

Gender Justice: An Adequate Frame for the Empowerment of Women?

Roundtable Report

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John Hume Building, Maynooth University, Co. Kildare

Overview

For some years now the concept of gender justice has been posed as the best overarching frame for the understanding of women and development and in pursuit of the empowerment of women. The history of gender mainstreaming is now being reassessed and its limitations realised. For many it is a problem related to a growing de-politicisation, whereby a technical fix is substituted for a genuine movement for social transformation.

There is a sense that the project for 'gender justice' has stalled due to the loss of credibility of the mainstreaming agenda and the failure of the human rights frame to take its place in a period of austerity and an assault on the living standards of working women. A particular problem has been that of finding common ground between the gender equity policies, projects and programmes and the ongoing struggle to assert women's rights and combat inequality and oppression.

It is in this context of honest reflection and re-energising that we, the DSAI Gender Study Group, posed the need to interrogate the concept of gender justice from a contextual, conceptual and power-knowledge perspective. A wide range of national and international researchers, practitioners and policy makers to make a concerted effort, in a collegial atmosphere, to push the debate forward while informing each other from our very different subject positions. A summary of the proceedings follows and a full podcast of the session will shortly be available on this website.

Welcome

G. Honor Fagan welcomed the participants on behalf of the Development Studies Association of Ireland (DSAI) and introduced the debate.

This 'think-in' sits at the intersection of gender and international development. How do we judge progress? What is the key dilemma? Within international development we are currently shifting conceptually from a 'gender mainstreaming' approach to one of 'gender justice'. This in some way reflects the insertion of a 'new movements' approach into the international development scene. This shift also forms part of the context of our 'think-in' and fits in with the new 'fourth wave' feminism, although it was pointed out that we must recognise that there are a multitude of feminisms.

Then there is the neo-liberal backdrop to our discussions. Gender equity while it has progressed has often been in the context of greater social and economic inequality. Advances in gender equality have gone hand-

in-hand with soaring economic inequality across the world. While there has been a certain levelling of world regions through accelerated accumulation in the BRICs, this has been matched by a growing disparity between classes and greater inequalities. While these patterns are intensifying, feminist intellectuals have unleashed a deep questioning of feminism's collusion with the neo-liberal order. We have been alerted to the danger of promoting gender equality within each social stratum as opposed to tackling gender and social inequality together. Interrogating and tackling the social and global inequality built into the neo-liberal order, and built in to international development policies, therefore, also forms part of the context for the 'think-in'.

Panel 1 Gender Justice and Development Futures

Claire Mc Ging addressed the critical question of the 'democratic deficit' through the issue of gender quotas after the Beijing 1995 Conference. The much debated notion of 'critical mass' for women's political participation was outlined. The main lesson from the gender quota debate is that the issue is now clearly recognised that the problem is about 'fixing the culture' and not 'fixing the women'. Interestingly, countries in the Global South are now overtaking the Global North in electing women to parliament. Scandinavia is no longer the model. What does that mean for gender and development?

Marci López turned the meeting's attention to the very topical *NiUnaMenos* anti-gender violence movement in Argentina. This new social movement has captured world-wide attention through its imaginative campaigns and vibrant on-line presence. Its construction and appeal was explained in terms of its combining of on-line mobilizing techniques and good old-fashioned networking and lobbying by women in the media, going back twenty years. While the opening slogan of *NiUna Menos* (not one more woman) was very much a single-issue campaign, it very soon broadened out into a systematic critique of patriarchy.

Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay addressed, from a broader lens, the question of gender and development futures. In particular, the tension between 'including gender' and 'governing gender' was critically examined. The myth that 'gender equity' would (in and of itself) reduce poverty was critically examined. Concretely, it did not provide a way through which the inherited and constantly reproduced inequalities of the global economy could be reduced. We still have not defined properly what 'gender equality' is in all its complexity, a necessary step before we can address it in practice.

Discussion

The discussion that followed the first panel was wide-ranging and informative. The way in which 'gender mainstreaming' has, to a large extent, been subverted or co-opted by the global financial institutions was much discussed. Another theme focused on was the lessons that could be learnt from the way in which *NiUnaMenos* practised a form of assembly democracy. For many there was also a change happening in more established organisations such as the trade unions which have also changed the way they operated to become more flexible to meet the challenges of the contemporary era.

Panel 2- Gender Justice and Development Interventions

The second panel was facilitated by **Angela Veale**.

Fenella Porter introduced the debate on the limitations of international NGO's in terms of representing the interests of women. The international NGO's have been very problematic with their conceptions of 'gender justice', which has become normative and has ruled out many dissenting voices. The competitiveness of the NGO market has also marketised political relations to the extent that messages become homogenised and contestatory strategies discouraged. The shared and consensual discursive landscape has fundamentally disempowered women in the Global South.

Caroline Ballantine reported on a project researching partner violence during conflict in South Sudan. This project as others on gender-based violence is designed to discover 'what works' in preventing or reducing gender-based violence. There is always a danger that this type of project reduces women to victimhood rather than constructing them as agents of their own fate. Naming involves making visible what was invisible and defining as unacceptable what was acceptable. This project challenges the notion that gender-based violence is only present in catastrophic episodes, it is indeed 'normal'.

Vanessa Liston turned the attention of the gender study group to the problems of measurement, data, and gender injustice. The lived experiences and voices of women need to be foregrounded more. We need to move from simplistic to more complex frames of reference. There was a call for a more transformative agenda for official statistics. Open access to data, metadata and underlying methods need to be central. Q-methodology for the scientific study of subjectivity, should be explored to centre women's agency to foreground their experience and voice. How to capture voice is hard to answer, but it is essential to a genuine struggle for gender justice.

Finally, **Tanja Kleibl** addressed the way the Western approaches to development de-legitimize women's resistance through the discourse of 'empowerment'. Central to our understanding of Third World women must be the history of colonialism and neo-colonialism. The role of the expert and the privileged role of Northern knowledge needs to be challenged. The intersectionality between gender and race oppression also needs to be to the fore. The whole notion of charity underpinning NGO work in the Global South and the claims of the Enlightenment need to be challenged if we are to move forward.

Discussion

The discussion following the second panel took up a number of key issues. One was a continuation of the conversation in the first session regarding the role of international NGO's in terms of promoting gender justice. There was a general consensus that the constraints placed by funders, but also fundamentally by their own developing orientations, place NGO's in a negative position. Another strand of the conversation was around the measurement of gender violence and the capturing of women's voices. Methodological innovation from a critical social science perspective is crucial for an advance in this area.

Overall Lessons

This gender-justice think-in provided a renewed impetus to the debate in an Irish and international context. There was a general consensus that placing gender as a 'cross-cutting theme' in development practice means, most often, that gender equity is not addressed directly. Gender needs to be brought back in centrally to development studies and practice. There is a recognition that the liberal version of feminism- bring women into the paid economy and into formal politics – is limited, and possible even counter-productive for the advancement of women in the Global South. We considered that development analysts and practitioners in the Global North need to pay more attention to the actual mobilizations of women in the Global South such as the paradigmatic case of *NiunaMenos* in Latin America.

Convening team

The Think-In was convened by

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in association with

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