The quest for gender equality

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INTRODUCTION

The field of gender and development is often viewed as a sterling example of researchers and activists working together to bring about policy change. A cursory glance at the kinds of policy changes that have occurred in the latter 20th century suggests strong confirmation for this view. Across a sweeping range of issues, from macroeconomics to human rights and political participation, feminist researchers and activists from women’s movements² appear to have succeeded in bringing about significant changes both in discourse and in actual policy.

This happened furthermore, in a relatively short 30-year time-span during which the field of gender and development was itself evolving and taking definition. Perhaps this openness and fluidity in the analytical underpinnings of the field during this time brought a salutary humility to the ways in which researchers were willing to listen to and learn from ground-level activists! Be that as it may, during this time policy was made, changed and shaped by the agglomeration of researchers and activists that call themselves part of the women’s movement. And policy makers who rarely have time or patience to deal with the intellectual vagaries of a newly evolving field appear to have paid attention.

What lessons are there to be learned by those who attempt to create knowledge to support social policy? Is the experience of the women’s movement unique or special? Was it the result of the serendipitous presence of the right people in the right places at the right times? Were there critical elements of conscious planning? And central to the concerns of this paper, is social activism the key to effective translation of research-based knowledge into policy? On the other hand, can activism by itself effect policy change? When and to what extent is research necessary? Are different combinations of research and activism required in different circumstances? The experience of gender and development provides a rich basis for addressing some of these questions. Looking more closely at this

² I do not in this paper get into a detailed definition or discussion of the nature or structure of international or national women’s movements. I use the term here in a fairly general sense, adequate to this discussion. For a more elaborate discussion of the structure, issues, and challenges of the international women’s movement, see Antrobus and Sen (2004) and Antrobus (2004).
experience offers insights into the key issue for this conference: how the relationship between research and policy is mediated by politics, discourse, subjectivity and learning.

The discussion of the paper draws from three illustrative examples of policy change: engendering macroeconomics; sexual and reproductive health and rights; and human rights especially violence against women. In discussing these we show that the relationship of activism to research has been far from smooth, and continues to be fraught with challenges. Nonetheless, it offers a number of lessons for how a better understanding of the politics of policy, and the politics of discourse may actually help to close the gaps between research and policy.

**ILLUSTRATIONS**

The three illustrations below raise a number of common issues that are addressed in later sections.

**Illustration 1: Engendering**

The field of gender and development took shape in the 1970s following the pioneering work of Ester Boserup (1970). Its evolution was informed by the critical research of feminist anthropologists and historians, many of whom drew from and counterposed their work to that of socialist historians and analysts. Particularly influential were the two volumes of anthropological writing edited by Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974) and Reiter (1975), the latter including Rubin’s important essay on ‘the traffic in women’; the work of historians such as Scott and Tilly (1987) who brought a gender lens to earlier gender-blind depictions of the industrial revolution; the analytical integration of production and reproduction in the research of the British ‘subordination of women’ group (Edholm, Harris and Young 1977); and the critique of Boserup’s argument that the problem for women was lack of ‘integration’ into development (Beneria and Sen 1981). This research was analytically rigorous, grounded in history and ethnography, and critical. It helped the field overall to assimilate these characteristics from its early beginnings.

These analytical underpinnings also helped feminists to interpret the difficulties faced by early policy attempts to integrate women in development (Tinker 1976; Buvinic 1984), as well as to develop new ways of understanding the experience of organisations working with women on the ground. The 1970s were not a period of major oppositional activism on gender and development. It was rather a period of developing analytical tools, gathering experience, and sharpening understanding. There was not, at this time, a sharp distinction between researchers and activists; this blurring of roles may also have been due to the importance of universities in the social uprisings of the 1960s. Researchers

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3 The term ‘engendering’ is used here in both its traditional dictionary meaning, and to also mean ‘incorporating gender into’.
4 In India, for example, the most important event of the decade was the participatory process that led to the landmark report, *Toward Equality* (1975?) that mapped out a terrain for research, activism and policy that lasted until the 1990s.
wore the badge of activism with honour, and activists turned overnight into respected analysts and researchers.

The period of the 1970s saw the beginnings of the feminist critique of growth processes that are inimical to equity and sustainability, even as they ignore the requirements of human survival and reproduction where women hold central responsibility. Feminists were not as yet thinking or writing in terms of macroeconomics, but their work was focused on understanding the place of gender in socio-economic systems. As such it sharpened feminist ability to use system-focused approaches that are central to macroeconomics.

This preparation came to quick fruition in the conservative policy climate of the 1980s – the Reagan-Thatcher revolution in the North and the Washington Consensus based structural adjustment programmes promoted by the Bretton Woods institutions in the South. Feminists were among the early critics of structural adjustment programmes, following closely and in parallel to the critique contained in the UNICEF volumes on the importance of putting a human face on adjustment (Cornia et al 1987). The Women’s Tent in the Nairobi conference of 1985 that was the culmination of the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985) saw activists and researchers coming together with a powerful critique of the growth-focused development paradigm. The DAWN network’s platform Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions: Third World Women’s Perspectives (Sen and Grown 1987) articulated an understanding gained through research and field-based experiences. It was the product of what was at the time a new and unusual process of bringing women from different geographical areas, backgrounds, and experiences together to develop a common understanding and analysis. The circles of interaction that DAWN used not only brought researchers and activists together, but also makers and shapers of policy. As a consequence, its critique spread quickly through the wider gender and development networks.

At the same time, feminist economists began addressing the problem of engendering macroeconomics directly even as their understanding of the phenomenon of globalisation and its implications for the gender division of labour grew (Beneria and Roldan 1987; DAWN 1995). The growing work on engendering budgets and budget processes was a spinoff of this attention (Budlender 1996).

On the ground women working in organisations were experiencing the feminisation of poverty, and deepening their understanding of the impact of macro policies beyond the traditional social sectors, health and education. The links between macroeconomic policies, poverty and inequality, environmental sustainability, and the newly emerging concern of trade policies (and later, the World Trade Organization) were articulated by an overwhelming number of the groups that took part in the 35000 strong NGO Forum held in Beijing in 1995. They also began drawing the connections to the growing crisis of

5 For more on the network, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), go to www.dawn.org.fj.
6 The UN conferences of the 1990s were an important catalyst that brought activists and researchers together. The importance of these large forums in making it possible for the women’s movement to impact
violence against women and to the rise of a conservative backlash against women’s autonomy and agency in the public domain. Research and activism came together powerfully and drew a promise from the new president of the World Bank that he would respond and address some of the concerns raised. The period since Beijing has seen further strengthening of feminist analysis of trade and integration, albeit slowly, of women’s concerns in the movement for global economic justice as represented in the World Social Forum (WSF).

Illustration 2: Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

Women’s struggle for control over their bodies is currently in its second phase. The first phase occurred during the birth-control movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This movement was interwoven with the suffragist struggle for the recognition of women as citizens in Europe and North America, and to some extent the anti-colonial movements of that time, although the relationship was by no means straightforward. The period between the first phase and the second phase that goes back to the last thirty years or so saw the population policy field and the discipline of demography grow substantially.

Population policy as it evolved in the period after World War II was largely Malthusian. The concern of the policy establishment in the North with protecting the North from the growing brown, yellow and black peoples of the world was barely concealed in document after document of the 1960s and 1970s. Population growth was portrayed as the single most serious threat to economic development and population control was the policy answer (Ehrlich 1971). Despite the South versus North skirmishes over the relative importance of ‘development’ versus family planning in controlling population growth, there was very little real challenge to this consensus about population policy.

Most demographers have had little to do with or say about the evolution of population policy. Demography developed as a largely technical discipline concerned with the calculus of birth, death and migration, with relatively little interest in social and behavioural issues. Perhaps for this reason, not only have few demographers focused on policy questions, but the field as a whole was able to close itself off from attention to the causes and consequences of sexual and reproductive behaviour, and the social institutions, practices and norms within which that behaviour is embedded in different discourse and policy cannot be minimised. Without these conferences, researchers and activists would have had to find other ways to come together, and that would not have been easy to do on the scale and with the frequency that the UN conferences made possible.

7 The World Bank’s new president, Jim Wolfensohn, followed his promise with a series of actions to pay closer attention to gender in Bank policies.
8 The International Gender and Trade Network (IGTN) was set up explicitly to assist feminists to engage with WTO processes.
9 Annie Besant, the first president of the Indian National Congress that went on to become the main vehicle for the Indian nationalist struggle against British rule, was also a champion of women’s right to birth control.
10 “Development is the best contraceptive” was the South’s slogan during the international population conference held in Bucharest in 1974.
11 This is something of an overstatement. However, though anthropologists and other social scientists have had some space, the field is largely driven by its technical aspects.
cultures and societies. It wasn’t until the rise of the modern women’s movement in the 1960s and 70s that real change became possible in the field.

The international women’s movement had coined and been using the term ‘reproductive rights’ for about twenty years before the paradigm shift that transformed the population field at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994. Much of this work was motivated by activist concern to challenge coercion, human rights abuses, and unethical practices in population policies and programmes. A strong focus of this work was to challenge the ways in which new contraceptive technologies were introduced in family planning programmes. This activism was not matched by significant feminist research effort until the 1990s. During the 1980s feminist demographers remained concerned with the question of whether and through what pathways women’s education or autonomy impact on fertility and related behaviour (Mason 1988).

The upcoming UN conferences of the 1990s galvanised both research and activism. The fact that the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was coming up in Rio in 1992 acted as a major challenge to the women’s movement, since many major North-based environmental groups viewed population growth as a major threat. Feminist activists began a process of consolidation of a counter position that was articulated in the Planeta Femea (the women’s tent in the NGO Forum of UNCED) in the presence of a large number of women from environmental organisations. In the next two years, women’s organisations worked together to develop a consensus position on population policy that would bridge the considerable differences and mistrust that existed among groups from different regions and backgrounds. While some of these differences were the product of mistrust of Northern by Southern groups, there were also tensions among groups within each global pole. A major and conscious effort at bridging gaps and building agreement was critical in allowing the women’s movement to turn its attention to two tasks: the first was to negotiate an alliance with the family planning lobbies, and the second was to develop the political capacity to challenge the growing bloc of religious conservatives that was being created by the Vatican. The success of the women’s movement in accomplishing these two tasks is the history of ICPD.

Again, the role of research and activism combined was critical. Although somewhat slow to get off the ground, feminist research opened up the field in ways that brought new issues and concepts to the table. A new framework for population-related policy was created that affirmed women’s right to control their fertility and meet their needs for safe, affordable and accessible contraceptives, while recognising the social determinants, and health and rights consequences of sexual and reproductive behaviour (Correa and Reichmann 1994; Dixon-Mueller 1993; Sen et al 1994). New and radical concepts such as reproductive and sexual health and rights had to be clarified in a field that had been an “odd mixture of technocratic modelling and doomsday scenarios until then” (Antrobus

12 The Women’s Global Network for Reproductive Rights (WGNRR) was the main international organisation mobilising women at this time.

13 A few women activists from the South even held demonstrations against ICPD during the actual conference.
and Sen forthcoming). A significant part of this research reflected the combined and collective effort of feminist researchers, activists, and a growing number of people from the policy establishment. This again was done consciously to win a place for activists at the policy table, and to build support for the paradigm shift within the policy establishment.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{Illustration 3: Human Rights and Violence Against Women}

Women’s organising in preparation for the 1993 International Conference on Human Rights in Vienna set the stage for the broadening of the human rights framework. Until then there had been two major controversies in the field of human rights. The first was the priority given by Northern governments and organisations to political rights and abuses over economic, social and cultural rights; the struggles to gain recognition for the ‘right to development’ during the conferences of the 1990s provided continuing evidence of this imbalance. The second controversy was over the political use of human rights by powerful countries as a stick to selectively beat countries into submission on various unrelated issues. Women’s activism brought a third issue - women’s human rights - squarely to the centre of the human rights debate (Bunch and Reilly 1994). With this came the question of the universality of human rights versus practices that violate women’s human rights but are upheld by some as cultural norms, e.g., female genital mutilation, or honour killings.

Violence against women became the lever that moved the opposition argument that there was no need for specific recognition of women’s human rights. The presence of women in Vienna testifying to their experiences of violence – systematic rape and war crimes, genital cutting, domestic violence, dowry deaths, honour killings, sexual violence to name only a few – created a climate that made it possible for violence against women to be placed for the first time on the agenda of a major human rights conference. Until then, the UN and governments had tended to treat violence against women as a private, familial or cultural matter; in many instances the official approach was to treat it as a matter of abuse of male private property\textsuperscript{15} rather than an abuse of the woman’s human rights. The recognition of women’s rights as human rights in Vienna in 1993 also made possible the significant advances made in Cairo in 1994 and Beijing in 1995.

This struggle brought together a powerful combination of activists who could identify and document experiences, and feminist lawyers who could translate those experiences into the legal terminology and concepts needed for negotiation. This experience of working together also gave the women’s movement analytical and negotiating skills and very importantly the language skills needed to become effective players in official negotiations. Women in these conferences were present not only as NGO delegates but

\textsuperscript{14} The book co-edited by Sen, Germain and Chen (1994) for example consciously eschewed creating a book in which academic researchers would write the main chapters while women activists would provide illustrative boxes. Instead the process of the book brought both groups together to plan and write the chapters.

\textsuperscript{15} Viewing the wife’s or daughter’s body as the property of the husband / family / clan etc is common in many parts of the world; its violation is treated in the law as a property violation rather than a human rights abuse.
also on official delegations; effective lobbying required rapid development of a very specific set of strategic and tactical negotiating skills that major networks developed through sheer learning by doing! Mistakes were undoubtedly made, but the ability to put tensions aside to work together and to learn from mistakes was a major reason for the effectiveness of the women’s movement in these negotiations.

THE POLITICS OF POLICY ADVOCACY

The three examples above appear to indicate a relatively smooth relationship between researchers and activists in the process of policy advocacy. This was not really so. It is true that the achievements of the women’s movement in these situations were due in no small measure to the ability to work through internal differences and develop common positions. However, the differences were sometimes quite significant and often very difficult to transcend; sometimes the differences would be set aside in the face of a common ‘enemy’ only to resurface when the situation became easier.

Three sets of issues were the source of recurring tensions between researchers and activists: issues of substance, issues of power, and issues of sociology. These issues were not in water-tight compartments moreover and would often be mixed up in practice.

Substantive differences often arose around the relative importance of immediate ground-level perceptions and understanding versus analytical discussion and extrapolation or abstraction. Whose ‘reality’ has greater validity when there are differences? While such tensions are inevitable given the varying grounds of research and activism, they have become sharper in the era of globalisation. Activists continue to function by and large where they have been, but researchers have the possibility and are more often required to compare and analyse across larger geographic spans. Their generalisations have necessarily to deal with the wider variations in ground level reality this entails.

For instance the history of population policy has varied considerably across major continental and sub-continental lines. While the traditional concerns of activists in South Asia has been about coercive practices in family planning programmes, the problem in Africa has been one of availability of services particularly in the context of HIV/Aids. Latin America’s major problem has been one of getting services through the public sector in a political context where conservative Catholicism, including the Opus Dei, is influential. The unwillingness of some activists in South Asia to recognise that the issue of coercion is not all there is to the demarcation of reproductive rights created major tensions before and to a lesser extent during ICPD. It required greater flexibility and a

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16 Activism has also been considerably affected by the capacity to communicate with and act at broader levels. This is true not only in the global justice movement and the WSF or anti-WTO struggles but also in particular movements, e.g., the Narmada Bachao Andolan’s ability to link up with anti-dam supporters in Europe and North America and even testify before the US Congress. Other activist movements have also been able to do this.

17 The Opus Dei is a lay Catholic organisation with close links to the Vatican, and that wields considerable political power in many countries of the region.

18 See footnote 13 above.
willingness to cross boundaries, something researchers tend to do more naturally and that some activists at least found difficult. Another example of tension, on the economic front this time, was the major ‘crisis’ that erupted in Latin America post-Beijing about the legitimacy of engaging with national or global institutions. Accusations of cooptation were in the air and issues of accountability within the movement became the hot subject of a somewhat rancorous debate.

On the surface it may appear that these were not primarily debates between researchers and activists, but among two tendencies within the women’s movement. I believe nonetheless that the basis of the argument was fundamental differences in the substantive ground of experience – more local or national and specific, as associated with activism, or more global as associated with research.19

These differences often translate into differences of power. Challenges to the links between knowledge and power have a long tradition in the women’s movement. Power may appear to be embodied in researchers who have access to resources and connections that activists do not. In the early days of the field of gender and development this often took the form of a South versus North divide as Northern researchers with research grants appeared in the South to write about Southern experiences.

This has changed considerably as direct links between activist organisations in the South and funding agencies have grown. Ironically, the result has been greater ‘research’ demands (framing proposals, monitoring, analysis and report-writing) being imposed on organisations that have little capacity for research.20 Activist organisations now perforce have to search for more qualified professional staff who can fulfil these requirements, and this has its own dynamic for the internal hierarchies within an organisation. What has tended to happen as a result is that what used to be a struggle for power between an activist organisation and external researchers has been displaced to two other levels: the level of an internal struggle within organisations, and a new form of struggle between funding agencies and organisations. The more ‘technisised’21 form of the latter struggle makes it appear more natural and more difficult to see the shift in power relations it entails.

A more symbiotic relationship between researcher and activist is now evolving as a result. In all of the illustrations given above, this symbiosis was very much in evidence. But this does not mean that the relationships are now free of tension. As organisations

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19 The congruence or otherwise between research versus activism and researcher versus activist is discussed later.
20 Some may argue that proposal and report writing are hardly research in a real sense, and at one level this is true. Increasingly, however, in my own experience organisations are expected to provide more analytical reports of their work, requiring them to have stronger information systems in place, to undertake surveys or at least focus group discussions, and to provide analytical grounds for grant renewals. It is also not very helpful in this context to have a very narrow definition of research; the definition I am using is broad enough to encompass different kinds and levels of analysis and theorising.
21 I am using this somewhat grotesque word to indicate that the form power takes is less transparent and direct but is mediated by questions about the adequacy of reporting or MIS systems that are more difficult to perceive as the workings of power.
attempt to develop new internal relationships between research and activism, major power struggles often develop. All of the ‘chips’ in these games of power are not on the side of research however. In the women’s movement in particular, many organisations profess a strong ethos of collective action, of breaking power hierarchies, and of empowering the activist. Laudable as these objectives may be, they have sometimes been naïve in their application, attributing achievement and capacity to inappropriate levels. This can result in a paralytic inability to address the issue squarely. It can also lead to disillusion on the part of professional staff who are asked to go along with the practice of attributing the work they feel they have done to the collective, while the work done by field staff is not. Unless the place of different kinds of knowledge and their relationship to power is addressed squarely, it can leave organisations incapable of moving forward to strengthen their work. Tensions can simmer and keep resurfacing even though everyone may be willing to pull together during key moments. It can also put funding agencies or research convenors in the awkward position of having to play the arbiter, or of wielding more power as a result of the internal tension than they ought.

A closer look at the sociology of research and activism may provide another perspective on these issues. Tension between researchers and activists is by no means the same or evenly distributed in different countries and regions. In some locales there is very little disagreement while in others conflict appears to lurk constantly beneath a thin veneer of solidarity. Even in the same country, some relationships are smooth while others are fraught with potential for conflict. The explanation may lie in the background and history of who researchers and activists are.

My thesis is that the potential for tension is greater when researchers and activists come from similar social and economic backgrounds, but have made different life choices early on which then affect their life trajectories and life chances. Competition may sometimes appear in the guise of disagreements over the basis of knowledge or the extent of commitment to a cause. Such competition may be more or less severe depending on whether life choices once made are difficult to alter, or whether people can move more fluidly from being a researcher to being an activist and vice versa, i.e., it depends on how irrevocable the choice is. It is not accidental, I believe, that tensions of this sort are less severe in Europe or North America (at least until recently) where the educated segment of the labour force can move with relative ease from activist organisations to research or policy analysis. The research-activism nexus is not congruent with the researcher-activist relationship. The tensions are probably most severe in Asia where the market for educated labour is demand-constrained. Tension over the control of knowledge and who gets credit for it can be quite severe in such circumstances.

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22 Because of the delicate nature of these internal power issues within organisations and because a fair amount of the knowledge that I have in this regard is confidential, I am not able to provide specific examples but they definitely exist and are growing.
23 Personal communication with some thoughtful leaders of organisations, and my own experience.
24 This in turn can depend on the tightness of the labour market for educated labour and the relationship between education and jobs.
25 India and the Philippines are probably good examples.
This would explain why the attempt to combine research with activism is greeted with suspicion and wariness. If the researcher begins to combine in herself field-level knowledge obtained from the ground, or if the activist develops the capacity for more rigorous analysis, it can make her a far more formidable competitor in the struggle for funds and recognition. This is particularly ironic because almost everyone in the movement would argue that it is important for researchers to have activist experience and for activists to have greater analytical capacity. This may also explain why the relationship of researchers to larger, mass- or community-based organisations (CBOs) can be easier than their relationship to smaller NGOs. The social and economic background of the large majority of activists in CBOs (although not perhaps of their leadership) is often vastly different from that of most researchers, thus reducing the perception of competing interests.

Displacement of such tensions on to the loftier ground of greater or lesser sacrifice of personal interest or commitment can only serve to conceal and confuse the real dynamic of relationships. I do not hold that all the differences that surface between research and activism are only manifestations of such displacement. But the issue is present enough and important enough that it has to be addressed in a more straightforward manner. People who work within or in support of social movements are not very different from others in their susceptibility to competitive or other pressures, although the fact that they make commitments and difficult personal choices also plays an important role in shaping who they are, and setting the ideals and norms of the organisations with which they work.  

THE POLITICS OF DISCOURSE

In the recent International Feminist Dialogue, a two-day meeting that preceded the World Social Forum 2004 in Mumbai, there was an argument made that the language of human rights and reproductive rights has been so coopted by powerful institutions that women’s organisations should no longer use these concepts or the related frameworks. This is neither the first nor will it be the last time that such an argument is heard. Its source is frustration at the slow pace of change and mistrust of the organisations entrusted with change, or who may be the self-anointed agents of change.

All of the three illustrations provided above are based on very significant transformations in the language and content of discourse. One of them, ICPD, represented a full-scale paradigm shift, while the others witnessed major conceptual changes. How did this come about, and what is its significance for policy change? And why do some people believe that the change is temporary?

To understand the politics of discourse is to understand a key element of how research gets translated into policy, and the role that activism can play both positive and negative. The typical trajectory whenever significant changes in discourse occur is that critical research supported by activism first wages a major struggle to change old concepts and

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26 This discussion develops further the argument about personal change made in Edwards and Sen (2002).
frameworks and introduce new ones. In the field of gender and development, many such struggles have been waged to gain acceptance and use for concepts such as ‘gender’, ‘empowerment’, ‘women’s human rights’, ‘reproductive and sexual health’, and ‘sexual and reproductive rights’. But such a struggle is not a once for all event. As the new frameworks and concepts begin to be used, they are also interpreted and reinterpreted to suit the predilections of the user. In the process their meanings may become more fuzzy and multivalent with different people and institutions using the same terminology in very different ways. As Humpty Dumpty said to Alice, a word can come to mean whatever the user wants it to mean!

This is the point at which two different routes can be taken. One is that chosen by the speakers in the International Feminist Dialogue who argued that it is time to drop the use of terms that have been coopted and by implication corrupted and rendered bereft of transforming power. The other route is one that I believe has more potential for moving debate forward. It is to recognise that the fact that the new terms and frameworks are being taken up by the opposition is an important sign not of failure, but of success in the first level of the struggle for change. If knowledge is power, then changing the terrain of discourse is the first but very important step. It makes it possible to fight the opposition on the ground of one’s choosing.27

By way of example, in the pre-ICPD days, all discussion about gender or women’s autonomy had to be cast in terms of its efficacy for population control. The paradigm shift of ICPD made it possible to begin to ask entirely new questions that were not focused on population control but on the guaranteeing of rights and the meeting of needs. The terms of discourse determine both what can be asked and what cannot be asked, and how it can be asked. It is very difficult within a Malthusian discursive framework to seriously entertain questions about quality of health care or the meeting of individual health needs.

Powerful institutions understand the importance of controlling discourse only too well. It is not accidental that the rise to dominance of the Washington Consensus during the 1980s and 1990s was mirrored by a very real decline in the ability of UNDP or other institutions outside the Bretton Woods system to find the resources for research or knowledge building.28

But winning the struggle over discourse (as happened at Vienna or Cairo) is only the first step. The greater the victory the more the likelihood that others will attempt to take over the discourse and subvert its meaning. The battle is not over; it has just begun. The real struggle to transform the new discourse into effective policy change has to move on to the level of changes in institutions, laws, practices and norms. In this struggle, terms and language will be interpreted and reinterpreted. This fact does not automatically mean cooptation. It simply means the struggle has moved on to another phase. Giving up one’s

27 To be able to fight an enemy on the terrain of one’s choosing rather than on ground chosen by the enemy is a key factor in waging a successful battle, according to Sun Tzu’s Art of War.
28 The only (and important) exception to this was the Human Development Report.
Are activists or researchers more likely to follow one or the other trajectory? I do not believe that the research–activism distinction is a particularly strong predictor of behaviour in this regard. However, those who were more involved in making the change in discourse happen in the first place are more likely to want to hold on to it, and this is but natural. Those more distant from the making of discursive change and who are more interested in knowing whether it has made impact on the ground are less likely to be patient. For the field of gender and development, much of the recent discursive change that has occurred was struggled over in the terrain of UN conferences, a locale far removed not only physically but also in terms of cultural and sociological distance from many in the women’s movement. Those who were present when the negotiations were going on in conferences tended to be from global networks whose links to activists on the ground may be ambivalent, but whose connections to researchers may be stronger.

It may be useful to reflect here on the changes of the last few decades in the way in which social policy change occurs. I do not possess a clear understanding of the time-phasing of discursive pressure versus activist mobilisation on the ground in earlier historical periods. But more than the time-phasing question, the fact that changes in discourse and changes in ground-level mobilisation have happened in the recent past in different geographic and political locales may be crucial. Ground-level mobilisation (except perhaps for the WSF and anti-WTO rallies) still happens by and large at local and national and possibly at regional levels. This is especially true for the women’s movement. But the struggles over language and discourse have happened in the first instance at the global level, particularly for many in the South. The gap between the two is literally oceanic! Great efforts have to be made to communicate the content, meanings and implications of the conceptual changes that have occurred. And this has to happen if activists in local and national locales are to play the role of interlocutors of governments to ensure implementation - the changes in laws, institutions, practices and mind-sets – that are necessary in the next phase.

The transformation of discourse into policy change – implementation in a word – is bound to be a time of great turmoil and clashes of interests as those who were favoured by the status quo ante are challenged. Backlashes and foot-dragging are par for this course. This is also therefore the time that requires clarity, ingenuity, flexibility and above all, stamina on the part of those who are attempting to change social policy. Ambiguity and confusion within social movements may weaken the potential for real change. Especially, this is not the time to be back-tracking on hard-won concepts and frameworks on the grounds that they have been coopted. The need of the hour is to push hard so that actual changes can occur.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MAKING OF SOCIAL POLICY CHANGE**
How effective has the combined research and activism of the women’s movement been in making an impact on social policy? The changes in discourse have been almost monumental in some instances. Changes on the ground within countries have been more mixed as might be expected, and have depended on the nature of the barriers faced and the capacity of the movement to chart a clear course for itself as the discussion in the previous section suggests.

Three sets of issues are particularly important in this regard: the nature of the ‘opposition’; the positions of allies; and the internal capacity and self-reflexivity of the protagonists.

In the case of gender and development, explicit opposition has come from social and religious conservatives opposed to gender equality at global, regional, national and local levels; this opposition continues until today, and is able at different times to mobilise support from powerful governments. Although the overt issue is often abortion or ‘family values’, this is a veneer for real and implacable opposition to the very idea of gender equality. For the gender and development field therefore, there is no compromise possible with this strand of opposition; the world-views are diametrically opposed.

The action of the Bretton Woods Institutions has been more indirect and complex. As stated earlier the women’s movement was one of the early opponents of the Washington Consensus. Globalisation, insecurity of livelihoods and inequality have proceeded in pace with the entry of women into labour markets and the breaking of traditional barriers. The BWI are not on the same side as the social conservatives on the issue of gender equality (World Bank 2000b) but they would like to believe that their policies are favourable to women. The evidence does not however point in this direction.

The presence and articulation of these two sets of actors have shaped both research and activism on gender and development. The relationship to allies has been even more complex. On issues of reproduction, sexuality and women’s human rights, the traditional family planning lobbies have in the course of the hammering out of the Vienna, Cairo and Beijing agreements become the partners of the women’s movement. But not everyone among them is happy. Some family planning organisations and demographers continue to believe that ICPD was a mistake, and that a narrower focus on family planning is more likely to lead to greater funding and more effective policies. While these are a minority, some of them hold positions of power and influence.

The relationship between the women’s movement and another important ally, the movement for global economic justice is quite complex (Sen and Correa 2000; Petchesky 2003; Antrobus and Sen forthcoming). Some organisations and individual members of the latter believe that the women’s movement represents a narrow identity politics without transformative potential. Many are reluctant to internalise the implications of the ‘personal as political’ in their own lives. Worse, some are allied to the most implacable opponents of gender equality – the religious conservatives – in the name of a common platform on poverty eradication, debt removal or cultural conservation. Expanding its
space within the global justice movement and transforming these positions has been extremely difficult for women activists, and is an ongoing struggle.29

Engaging in these relationships with allies and opponents has been essential for the field of gender and development to really be able to transform policy. But the women’s movement’s own capacity to engage has had many sociological limitations. Challenging the Bretton Woods Institutions, for instance, requires familiarity with the concepts and language of mainstream economics, but very few women are actually trained as economists. Women also have relatively little experience with making policy since they have by and large and with few exceptions been outside the mainstream of policy institutions and structures, and even marginalised from the institutions of representative democracy. They have little experience, as a result, of the politics or mechanics of policy making and implementation. Women also have little background in negotiating power within large organisational structures such as bureaucracies or other institutions of the state which men have dominated from time immemorial. This may result in their falling back to personalised, ‘familial’ modes of dealing with power, with which they may feel more comfortable but which may be inappropriate and ineffective.

These weaknesses have often meant that feminist activists are more comfortable with oppositional politics that requires them to be on the streets rather than in the offices and corridors where negotiations occur and power is brokered. This is not a problem for feminists alone but for all social policy whose protagonists (dalits, racial or ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples) have been historically marginalised from political power.

CONCLUSION

The introduction to this paper contained a set of questions about the lessons that the experience of gender and development provides for the making of social policy. Some answers have been developed in this paper, but this is uneven and in some cases fragmentary. Nonetheless, there is an important set of lessons to be learned. While the experience of the women’s movement certainly contains unique and special elements deriving from the nature of gender power in society, it has much to offer for a reflection on the relationship of social research to social activism.

When dominant social paradigms have to be changed, one is inevitably in the terrain of power where a combination of research, analysis and activism is essential for the protagonists of change. But the relationship between researchers and activists is by no means simple, and requires careful negotiation and great patience if it is to fulfil its potential. In such situations, neither research by itself nor activism by itself can bring about change in policy discourse or policy implementation. Different combinations may be necessary in different circumstances, but the two must come together nonetheless.

29 WSF 2004 in Mumbai witnessed many more women’s panels and discussions, but real integration of a feminist voice and presence has a long way to go.
The terrain of power in which social change movements have to operate is a complex one where opponents can be obdurate or wily, where alliances can shift like quicksand. Self-reflexivity, patience and stamina are essential ingredients for forward movement.

References


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