Chapter 15

Out of focus: gender visibilities in development

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Women. What are we good for? Absolutely everything. But you would never know it from development work. Within development rhetoric, women have value in terms of our capacities to reproduce and to nurture children, families, communities and nations, our propensity to consume, and our victimisation in violent confrontations. In essence, we breed and feed; we buy and cry. But we do so much more. We create; we console; we connect. Our visibility as dynamic, active participants has been obscured. So how have we achieved this disjuncture?

In the spirit of "mapping the field" I explore, in this chapter, tensions in the field across approaches recognizing women, gender, and feminist concerns. The very visibilities of development issues shift in focus and frame, across historical moment as well as institutional context. The panoptic gaze described by Escobar (1995) illustrates how development institutions with power are able to inscribe their characterizations of women in order to justify their own political and economic agendas. Women not only serve as a prominent "target" within media campaigns, particularly in the areas of population, health, and nutrition, but also function symbolically as nurturers of community and nation, and as victims justifying development, and military, intervention.

Within the context of the broader field of development communication, we can distinguish attention to what development communicates about particular people, problems, and solutions, from well rehearsed discussions of how communication strategies promote development (Wilkins and Mody, 2001). In order to provide an overview of the field, I focus on the shifting visibilities of

women and gender within development, the material structures within which these visibilities are articulated, and consider how feminist critiques might contribute to this dialogue.

Communicating women, gender, and feminism in development

Development strategies designed to address women's issues face a paradox: despite more and better programs and research efforts, women's conditions are not improving. Women are more likely than men to suffer from poverty, with their access restricted to critical education, health, employment, and political resources (Neft and Levine, 1997; Steeves, 2000). Clearly, a few isolated, meager development projects are not enough to raise the political, economic, and social status of women on a global scale. However, development programs comprise fundamental strategies implemented toward resolving gender inequities. It is important to critique development discourse in order to build potentially improved models for social intervention: this deconstruction may help us consider how to reconstruct our strategic paths toward social change (Nederveen Pieterse, 2001).

Development discourse communicates assumptions about women, gender, and feminist critique through its articulation of broad programmatic goals as well as of specific project strategies. On the one hand, one can conceptualize the field of development as having moved historically through a period of no attention to women toward a recognition of women's integral roles in the development process (WID), incorporating over time, and in some limited instances, an understanding of the broader gender dynamics that structure men's and women's participation in development processes (GAD). Since the introduction of GAD, feminist critiques have gained more attention, situating issues of gender within other conditions of oppression, such as ethnicity and class, in a global context.

While these contributions can be seen as representing historical shifts in the field (Wilkins, 1999, 2000), it is important to recognize that at present each of these approaches still permeates development discourse. It is not that moving from attention to WID toward a recognition of GAD implies that development work no longer operates within the framework of WID. Rather, each of these approaches works in different ways, guiding project activity and program justification, in different ways. Issues of feminism, gender and women should be seen as intersecting in some instances, while serving different political purposes in other senses through the course of development work.

The movement toward recognizing women's roles in development (WID) in the 1970s reinforced broader attention to women's issues raised by social movements as well as by global conferences on the subject. The 1975 UN conference in Mexico City launched that Year of Women, which then led into the Advancement of Women (1976 until 1985). WID discourse focuses on women's contribution to development through their economic production (Boserup, 1970)

and human reproduction (Staudt, 1985). These two roles emphasize women's active contributions, such as through farming, toward their material gain, as well as women's more passive roles, as nurturers for their children and families. The emphasis here is on women as a specific group, irrespective of other conditions, such as class, ethnicity, or urbanity. Instead, projects emphasize the importance of selecting women as beneficiaries or participants, the language depending on the perspective of the project.

An articulation of gender concerns over women's issues is meant to signal recognition of gender roles as being socially constituted. Development programs focusing on "gender" do more than focus on women as subjects and objects of development, but instead attempt to address or at least understand the structural systems of patriarchy and power that inhibit women's and men's potential (Cardinal, Costigan and Heffernan, 1994; Dagenais and Piché, 1994; Parpart, 1995). GAD projects should be addressing more of the social and structural issues of development, in contrast to WID projects that target women as individuals in the process of social change.

Next, feminist scholarship builds on this recognition of the broader systems of power that contribute toward and inhibit gender concerns, adding more complexity and political dimensions. First, issues of gender are recognized as being closely connected with broader experiences of oppression, connected with various conditions of marginality, such as race, ethnicity, and class (Luthra, 1996; Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1996; Chua et al, 2000; Mohanty, 1991a, 1991b). Feminist critiques of the representation of "third world women" as being constructed in monolithic terms as generic others, as passive, traditional, and victimized (Hegde, 1996, 1998; Mohanty, 1991a, 1991b; Shome, 1996), have contributed substantially in this realm. Some (Calás and Smircich, 1996; Hegde, 1998) advocate a more political stance, moving beyond academic research deconstructing development texts, toward strategies addressing experiences of oppression. In addition, a critical feminist approach points us not only toward the concerns raised within local communities, but also toward power dynamics within donor institutions, such as the proportion of women employed and the types of positions held.

Envisioning women in development

In keeping with the dominant mode of development approaches, in this section I consider how women, in particular, become seen through development practice, when considered as targets or participants of projects. Specifically, I comment on the passive and monolithic characterization, particularly in terms of the sexualisation of women through reproductive health and population programmes, the commodification of women as consumers through communication campaigns, and the victimisation of women through emergency aid and military intervention. This discussion then allows for further exploration regarding the extent to which more active roles might be engaged, and gender and feminist concerns might be integrated into development work.

In much of development discourse, particularly in the Women in Development (WID) tradition, women's roles tend to be conceived through their bodies, as motherly nurturers or sexual temptresses (Calás and Smircich, 1996; Chua et al, 2000; Cloud, 2004; Meyer and Prugl, 1999; Mohanty, 1991b; Rodríguez, 2001; Wilkins, 1999). It is particularly worth noting that in many donor organisations financial resources devoted to "women's" issues tend to be channeled through children's health, nutrition, and population programmes. For example, an intervention to address deficiencies in iodine, iron, and vitamin A justified its attention to women of reproductive age in order to improve "pregnancy outcomes and increased productivity" (Smitasiri and Dhannnamitta, 1999: 5).

The sense that women are passively suffering from the burdens of their sexuality and reproductive capacities, as a result of their "traditional" cultures, becomes more pronounced in those regions that are culturally distant from the homes of prominent bilateral donors (Chua et al, 2000; Mohanty, 1991b). An Orientalist approach to development incorporates patriarchal assumptions, which envision "other" women in passive roles requiring "our" assistance. "Helping" women in these culturally distant spaces focuses on women's sexuality, through development programmes focusing on attempts to control women's bodies.

Although reproductive health may be an important issue, development programmes should be faulted for concentrating on this at the expense of a broad range of concerns, and for constructing women as passively responding to interventions instead of as actively engaging in decision making about their own sexuality. But it is not just that development agencies create roles for women as passive victims requiring assistance: these visions of women vary across cultural space, such that cultural "others" are more easily justified as targets for development intervention.

Development communication campaigns also rely on passive characterisations of women, conceived as "targets" for intervention. The underlying model of social marketing assumes that individuals (not policies or structures) are the appropriate targets for change, and that behavior change is an appropriate focus for intervention. While the "product" advocated through social marketing campaigns need not pertain to a material artifact but might also refer to an idea, often the suggested practice, particularly in health and nutrition programmes, involves consumption, such as of ORS packets, vitamins, or other material goods. This is not to discount other campaign issues that do not target tangible products for purchase, such as breastfeeding and exercise, but to draw attention instead to the commercial foundations upon which social marketing campaigns are created. As an extension of a commercial model, social marketing targets individual consumers as passive recipients just waiting to be activated into purchasing the right product, which will somehow improve their lives, as well as the lives of their children and families. Consumption then becomes the appropriate way for individual women to engage in social change.

One of the reasons for the popularity of social marketing in communication projects directed toward women is that this very framework of social change does not question, but instead reinforces a global power structure that privileges global corporations, which require us to engage in practices of consumption. Focusing on individuals as the locus of change also distracts us from recognising the power of a collective group in resisting dominant groups such as corporations. Thus, the potential for women to organise and engage critical social issues is marginalised in favor of women's consumption patterns.

Some approaches to entertainment-education may be subject to similar critiques. In some scripts, women become subject to communication strategies attempting to convince them to "role model" themselves after fictional characters, rather than encouraged to see broader systems of gender dynamics or to engage in collective acts of resistance to consumer culture or to oppressive political systems. Whereas women may not necessarily be targeted as consumers per se as in social marketing, the privatisation of this public interest strategy means that commercial interests compete with socially beneficial purposes. The very structure of many of these programmes involves the "partnership" of private industry with development institutions ostensibly acting in the public interest. This "partnership" limits the potential for communication messages to engage in more controversial subjects and strategies. The integration of commercial products, in the name of the "public good", draws attention away from potentially more environmentally sound and politically responsive solutions.

Women are often used as a justification for development assistance in conflict situations, particularly in discussions of humanitarian and emergency aid. In textual as well as visual references, women crying over death and destruction are used to explain why resources need to be diverted to particular territories. The point here is not that women do not suffer; women do. But so do others. So do men. But women are compelling as victims, largely due to our broader sense of women's subservient role in our society. Playing on these stereotypes, we lose a sense of the humanity of pain and suffering. Instead, women's rights have the potential to become a pretense for development, as well as for military intervention. US rhetoric explaining military intervention in Afghanistan (Cloud, 2004), along with justifications among many development institutions recently investing in this territory, foreground women's concerns as both target and justification.

One of the more politically attractive means of securing fiscal support within the US Agency for International Development (USAID) for women's issues involves leveraging interventions in areas of crisis. The assumption is that emergency relief, to nations such as Sudan, Nigeria and Angola, would be more attractive to American constituents and the US Congress. One way to allocate resources for women then becomes to work with women in crisis territories. For example, a program in Rwanda targets resources directly to women and women's groups to meet their basic needs for food and shelter. The intervention privileges those women who are widows, particularly with children, and those groups with

women officers. Funds are allocated for building homes and for establishing women's cooperatives to market their agricultural products. This strategy connects these projects to larger development issues: "assisting Rwandan women to overcome the burdens of genocidal warfare and the barriers of custom, tradition, and law" (USAID, 1999b: 1).

Women, often the subject and target for development intervention, embody more than the sexual, reproductive, consumption, and victim functions typically portrayed in this discourse. In contrast, some projects do envision women in more active roles. For example, the Women and AIDS research program recognizes women as actively engaged, within an inequitable dynamic in which power differences between men and women inhibit safe sexual practices (Weiss and Gupta, 1998). In Morocco, USAID works with NGOs on voter education campaigns targeting women and consulting with female candidates for parliament. In addition, a Danish supported regional program for Women and Law in Southern Africa (WLSA) informs communities of women's legal rights while advocating women's political networks. The Japanese funded TESDA project in the Philippines provides technical training in skills in order to enhance women's positioning in the formal economic sector. Micro-enterprise and agribusiness projects encourage women to become active entrepreneurs through acquiring loans and investing in infrastructure. Micro-enterprise projects tend to focus on integrating women into the commercial private sector. For example, some micro-enterprise programs teach women how to use computer technologies, as a way to market their products across national boundaries. In Afghanistan, USAID supports projects designed to help rural women generate income through dairy and poultry, in addition to attempting to register them to vote. Other projects in the education sector, such as those teaching girls new technologies or women literacy in order to promote women's political rights and economic opportunities, may also be seen as constructing women as more active participants.

These efforts suggest a pluralist model of social change, in which public education stimulates informed dialogue among individual constituents. Key here is the conceptualization of women's involvement in a formal democratic political structure, rather than the mobilization of women in order to advocate for more progressive feminist concerns. Similarly, development programs emphasizing women's material gains situate economic achievement as an individual act connected with the formal economic structure. Development discourse markets a version of modernity that resonates with the interests of global capital. As targets of development, women unwittingly serve as ideological conduits toward the selling of global modernity.

Overall, women are constructed in mostly passive roles, apart from their connections to the marketplace as entrepreneurs or as consumers, or to the formal political governance structure as candidates or as voters. When project discourse portrays women in more active roles, it does so in relation to women's projected connection to a capitalist economic or democratic political structure.

Moreover, women are articulated as individuals within a pluralist society, rather than as members of a shared collective with the power to mobilize, act, and resist.

The material structure of visibility

Women and gender become visible through the material allocation of resources toward programs as well as the articulation of policies and concepts. This visibility then is manifest through the institutional processes engaged within the development industry. In this section, I explore institutional contexts of funding, organizational structure, gendered composition of development professionals and the politics of language used within organizations.

In response to low funding levels, many development programs have begun to increase their collaboration with private-sector organizations. This commercialization of the development process has been engaged by many of the programs designed to benefit women and girls, with educational strategies being no exception. To illustrate, a current version of the Strategies for Advancing Girls Education Program (SAGE) attempts to mobilize private sectors in support of their efforts. The stated rationale explains that the business community might offer financial support for the educational infrastructure, such as buildings and textbooks (USAID, 1999a).

"Partnering" with private industry allows projects to expand their work while expending fewer resources. The implications of this decision, in the face of economic constraints, are profound. Instead of working with the most needy and marginalized of communities, projects are more likely to target groups of individuals with the ability to consume. In addition, subscribing to a more corporate perspective entails focusing on more short-term tangible results, at the expense of more long-term, nebulous goals, such as improving women's status and human rights (Whelan, 1998).

In addition to issues of funding, development organizations structure their attention to women or gender through the naming of particular divisions, or perhaps through "mainstreaming" or "integrating" these concerns into a variety of divisional sectors. As explained by USAID:

> In development programs, gender matters. Traditions, customs, and laws define gender relations within societies, but they often impose costs that inhibit sustainable development. … Every USAID Bureau and mission shares the goal of improving the status of women in developing economies and emerging democracies (USAID, 2000).

On the positive side, this approach has the potential to legitimize feminist issues within institutional discourse. Given an identifiable budget and reporting structure, this strategy has the capacity to benefit women, recognizing gender as a relationship of power enacted in social and political communities. However, some organizations find it difficult to track how women benefit in these "mainstreamed" or "integrated" programs. A structure of accountability is needed to

evaluate both the processes and the outcomes of these projects. This move toward integration may in effect reflect a political response to those interested in eclipsing feminist issues, and those concerned with reducing budgets. Thus, in practice, by incorporating women's issues into other development concerns, gender issues lose visibility. Gender integration thereby implies a potential disintegration of feminist interests.

Next, I consider the composition of organizational staff, particularly in terms of gendered divisions of labor. Feminist concerns suggest that we recognize the importance of hiring women in senior positions of authority within development institutions, and not just focus on women as recipients and targets of aid. While one should not assume that women uniformly approach development in similar ways, some research suggests that women and men within the same organization do justify and understand their work differently (Wilkins, 1991).

In recent research exploring how development professionals in the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) justified work on women and gender issues, clear differences between male and females staff were discerned (about half of the 39 informants were female). First, the women interviewed were much more likely to engage in discussion of women and gender issues –almost all of the women (83%) compared with only 24% of the men. Among those who did discuss these issues as part of their overall development work, men were more likely to articulate concerns with efficiency, seeing the inclusion of women or gender as a means toward achieving other development goals. In contrast, the women interviewed were more likely to emphasize these approaches as justified in and of themselves, in terms of human rights. The difference here is striking: almost all of the women responding to this question appealed to issues of rights, status, and participation, compared to only one of the men.

Within organizations, issues become visible through the language used to define their terms, as a way of channeling resources and determining accountability. With these sets of issues, attention to "women", "gender", and "feminist" concerns denote different understandings of development issues, while also signaling particular political approaches.

The most dominant approach in larger development institutions still falls within a more women-directed framework, although the term "gender" has been incorporated into published documentation more steadily since the 1995 Beijing conference. For example, the World Bank lists the third Millennium Development goal, "to promote gender equality and empower women –as a central component to its overall mission to reduce poverty and stimulate economic growth" (World Bank, 2004). The Danish International Development Agency and some bilateral institutions describe "gender" (DANIDA, 2000), while USAID describes "women in development" (USAID, 2004a, 2004b) as central cross-cutting issues, along with other central development concerns.

Being more male dominated, these organizations tend to justify their attention to women more often in terms of "efficiency" of programs and as

"technical" solutions than in terms of human rights. Terms such as "feminism" are avoided, along with others such as "abortion", in favor of subjects that are seen as less controversial such as "violence against women". Even women working in prominent bilateral development institutions explain that they work within this technical framework in order to depoliticize these issues, thereby establishing credibility and avoiding resistance.

While many development organizations created WID divisions or offices in the 1970s and 1980s (Wilkins, 1999), JICA did not do so until the early 1990s. The year 1995 marked a critical difference in JICA's commitment to WID concerns: attention in annual reports doubled, and the amount of funding specifically devoted to women's issues increased by about 27% from the previous year. But as global attention subsided in the late 1990s, so did JICA's formal recognition of these as central development concerns.

While "gender" became more prominently displayed in the vocabulary used to describe development concerns since 1995, the projects implemented remained entrenched in the domain of WID. More recently, informants across development organizations report that it was politically more expedient to subsume the potentially contentious issues of gender within the relatively innocuous consideration of "poverty". Female development professionals across organizations also describe how difficult it has been to use the vocabulary or framework of "feminism". JICA informants describe how some male staff had been put off by what they considered to be ardent feminist arguments made by women from Nordic countries during international meetings, or akin to feminist movements toward contraceptive rights within Japan during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Several female informants independently made reference to what they termed male staff's "allergic" reaction to "gender" issues, perceived as emanating from feminist, western liberation movements. As issues of poverty gain focus in development work, feminist and gender concerns lose visibility, thus depoliticizing central concerns with power and structure in development processes.

Future focus

Gender needs to be understood not as a monolithic condition with universal characteristics, but as aligned with other markers of difference, such as class, race, and religious identity, within broader power dynamics. Regardless of institutional base, development practice engages in this problematic hierarchical process, reducing women to narrowly caricatured roles. Without a more respectful approach to women and to social change, development strategies will continue to fail.

Moreover, the structural conditions that foster the hierarchical nature of help, along with the process of "othering" that encapsulates women's roles in passive and sexual terms, are difficult to shift. Supporting the work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) may help to facilitate a process of disengagement from the dominant development approaches, but this strategy itself risks

marginalizing issues that need to become more central to our work in the area of social change. If women's conditions are to improve on a global scale, not only the discourse but also the structure of development work need to change.

Although development and other government institutions may exploit women's issues to pursue their own agendas, there is potential for resistance. We need to consider how to engage respectful strategies that recognise the complexity of gender as well as of the processes of social change. We tend to polarise development processes as either hierarchical or participatory, either dominating communities of passive individuals or engaging active participants in key decisions. Critiques of the dominant approach to development as well as the history of the field do justice in recognising the patriarchal assumptions embedded in creating interventions within powerful institutions that are then imposed on groups with less power. Advocates of participation also offer an important contribution by arguing for contexts of implementation that are respectful and informed, on grounds of ethics and effectiveness. In many ways our attempts to understand women's roles in the development process resonate with these broader interpretations of the field. In some approaches, women serve as passive targets for campaigns, while in others women are sought as active participants, though usually as members of recipient communities rather than engaged as paid, authoritative officials in development organisations.

However, all too often this discussion becomes polarised, simplifying complicated dynamics into the very types of dichotomies that have been the subject of critique: modernity vs. tradition; active vs. passive; top-down vs. bottom-up; dominant vs. participatory approach to development. The processes of creating, implementing, and evaluating development policies and programmes are much more complex than these simplified categories allow. Yet, understanding the broader power dynamics is still a critical component of this process. In this regard, feminist theory offers insight into the structures of power that operate in transnational, institutional, as well as social contexts.

While more attention to gender dynamics, as opposed to targeting of individual women as responsible for development failures, holds great potential, there is still the risk that this perspective may become co-opted and thus lose its critical edge. Feminist critiques offer a way of envisioning gender issues that not only brings broader dynamics of power and markers of difference into focus, but also offers an opportunity for new voices to join the chorus.