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Talking of gender: words and meanings in development organisations

Ines Smyth

This article reflects on the vocabulary commonly used within development organisations to communicate about ‘gender and development’. It argues that the relevant terminology, though frequently used, remains problematic. Some terms are almost entirely absent, while others are used loosely and inappropriately – with the subtleties of carefully developed and much-debated concepts often lost. Terms such as ‘empowerment’, ‘gender’, and ‘gender mainstreaming’ which originated in feminist thinking and activism have lost their moorings and become depoliticised. Despite these problems, there are indications that debates and language may be taking a more radical turn with the acknowledgement of the shortcomings of the practices of gender mainstreaming, the deepening of interest in the notion of empowerment, and the explicit adoption of a human-rights language.

KEY WORDS: Gender and Diversity; Rights; Aid; Civil Society; Methods

Introduction

Why do so many of us use the language of gender as a camouflage that fools no one and does none of us any favours? (Cornwall 2006:1)

Several years ago I wrote an article (Smyth 1999) reflecting on how development organisations appeared to be afraid of using feminist language and concepts, opting instead for safer and less challenging discourses. My reflections focused most directly on Oxfam GB, since as a staff member of that organisation I inhabited, heard, and spoke its language.

Enough time has gone by to warrant revisiting these thoughts and expanding them. Here I am not attempting to ‘monitor progress’ in Oxfam GB, in the manner often required in development work. Even if this was the intention, changes in knowledge-management systems at different levels of the organisation would not allow for a methodical review of whether the language of feminism is any more in favour now than it was in 1999. What I seek to do here is to consider more broadly the vocabulary that we use in the development world to communicate about what is often referred to, in its most common short-hand, as ‘gender and development’. Oxfam GB remains the main subject of this investigation.

This is not an easy piece to write, since it requires using language that has become densely layered with contradictory meanings and interpretations, and which, in the rest of the article,

I challenge and criticise. In so doing I am chipping away at the very blocks that should be building my argument, or turning them into traps of my own making.

‘Gender talk is everywhere’

Reflections on and celebrations of the progress made by women and in gender relations in recent decades are always tempered by the realisation that change is never linear, and that current circumstances and trends are full of intractable problems and new threats (Kerr 2006).

What is undisputed is that in the past 30 years or so concerns about ‘gender issues’ have shifted from being seen as a minor but irritating diversion from the more urgent questions of poverty and globalisation, to being a *lingua franca* in which so many actors appear to be fluent. As Gita Sen says: ‘Across a sweeping range of issues, from macroeconomics to human rights and political participation, feminist researchers and activists from women’s movements appear to have succeeded in bringing about significant changes both in discourse and in actual policy’ (Sen 2006: 128). Thus the fact that, as Ruth Pearson puts it, ‘gender talk is everywhere’ (Pearson 2006: 157) is a victory in terms of conveying the pervasive presence of certain concerns in the field of development.

If words are important, silences are important too and a reflection of what is excluded from daily exchanges – verbal or written – among development practitioners and policy makers. What is also important is the frequency and clarity with which certain terms are used, the first as a sign of what gets given priority and air space, the latter because on the clarity of key terms depends whether and how policies are developed and then implemented.

I would argue, however, that the terminology associated with ‘gender’, though encountered everywhere, remains problematic. Some terms are almost entirely absent, while others are used loosely and inappropriately – with the subtleties and rigour of carefully developed and much-debated concepts utterly lost, so that words are left empty of meaning. Other terms are connected in what Cornwall and Brock (2006: 48) call ‘chains of equivalence’, where new meanings emerge according to the proximity between chosen words. This lack of clarity in language and concepts affects Oxfam GB too. In a review of its use of human-rights instruments, Marsha Freeman concludes: ‘Lack of clarity as to “gender”, “mainstreaming” and the role of human rights impedes achievement of the goals of equality between women and men, historically referred to as gender equity’ (Freeman 2002: 7).

Confusion can thus compromise the entire purpose for which such language is developed. Something more complex is also happening, however: real women and men, power and conflict all disappear behind bland talk of ‘gender’, while the language of ‘mainstreaming’ creates the possibility of orderly tools (an interesting term in itself) and systems through which profoundly internalised beliefs and solidly entrenched structures are miraculously supposed to dissolve and be transformed. At the root of all this is the fact that terms that originated in feminist thinking and activism have somehow lost this mooring, although there are indications that the emerging ‘rights’ language could be heralding a return to such foundations.

Speech impediments

What are the terms that are being used or deleted from daily spoken and written language in the field of international development?

Silence on feminism

The first thing to note is that there is still a resounding silence around words such as *feminism* and *feminist* (as well as *class*). This was the subject of my article of 1999, and nothing seems to

have changed much, either in Oxfam GB or in other organisations. Occasionally the connection with feminism is acknowledged. This is the case, for example, with various documents in which ActionAid acknowledges feminism as the inspiration for some of its thinking.

These remain exceptions, however, and it would seem that the 'fear of feminism' to which I had earlier attributed the absence of certain terms is still dominant. While, as I stressed in my earlier article, feminist-inspired work can take place even in the absence of such explicit language, *feminist*, *feminists*, and *feminism* are certainly not the kind of 'warm and reassuring' (Cornwall and Brock 2006: 45) words of which the discourse of development organisations has become redolent. On the contrary, they either evoke the derogatory and faintly ridiculous notions through which feminists of all eras have been belittled and demonised, or they instil fear by pointing, accurately, to an arena of struggle and contestation. For this reason they are avoided.

This absence is perhaps also a consequence of the fact that individuals (the majority of whom are women) who are engaged in intrinsically feminist work seem to inhabit two separate domains: that of the women's movement on the one hand, and that of development bureaucracies (including NGOs) on the other. This was certainly the consensus expressed at the AWID Forum held in Bangkok in November 2005, where there was a real sense of the existence of these two separate worlds, as echoed in the repeated calls for creating new bridges and connections (see *Development* 49(1), 2006 for all the key speeches at the Forum).

Contrary to what happens within the women's movement, those who, for whatever reasons, choose to inhabit the so-called 'mainstream development sector' (Win 2006: 62) struggle to champion gender equality and women's rights, in speech and in practice. This has to do with organisational structures and changes, and with the power relations inherent in hierarchies. The common experience, as House remarks in relation to the water sector, is one where being a 'gender activist' 'often mean[s] receiving the negativity that appears to be integral to the raising of this subject' (2005: 212). It is thus understandable that many such activists, let alone others whose world views differ and whose priorities lie elsewhere, choose not to use the explicit language of feminism, with all its negative associations.

Empowerment

Empowerment perhaps has the richest and most complex history and evolution of all relevant terms: from the seventeenth-century meaning of delegation and granting licence (Pieterse 2003) to its reverse meaning – in a feminist sense – of self-generated positive change. In this long trajectory, the term has attracted contributions from the most extreme traditions: 'feminist scholarship, the Christian right, New Age self-help manuals, and business management' (Cornwall and Brock 2006: 50).

When the term *empowerment* is used, the emphasis is often on the idea of 'processes' leading to broader outcomes. According to the UK government's Department for International Development (DFID), empowerment refers to 'individuals acquiring the power to think and act freely, exercise choice, and to fulfil their potential as full and equal members of society' (DFID 2000: 11). Oxfam GB has adopted this definition verbatim, adding: 'This will of course take different forms and move at different paces according to the particular social, cultural, economic and political context. It is a critical part of working toward the attainment of gender equity ...' (Oxfam 2001).

There are, however, two common problems with the way the term is used. One is that it can easily become too broad and generalised, and thus the answer to questions on 'life, the universe and everything'.¹ An example is the DFID definition quoted above, which continues that empowerment is also about 'negotiating new kinds of institutions, incorporating new norms and rules that support egalitarian and just relations between women and men'.

The other, more common, problem occurs especially within development agencies when they attempt to 'operationalise' the term and shift the focus from empowerment as process to empowerment as end product. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are an example of this, quantifying as they do women's empowerment in the specific and rather limited fields of education, waged employment, and participation in formal politics.

This focus on outcomes has been amply criticised by feminist analysts, not least because it pre-defines what are highly individual experiences and perceptions. As Mosedale (2005a: 244) points out: '[E]mpowerment is an ongoing process rather than a product. There is no final goal. One does not arrive at a stage of being empowered in some absolute sense. People are empowered, or disempowered, relative to others or, importantly, relative to themselves at a previous time.'

In some of the NGO literature, the distinct impression is also given that development programmes can 'empower' women, while a feminist perspective would emphasise that only women themselves can be agents of such a process of change. The first approach is typical of many microfinance projects. For example, the US Grameen Foundation states: 'Our programs are designed to empower the world's poorest by providing affordable capital, financial services, appropriate technology, and capacity building resources to those front-line microfinance institutions (MFIs) that serve them' (www.grameenfoundation.org/programs).

Finally, a feminist tradition understands relevant processes of empowerment as being collective endeavours, versus those that promote individualism and even consumerism (Rowlands 1998), again as appears to be the case among popular microfinance interventions.

Despite the problems, current research on how women's empowerment can be achieved in practice through development interventions is allowing different agencies to engage in dialogue on shared concerns, and to link abstract notions of empowerment to concrete attempts to establish how development programmes can genuinely contribute to women's empowerment (Mosedale 2005b).

Gender

Perhaps the most confusing of all terms is that of *gender* itself. We know that often the word is used to mean 'women'. At a more basic level, words such as *engendering* and *gendered* are usually helpful, for example in titles such as *Engendering Development* (World Bank 2001; for Oxfam see Zuckerman 2002). Other expressions, such as *genderising*, *doing gender*, and even *you are gender* (though admittedly those are mostly verbal rather than written usages), are certainly much less so.

The transition that seems to have occurred in this case is one that gradually has eroded any meaning from the term gender. Emptied of meaning, it pops up in the most inappropriate places and manners. Clearly 'gender . . . is a widely used and often misunderstood term' (Momsen 2004: 2).

I am not suggesting with these comments that the term *gender* and those associated with it should be entirely dropped. On the contrary: with increased clarity and consistency of use, they can provide important bridges between understandings and practices of feminist activists on the one hand, and those of feminists and others operating within the confines of development organisations, on the other.

Gender mainstreaming

The most common use of the term *gender* is in association with *mainstreaming*. The notion of gender mainstreaming grew out of the realisation that the concerns for women and gender issues should not remain marginal to the ideas and practices of development organisations, but should be central to them, and hence located in their 'mainstream'. How this should happen, whether by being integrated into them or radically *transforming* them, has long been debated.

Most organisations have opted for a language of transformation. For Oxfam GB, for instance, gender mainstreaming is ‘a process of ensuring that all of our work, and the way we do it, contributes to gender equality by transforming the balance of power between women and men’ (Gell and Motla 2003). This approach has helped to emphasise that gender issues must be addressed in *all* aspects and stages of development work, including the necessity to do the same internally within development organisations (Mukhopadhyay *et al.* 2006). But it is exactly here that organisations appear reluctant to consider fundamental transformations and are content to tinker at the margins of their structures and practices. It is for this reason that much feminist-inspired literature has long concluded that gender mainstreaming has not been successful. As Aruna Rao puts it: ‘While the intention of gender mainstreaming is transformation, it has been chewed up and spit out by development bureaucracies in forms that feminists would barely recognise’ (Rao 2006: 64).

Ironically, at a practical level the dominance of ‘gender mainstreaming’ has led to a decline in the resources devoted to programmes and projects explicitly addressing women’s disadvantage, or supporting women’s organisations, on the understanding that there is no need for gender-specific activities because all concerns have been thoroughly ‘mainstreamed’.

In terms of language it can be said that the association between the term *gender* on one hand and *mainstreaming* – with its bureaucratic associations – on the other has created a ‘chain of equivalence’ that hides the element of power relations so essential to the original feminist understanding of the term. This terminology also helps to smooth over the fact that ‘doing gender’ within development organisations is itself an arena of dissent and struggle (see earlier discussion on the fate of many feminists inhabiting development agencies).

With ‘gender mainstreaming’ it is also easier to put real women and men, and the messy realities of their lives and relations, at a certain distance, and turn them into the neat categories necessary for log frames, monitoring tools, and management systems. The experience of Oxfam is interesting here too. Oxfam Great Britain was one of the first NGOs to have a Gender Policy, and the very process of developing it – let alone the contents – was unique in terms of using consultations through which people could internalise essential principles. Ten years or more later the Policy still stands, but it is accompanied by what are called ‘non-negotiables’: a very small set of basic rules for management and for humanitarian practices. While clearly it is essential that systems themselves embody principles of gender equality, these rules suggest that a commitment to gender equality can be ‘ordered’ by diktat once and for all, rather than growing out of sustained and continuous efforts to encourage an organic transformation of people’s views and actions.

As Joanna Kerr is reported to have said: ‘All of us were very excited in Beijing, in governments, donor agencies and women’s organizations. But something has happened since then: the last few years a terrible gender fatigue has developed within governments and within donor agencies. . . . Possibly one of the explanations is that the use of the concept of gender mainstreaming led to an overemphasis on instruments and tools, whilst neglecting to look at the political process’ (Hivos 2006: 4).

Thus the term *gender mainstreaming* as a ‘chain of equivalence’ has become highly depoliticised, in the sense that it is ‘disconnected from political and structural realities, and alternative or radical ideas are diluted or neutralised’ (Utting 2006: 4).

Conclusions: new words, threats, and promises

Despite the problems discussed so far, new expressions have been finding their way into development language in recent years. In most cases they are not entirely new: rather they are terms that have been rediscovered and adapted to new contexts. *Diversity* is certainly one. However,

while this opens the possibility of bringing into development organisations discussions and approaches typical of debates on intersectionality (a difficult term in itself), it also carries new threats. One is that of encouraging a belief that gender disparities and inequalities have been overcome, and that our work therefore needs a new focus; the other is that gender becomes ‘dissolved’ into more generic categories of disadvantages, with the associated risk of losing even more institutional profile and resources (Pearson 2006:159).

A source of innovation and promise is the spread of rights-based language and approaches to development. In ActionAid the move from a core statement focusing on ‘Fighting Poverty Together’ to that of ‘Rights to End Poverty’ has been accompanied by supplementing the 2000 Gender Policy with a firm statement to the effect that Women’s Rights are to be one of the main priorities of the organisation (although the original Policy had also made clear reference to women’s rights and their empowerment).

This revision is certainly welcome, as it bases efforts to promote gender equality on intrinsic rather than instrumental arguments (Kabeer 2003). Furthermore, an emphasis on women’s human rights helps to re-politicise debates and also practices, by offering opportunities to use human-rights treaties as tools of advocacy (Freeman 2002).

Oxfam GB has also adopted a Rights-Based Approach, both in its overall analysis of poverty, and as a specific area of intervention (known as the ‘Right to be Heard’). In its approach to gender equality, things are not so clear. Recent attempts to transfer the emphasis of the organisation from ‘gender mainstreaming’ to women’s rights have met with the expressed fear that this is ‘a step backwards to WID [Women in Development] and away from GAD [Gender and Development]’, and a sign that ‘we are neglecting men’ (various personal communications). These discussions are on-going. It is to be hoped that they will lead to a consensus on the fact that, given that women continue to face specific and substantial barriers to the enjoyment of their rights, the promotion of women’s human rights is the logical and necessary aim for a rights-based development organisation.

In summary, there are major problems associated with the absence of certain terms, the ‘emptying’ of meaning and depoliticisation of others. At the same time there are indications that debates and language may be taking a more radical turn, with the acknowledgement of the shortcomings of gender mainstreaming, the deepening of interest in the notion of empowerment, and the explicit adoption of a human-rights language.

Note

1. The question concerning Life, the Universe, and Everything was posed and answered by Douglas Adams in his series *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*.

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