GENDER MYTHS & FEMINIST FABLES

THE STRUGGLE FOR INTERPRETIVE POWER IN GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT

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Edited by Andrea Cornwall, Elizabeth Harrison and Ann Whitehead

Gender Myths and Feminist Fables

The Struggle for Interpretive Power in Gender and Development

Edited by

Andrea Cornwall, Elizabeth Harrison and Ann Whitehead

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Contents

Notes on Contributors vii

1 **Gender Myths and Feminist Fables: The Struggle for Interpretive Power in Gender and Development**
Andrea Cornwall, Elizabeth Harrison and Ann Whitehead 1

2 **A Bigger Piece of a Very Small Pie: Intrahousehold Resource Allocation and Poverty Reduction in Africa**
Bridget O'Laughlin 21

3 **The Construction of the Myth of Survival**
Mercedes González de la Rocha 45

4 **Earth Mother Myths and Other Ecofeminist Fables: How a Strategic Notion Rose and Fell**
Melissa Leach 67

5 **Political Cleaners: Women as the New Anti-Corruption Force?**
Anne Marie Goetz 85

6 **Resolving Risk? Marriage and Creative Conjugality**
Cecile Jackson 105

7 **Feminism, Gender, and Women's Peace Activism**
Judy El-Bushra 127

8 **Myths To Live By? Female Solidarity and Female Autonomy Reconsidered**
Andrea Cornwall 145

Index 165

Gender Myths and Feminist Fables: The Struggle for Interpretive Power in Gender and Development

Andrea Cornwall, Elizabeth Harrison and Ann Whitehead

INTRODUCTION

Gender and development has become, over the course of recent decades, a distinctive and plural field of enquiry and practice. Gender and development is a recognized sub-discipline and 'gender' has gained official status within the discourse of mainstream development. It has become institutionalized in numerous ways: in advisory posts in donor agencies and non-governmental agencies, in masters courses in universities, in ubiquitous training programmes and in women's national machineries. Diverse and differently located groups of feminist gender advocates have created a body of academic research and initiated many changes within development institutions.[1] In these processes, a key site of innovation has been the creation and evolution of new languages — languages of representation, languages of analysis and languages of policy discourse — and debate over these. The contested nature of the language of gender and development, its uses and contexts are central themes of this collection.

This volume arises from contributions to a conference entitled 'Beyond Gender Myths and Feminist Fables', hosted by the Institute of Development Studies and the University of Sussex,[2] which brought together activists and academics from the South and the North and representatives from bilateral and multilateral development agencies and international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The impetus for the workshop was widespread disillusionment among feminist gender and development innovators with what had become of 'gender' in development, including frustration with the simplistic slogans that had come to characterize much gender and development talk.

1. Key contributions to the analysis of the emergence of this field and the dilemmas faced within it include Baden and Goetz (1998), Jackson and Pearson (1998), Kabeer (1994), Marchand and Parpart (1995), McIlwaine and Datta (2003), Miller and Razavi (1998) and Razavi and Miller (1995).

2. A number of papers from this conference, addressing themes ranging from the pragmatics of mainstreaming 'gender' to the contemporary politics of feminist engagement with development, were published in a special issue of the *IDS Bulletin* 35(4); see Cornwall et al. (2004).

The chapters collected here focus directly on locating particularly resonant ideas about gender within the field of development discourse and practice. Taking pervasive popularizations of notions such as 'women are less corrupt than men', and images of women as 'closer to the earth' or 'inherently peaceful', contributors seek to situate the deployment of these notions and images within development narratives. Their analyses illuminate how the languages through which knowledge is produced and deployed within feminism affect the representation and strategic employment of that knowledge. Together, they raise broader questions about the relationship between research and policy and the difficult task of feminist advocacy within the domain of mainstream development practice, which can be indifferent or even hostile to gender issues.

A central question for us is why bowdlerized, impoverished or, for some, just plain wrong representations about gender issues have become embedded in development. The contributions explore this in the multiple sites in which such knowledge is created and put to use, tracing the genealogies of influential ideas and the contests that have accompanied their inscription in development narratives. Beyond this, many of the pieces are also self-reflexive, asking hard questions about feminisms' own political and narrative practices. To what extent has feminist development advocacy and mobilization relied on essentialisms in its own imaginaries? One of the biggest challenges for feminism was to set loose the association between identity and identification that served to mobilize the category 'women' as a politically salient interest group. Yet many pressures conspire to bring us to powerful but unhelpful default positions.

Women often appear in narratives of gender and development policy as both heroines and victims: heroic in their capacities for struggle, in the steadfastness with which they carry the burdens of gender disadvantage and in their exercise of autonomy; victims as those with curtailed choices, a triple work burden and on the receiving end of male oppression and violence. Embedded at least in part in our own self-conceptions, these rallying calls have the power to move, but they are also — our contributors suggest — very far from the complexity of women's and men's lives. Our critical self-reflection extends to the use of the term 'gender' itself which, some would go as far as to argue, has become part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

In this introduction, we comment on the issues arising from these dilemmas and on what they suggest about the relationship between feminist knowledge and development practice. In doing so, we also interrogate the ambivalence that underpins feminist engagement with development. Our aim is to go beyond homogenizing versions of the development enterprise and of feminism, and to situate representations of gender issues in the everyday discourses and practices of gender and development.

TALKING DEVELOPMENT AND DEVELOPMENT TALK

Development and feminism share philosophies of transformation and as such have political objectives that are hotly and continuously contested. A critical area of such contestation is in the struggle for interpretive power — what languages and images, representations, narratives and stories, should be used to plan or mobilize for change. Issues of representation and the politics of discourse have become subjects of widespread debate within development studies in general, moving from the widely quoted work of Escobar (1995) and Ferguson (1990), to attempts to present the discourses of development in less monolithic terms (Crewe and Harrison, 1998; Grillo and Stirrat, 1997; Mosse, 2003, 2005).

Some of this work is centrally focused on the production and reproduction of development discourse and narratives; on the 'framing, naming, numbering and coding' (Apthorpe 1996: 16) that underlies development policy. For example, Arce (2003: 33) argues that struggles over meanings are central to understanding development institutions and their outcomes: 'the language of development frames our understanding of contemporary problems'. The reason that this is important is because language representations are deeply implicated in positions concerning what constitutes knowledge; in turn, this provides a basis on which to map out and legitimize interventions.

The making and shaping of development policies can thus be understood as a terrain of contestation in which particular framings of the problem and the solution — what Maarten Hajer (1995) calls 'story-lines' — come to gain purchase. Such 'story-lines' rely for their effectiveness on being mobilized by advocates and used as a basis for enlistment of actors who span different sites of engagement (Hajer, 1995; Latour, 2005). The representations that come to shape development practice are a reflection of institutional and individual power. Recent work by Mosse (2005) draws attention to the disjuncture between the representation of policy as a technical matter, arising primarily from an assessment of evidence, and the complex ethnographic realities of the political nature of policy formulation. In particular, Mosse proposes that 'policy primarily functions to mobilise and maintain political support, that is to legitimise rather than to orientate practice' (2005: 14). His ethnographic case is that of a development project in rural India, but the arguments have a wider relevance for analyses that seek to understand the ways in which policy making can create different rules as to the status and production of knowledge. For example, King and McGrath (2004) have recently drawn attention to the ways in which development agencies are positioning themselves as 'knowledge agencies'. In the case of the World Bank, being a 'knowledge bank' arises out of its avowed interests in local sources of knowledge, participatory approaches, and the recognition of a plurality of voices. The extent to which this results in better or more effective aid is a moot point; some argue that it has made the Bank 'more certain and arrogant rather than less' (King and McGrath, 2004: 93).

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These discussions have great relevance to our understanding of how representations of gender come to be mobilized in development policy and practice. In a powerful analysis of development, written almost forty years ago, Albert Hirschmann (1967) drew attention to the role that myths play in animating and motivating the actions of development actors. He argued that in order to contend with the otherwise insuperable obstacles that such actors face in transforming conditions of misery and inequality, they need something to believe in, something that will guide and sustain them, something that would both lend them moral conviction and a sense of purpose. Development, he contended, needs to create, and sustain belief in, its own myths.

Many development players would find unacceptable any idea that policy directions are inspired by belief rather than fact. The commonest use of the term 'myth' in development discourse is to invoke it as a device to emphasize the falsity of taken-for-granted assumptions and as a basis for designating what ought to replace them. But if development practitioners and researchers find it hard to accept that their behaviour may be based on myths, they might be persuaded by the work of a number of twentieth century political theorists who stress the relationship between myth and action. Hirschmann draws on the work of Georges Sorel (1908) to contend that development needs its own myths to guide and motivate action; mistaking these heroic stories of change that inspire intervention for actual, given realities of development work is to miss the point, Hirschmann argues. He cites Sorel, who argues; 'myths are not descriptions of things, but expressions of a determination to act. . . A myth cannot be refuted since it is, at bottom, identical with the convictions of a group' (1908/1941: 33).

For Sorel, the epistemological status of myth, its relationship to truth or falsehood, is beside the point: what matters is the power that myths have to make sense of the inchoate flux of life, and provide a sense of purpose and conviction. It is, as Doezema's (2004) work on trafficking in women has shown, drawing on Laclau (1996), when myths take on a political dimension and are put to use to serve political agendas that their potency becomes apparent. Myths work for development by encoding 'truths' in narratives that nourish and sustain convictions. And development's myths gain their purchase because they speak about the world in ways that lend political convictions the sense of direction that is needed to inspire action.

GENDER MYTHS AND FEMINIST FABLES

As 'gender' has been taken up in development policy and practice, storylines, fables and myths have been created that have emphasized some aspects of feminist agendas, and pushed others out of the frame. Reflecting on the uneasy outcomes of the transformation of feminist knowledge into development agendas, participants at our workshop expressed concern about the consequences. They had become wearily familiar with the constant

repackaging of ideas. They were becoming punch drunk with the reassertion of key axioms under different labels such as 'poverty reduction', 'empowerment', 'rights, 'exclusion' and 'citizenship'. Contributors to this volume explore some of the dynamics of the rendition of feminist ideas in the narratives and story-lines that have come to be used in the development mainstream. These are adopted for a range of purposes. They include, of course, tactical moves to bring about policies that can change women's lives for the better. Getting gender concerns onto the mainstream development agenda requires pragmatism. In order to capture resources for policies to tackle gender injustice and disadvantage, discursive strategies need to be adopted that will forge alliances with many different kinds of development actors in a plethora of development institutions. Some of the contributions also explore the role that gender myths play in galvanizing and inspiring feminists to undertake the hard slog of change.

Some of our authors find the notion of myth useful — as Hirschmann did — for making sense of how and why certain ideas gain purchase with diverse development actors and of the work that these ideas do in motivating development interventions. But they invoke different aspects of myth's potential range of meanings. For Mercedes de la Rocha a myth is a popular dogma, a useful thing to say: it takes the form of a sacred narrative (something that is uncontestable), that can be acted out or reproduced in rituals in 'fora where members of academic institutions, governments and international agencies meet to discuss social policy and poverty issues' (this volume, p. 46). Other authors centre their analyses less on myths than on 'received wisdoms' in gender and development (El Bushra) or 'powerful assumptions' and 'generalizations' (Jackson). Jackson highlights the taken-for-granted and self evident character of myths, focusing on ideas that form 'part of the unquestioned. . . dispositions of thought which may be reproduced over generations of scholars' (this volume, p. 108).

In some cases, the images deployed by gender myths are less textual and more visual, as is the case in Melissa Leach's account of the way in which particular images of women's relationship to the environment became 'visual development icons', encapsulating 'powerful and appealing messages'. Her chapter offers an example of feminist fables. In this case a powerful set of narratives about environmental degradation had come to be harnessed to gender myths about women's inherent propensity to act as conservers of resources, and guardians of nature. As in de la Rocha's chapter — where a myth becomes 'a fable (or a fairy tale?)' (this volume, p. 46) when charged with a key moral message — the women and environment fables occurred at the height of global moral contestations about the environment. Feminist fables work, as Emery Roe (1991) has so effectively described, to set up the overcoming of a problem by heroic intervention that results in a happy ending. Their persuasive power comes in defining the problem as well as the solution. By presenting policy actors with actions that find their resolution in a desired set of outcomes, such fables also offer them a place within the story,

requiring, as well as justifying, their intervention. The feminist fable here — the story of the brave heroines who rescue the environment — was potently coupled with essentialized notions that have a broader mythical appeal.

Cornwall argues that feminist attachment to certain ideas about women and about what is needed to improve their lives needs to be analysed in terms of the affective power of the deeply held beliefs about women that come to be encoded in gender myths and feminist fables. She draws upon Cassirer to emphasize the emotional qualities of myth: 'Myth does not arise solely from intellectual processes; it sprouts forth from deep human emotions. . . it is the *expression* of emotion . . . emotion turned into an image' (Cassirer, 1946: 43, emphasis in original). Myths, Cornwall suggests, are narratives that do more than tell a good story. They are composed of a series of familiar images and devices, and work to produce an order-of-things that is compelling precisely because it resonates with the affective dimensions of values and norms. It is the mythical qualities of narratives about women evoked in gender and development policies, then, that gives them the power to spur people into action.

The contributions to this collection highlight a number of links between knowledge and power in the field of gender and development that myths contribute to making. For some, myths are 'out there' and the province of powerful development others, as in de la Rocha's chapter where myth's crucial function is 'to provide justifications and/or to legitimize social oppositions and tensions', or in the account given by O'Laughlin for whom the people who repeatedly recite the simple story are those 'with powerful voices'. For others, myths are what feminists make when they seek to influence the powerful. For yet others, myths and fables are what feminists live by in order to act for social transformation.

The remainder of this Introduction looks in more detail at the different ways in which the political nature of knowledge production is elaborated through different kinds of gender myths and feminist fables. We begin by exploring further the ways that the nature of development intervention affects the production of knowledge within gender and development and the language in which this knowledge is communicated and debated.

POWER AND THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT: IMPLICATIONS FOR GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT

The different institutional sites dealt with by the contributors to this collection add interesting perspectives to the existing literature on the history and politics of gender within development institutions. Much of this literature looks at the adoption of gender mainstreaming within the UN bodies and the Bretton Woods Institutions, although particular NGOs and bilateral donors such as OXFAM, DFID and Sida have also been covered, as well as

processes of gender mainstreaming within state bureaucracies.[3] The glimpse that our chapters offer of the world of development bureaucracy provides a powerful case for the argument that it is almost a necessary condition for institutionalization for ideas to be blunted and reduced to slogans and ideals — they need to be domesticated to fit the exigencies of agency procedures and priorities. This has been an argument long and powerfully made by critics of gender mainstreaming, of which Standing (2004) and Woodford-Berger (2004) more recently explore troubling nuances.

This is not only a matter of the extent to which ideas are changed as they are taken up, but also of the techniques used to institutionalize and 'sensitize', such as gender training. Establishing frameworks, activities and protocols for gender training was a major site of innovation in gender and development. All the major development institutions undertook gender training during the 1990s. Although many of these training programmes were tailor-made, they drew their major content and approach from three or four main models. After the initial flurry when the models were first developed, in the early 1990s, there has been little substantive innovation for close on a decade in the tools that are commonly used for gender training. The ways in which the essentially political — and at the same time, deeply personal — issues of gender get rendered within such training frameworks and within bureaucracies more generally is discussed at length in Cornwall et al. (2004). Papers there describe how the political project of gender and development has been reduced to a technical fix so that gender 'becomes something that is ahistorical, apolitical and decontextualised' (Mukhopadhyay, 2004: 95). They also illustrate the tendency, described by Goetz (1994) for bureaucracies to incorporate information on their own terms, privileging that which fits in with their own views of the world and the shared analytical framework of those within such organizations.

Denying Dissidence

The institutional context of large development bureaucracies not only leads to the simplification of gender and development ideas, it also transforms them. This is very powerfully argued in the contribution by de la Rocha. Her chapter is particularly interesting because she revisits her own earlier 1980s' work on the urban poverty of Guadalajara, Mexico, which covered a period of economic crisis when the already low-waged urban poor suffered a dramatic fall in purchasing power. This path-breaking work expanded understandings and definitions of poverty and poor people's strategies for survival. Poor urban households responded in essentially private ways with resourceful strategies that included working harder, turning to the informal sector,

3. For example, in the works of Geisler et al. (1999); Goetz (1995); Jahan (1995); Macdonald et al. (1997); Porter et al. (1999); Razavi and Miller (1995).

self-provisioning, restructuring households and using social networks. De la Rocha argues that this and other studies led to the creation of the 'myth of survival' — the idea that the poor have an infinite capacity to withstand shocks and crisis through these multiple strategies. She draws attention to new approaches to poverty emphasizing the agency of the poor, and to the World Bank's emphasis on assets as part of this thinking.

Later research, however, brought into question the 'myth of survival'. In 1994, Mexico suffered a financial crisis which led to a loss of permanent male employment. De la Rocha found severe limitations on the capacity of poor households to adapt to the new adverse economic conditions. In particular, they were unable to intensify the use of their labour force to achieve survival and reproduction. De la Rocha argues that her work has been selectively used: her earlier study in which poor households did have options to survive falling incomes from formal employment was picked up, but her later work, which shows the severe limitations of these strategies, was ignored.

De la Rocha's account implies various ways in which the institutional context in which research is discussed influences its content. In its transition from the context of the work of independent scholars, to interpretation within the World Bank, her work came to be selectively inserted within a particular institutional agenda. She forcefully makes the point that it is the World Bank's commitment to liberalization, which included policies that were responsible for Mexico's crisis in the 1990s, that is behind the adoption of the myth of survival. The substantive current World Bank agenda — the post Washington consensus and the new architecture of aid based on economic liberalization — underlies its continued use of particular approaches to poverty which incorporate the myth of survival. As Gita Sen has noted, 'powerful institutions understand the importance of controlling discourse only too well' (Sen, 2005: 13).

However, the passion behind de la Rocha's contribution derives from another feature of the encounter she outlines. This is the banal but overwhelming point that there are enormous power differentials between Latin American researchers on poverty and World Bank poverty specialists. With its economic resources and the manifold political relations that constitute part of the net of global geopolitical relations, the World Bank is able to make organizational, discursive and strategic choices and decisions which have profound effects on poor people. These global inequalities are reflected on the much smaller stage of inequalities in relations with the research community.

Many of the authors represented here have experiences, often aired privately, of their work being taken up by powerful development players such as the World Bank. First brought on board because of their innovations in areas that come to be deemed relevant to World Bank thinking, researchers often find that critical, reflective and, indeed, honest accounts do not find favour. Findings have to be endlessly rewritten and reshaped to be published or adopted, or reports are received and quietly dropped, never to be referred to again. Initially and individually, gender specialists have berated themselves

for their naiveté and have often acquiesced to charges that they are 'too academic' and unable to translate their work into appropriate policy language. In some cases such self-criticism is justified. But in many cases the rules of the game that we are apparently unable to learn are less about presentation, or accessible and policy-focused writing, and more about conflicts over, and indeed suppressions of, substance. The tolerance level for differing views and for challenge and critique seems to be getting lower, as major international players experience ever more intense pressure to show no doubts and admit no uncertainty (Goetz, personal communication, 2005).

The chapters in this collection also speak to ways in which the power relations of development transform discourse in another sense. The development of the policy agenda often depends on the big players achieving maximum cooperation amongst themselves in order to produce a globally agreed agenda. The arenas in which the fiercest contestations over language and objective occur are those that bind governments and other bodies to particular kinds of action. Protocols that imply subsequent legislation and end-of-summit agreed statements (such as the Platforms for Action of the UN Women's Conferences) are fought over word by word and clause by clause.

While the need for these globally binding agreements may be responsible for some of the homogenization and universalism apparent in UN policy, this is of course not the case for the Bretton Woods institutions. They are also noted for the universalism of policy analysis and policy directions that generally fail to take into account national specificities. Here the drivers are much less about getting global agreement and much more about establishing hegemony and promoting economic liberalization. It is remarkable that a central criticism frequently made of structural adjustment policies and of Poverty Assessments — that they adopt a 'one size fits all' approach — can still be made for the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, which have avowed country ownership and responsiveness to national 'voices' (Whitehead, 2003).

Encoding Essentialisms

This tendency towards universalism may be one reason why gender myth making in mainstream development contexts so often turns on using ideas about gender that rely on essentialized images of women. Leach looks at this in the field of eco-feminism, El Bushra in the field of women's peace activism and Goetz in relation to a myth in the making — the idea that women are less corrupt than men.

El Bushra's contribution to this collection examines the pervasive myth that women are inherently more peaceful than men — the peace-makers who smooth ruffled feathers and mediate conflict — and that women are passive victims rather than in any way actively engaged in violent conflict. She argues that there are different kinds of essentialisms in some discourses about men, women, violence, conflict and peace, but that over-generalization fails those affected by war and conflict. Working from essentialisms, it is impossible to

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