, and for forging agreements on action agendas which were to have an impact far beyond the national frontiers of any of the individuals or organisations who participated in them.

The Among Women Network (*Red Entre Mujeres*), encouraged and supported by the Dutch agency Novib, and the efforts devoted to building the network of Caribbean women fostered in its early days by Oxfam GB and Oxfam America are just two interesting and innovative examples. Many other networks have been created throughout Latin America continent and between *latinas* and women from other continents. For example, DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era) brings together strong Third World feminists whose clear analysis has demonstrated the close relationship between the subordination of women and the global economy, structural adjustment programmes, the deterioration of services, environmental degradation, and violence against women, to name but a few (Antrobus 1997). Their proposals on the need for paradigms whose methods and strategies were capable of including women in development – beyond their simplistic involvement in marginal income-generating projects – reverberated around the world, because they turned upside-down the principles of the market economy, ways of understanding the environment, the concept of North and South, and the predominant ways of thinking about women and development (Mies and Shiva 1993).

Similarly, international co-operation agencies can play an important role in fostering mutually beneficial alliances between sectors with somewhat different characteristics. One such example was the role that Oxfam GB played in the review of how the codes of conduct adopted by the transnational jeans company Levi Strauss and Co. were being observed in the Dominican Republic. Here, Oxfam GB helped to bring the private sector and local NGOs closer together, with a view to revising the quality standards of employees' (male and female) working environment. Through this, improvements were obtained which directly benefited the company's workers – not only in the Dominican Republic but also in all the countries where the company has production plants.

In conclusion, I believe that the globalisation process offers development co-operation agencies the opportunity to go beyond simply project funding and to become strategic allies of those Southern organisations which seek to influence international policies towards equity and equality of opportunity, and against poverty. I am convinced

that our experience has shown us the importance of addressing economic and social policies and their impact on the poorest. Similarly, going beyond their simple funding role, international co-operation agencies are now called upon to support and offer strategic accompaniment to those local initiatives that can in turn transform themselves into new points of reference in defending new ways of 'doing' development.

Acknowledgement

Translated by Frances Rubin and Deborah Eade. Original Spanish version available from the Editor on request.

References

Antrobus, Peggy (1997) 'Women and planning: the need for an alternative analysis', in Elsa Leo-Rhynie et al (eds.): *Gender*, Oxford: James Currey

Figueiras, Carmen L. (1995) 'Feminismo en República Dominicana', *Género y Sociedad* 3(2): 41-90

Melucci, Alberto (1989) *Nomads of the Present*, London: Hutchinson Radius

Mies, Maria and Vandana Shiva (1993) *Ecofeminism*, London: Zed Books

Vargas, Virginia (1999) 'De multiples formas y en multiples espacios', *fempress*, special number