



Realising Gender Equality and Women's Rights in a Neoliberal Era

The field of international development has changed profoundly over the past fifteen years. A dominant neoliberal economic discourse and practice has manifested itself in stronger policy links between aid and trade, in public-private partnerships, and in unusual suspects such as private companies playing a more prominent role. There is more emphasis on economic growth, and a strong presence of new public management in both governmental and non-governmental organizations. Result-based management has gained ground, with a strong emphasis on evidence-based policy making and impact measurement. Changing funding and aid modalities have also changed accountability mechanisms.

Both the emphasis on economic growth and the predominance of the new public management techniques have affected the way gender equality and social change have been understood and are being put into practice. On January 16th 2014, practitioners, researchers, policymakers, activists, lobbyists and gender experts came together at a forum hosted by KIT and WO=MEN to stimulate reflection and the articulation of critical engagements with the current era. The aim of the forum was to identify transformative approaches and practices that contribute to gender equality and women's rights in this challenging landscape. This briefing paper shares key points of the two key note addresses, highlights of the six cases presented, and the main insights and findings of the discussions.

QUESTION 1

How to deal with the dilemmas that the opportunities and challenges for realizing women's rights and gender equality pose in a neoliberal era?

QUESTION 2

What are key elements of transformative approaches to women's rights and gender equality?



KIT | Gender

women
Dutch Gender Platform

“The tyranny of results produces toxic relations between INGOs and donors and their development country partners.”

Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay
Royal Tropical Institute
(KIT, Amsterdam)

Results-based management is reshaping gender and development practice. Whereas gender and development approaches has for many years tried to bring diverse realities of people into the development discourse, results-based framing is reducing them into homogenized categories without a context and history.

The politics of evidence and results shape what we are able to do through the practices we adopt and the spaces we engage in. Measurable outcomes drive out immeasurable ones. Current accountability methods have had the perverse effect of undermining our responsibility to question how our efforts contribute to transformative change.

Gender has taken on a variety of meanings, but this multiplicity of understandings is rarely recognized and acknowledged. As a result, assumptions about what gender means remain unchallenged including that most understandings erase the structural bases of gender relations and how these shape gender differences. Investigation of how development efforts affect gender relations is in the process undermined.

In working towards social change there is a need to reassert solidarity between north and south, east and west. Among Northern organisations competition for funding is undermining solidarity between organisations, making them more dependent on the goodwill of donors and less autonomous in their agendas. Responsibility and solidarity with women in the south is weakening.

“The current era offers challenges and opportunities. Are we seizing the possibilities for social change?”

Wendy Harcourt
Institute for Social Studies
(ISS, The Hague)

The neoliberal era confronts us with challenges and risks, but also with opportunities. Challenges include the growing inequalities within and across countries. Environmental and food crises, as well as economic and financial crises are not new, but escalating and asks for new imaginaries. The current era also offers possibilities, for instance in technological transformations, shifting geopolitical constellations, and new forms of activism.

Neoliberalism is not a given, but a particular historical process. We have to look at its fault lines, at the cracks, at where things do not work. We have the tendency not to look at the fault lines, because they make us feel uncomfortable. But it is those in-between places where one can find new opportunities, new ideas and new practices.

Important conceptual framings for new imaginaries surface around sustainable livelihoods, community economies, body politics, generational difference and the digital age. We have to move away from the solely economic approach towards an understanding of the complexities that we live in every day.

One important step is to recognize the diversity and fluidity of realities. We have to move away from strict divisions between the state, market, civil society. The binary thinking when talking about gender relations homogenizes and categorizes people. We have to recognize positionalities in different localities so that we can look at challenges and solutions from different perspectives.

MAASTRICHT SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT
Saskia Vossenbergh



Women Entrepreneurship

Current approaches to women entrepreneurship are gender blind and based on a homogenous concept of 'women'. Women entrepreneurs are seen as the drivers of economic growth. The small size of their businesses is considered a technical problem to be fixed. Saskia Vossenbergh uses feminist theories to redefine entrepreneurship as a situated and contextual practice. She starts her research from the daily realities of women entrepreneurs and the daily decisions they make. This opens up the question whether women entrepreneurship can be an entry point to change structural challenges women face.

KIT
Noortje Verhart



Gender and rights in cocoa

The World Cocoa Foundation wanted to increase outreach to women in their Cocoa Livelihood Program. KIT's analysis of gender relations in cocoa farming broadened the narrow definition of a cocoa farmer as a male land owner and manager. This provided an overview how different women are involved in cocoa farming, and insight into what challenges they face in the program. When gender relations in the production of cocoa are not taken for granted, an opportunity is created to look at how production relations at the family farm can become more beneficial for both women and men, and for potential buyers of cocoa beans.

HIVOS
Caroline Wildeman



Women at Work Campaign

In the flower industry, women are seen as good workers: careful, docile and cheap. Women are often found in temporary contracts, paid the lowest salaries, working in greatest uncertainty and with little influence over their working conditions. Certification programs often miss out on women, as they work in the informal sphere. The Women at Work campaign focuses on corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies and especially on the invisibility and treatment of women. Hivos reaches out to make companies aware of women's needs and interests, and advocates for concrete improvements of women's conditions and position in their places of work.

PARTNERSHIPS RESOURCE CENTRE
Antoinette Gosses



Gender in PPP proposals

Antoinette Gosses conducted a gender analysis of 40 Public Private Partnership (PPP) proposals on food security and water sustainability, approved by Agentschap NL. The analysis revealed that the proposal format does not allow for contextual information and is gender blind. Consultation of local stakeholders was limited, and in half of the approved proposals, it was not clear what local demand for the project is. Most proposals include a gender strategy, as the format requires, but weak involvement of local women and men in the proposal development makes it unclear whether the gender strategy reflects their needs and realities. This allows analysis for revision of the proposal format.

OXFAM NOVIB
Jeanette Kloosterman



Most Significant Change

Oxfam Novib piloted the Most Significant Change methodology to review its Gender Mainstreaming and Leadership trajectory. Unlike conventional M&E approaches, the MSC methodology offered an opportunity to search for deeper and transformative processes of change. The pilot was empowering and inspirational for partners because it offered insight into their experiences of change. This nurtured greater solidarity between partners and Oxfam Novib. Within Oxfam Novib, the pilot stimulated a stronger engagement with collecting and analyzing stories of change. Next steps to further integrate this method into the organization's M&E system, would require new projects and external funding.

MAMA CASH
Zohra Moosa



Piloting a new M&E tool

Mama Cash is exploring how to build understanding of its work, its relevance and its distinctiveness. Committed to being accountable for its money flows and interested in tracking the impact it is having, Mama Cash recently started a pilot of coding its grants in terms of pathways of change and outcomes. Reflections on the pilot brought to the fore how tempting it is to claim impact, whilst it might be just as relevant to interrogate how the coding tool informs what is defined as an impact. The limitations of applying quantitative and linear methods to complex social change processes is also inspiring further rethinking of M&E tools.

Emerging insights

The forum sought to create a space for different stakeholders committed to gender equality and women's rights to build knowledge on gender in a way that helps to maintain a critical and transformative angle to our work. The aim was not to only critique the current era, but to reflect upon and discuss current initiatives which have been able to address challenges we are facing in development or which used some of the opportunities. Some emerging insights are presented here.

AUTONOMOUS KNOWLEDGE CREATION

The dominance of donors and business interests in shaping the agenda impacts on our understanding of gender and of social change. Many economically and result-driven policy initiatives are not necessarily contributing to transforming gender relations or relations between women and men with donors and private sector. Instead, notions of women as key drivers for economic growth tend to take gender relations relations as a given, and seek to make them more effective through technical fixes.

This observation calls for strategies for autonomous knowledge creation and sharing, autonomous from the current economic and result-based discourses; knowledge generation in which multiple realities and pluralities of knowledge are made visible. Knowledge that resists the homogenizing effects and technical fixes, and brings back respect and recognition of women in all parts of the world. Subversive knowledge generation requires space where stakeholders can think and learn together.

For videos of some of the speakers, visit www.kit.nl/kit/Videos-on-gender-equality-and-womans-rights.html
For more info, visit www.kit.nl/gender and www.wo-men.nl

SPACE FOR WOMEN'S VOICES

The key notes as well as the cases point out that the daily realities of women and men that development claims to serve have disappeared from our agendas and approaches. This raises concerns about the extent to which social transformation is a contradiction or opportunity in the context of value for money and the quest for concrete results. Current aid modalities risk to create a disconnect of policy strategies from local context and daily realities. This neglect and silencing of diverse realities calls for an explicit strategy to make space for women's voices.

MAKING THINGS YOUR OWN

A powerful strategy is to make things your own. How to bring the ownership of projects and of knowledge back to the different contexts we work in? How to resist the erasure of difference and of context? This implies moving beyond binaries, stereotypes and pre-fixed ideas of what people, men and women want or need. This can be done within the frameworks of donors and policy imperatives, to legitimize and redefine social change, transformation and 'results'. Developing relations and partnerships that allow for such an appropriation and redefinition are critical.

POSITIONALITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Changing aid modalities, public-private partnerships and public management techniques change accountability mechanisms. To whom are we accountable? How do northern agencies navigate between donors, tax payers and citizens in developing countries? The complex aid and trade infrastructure calls for a high level of conscious and reflexive sense of accountability. Not playing the politics of the aid industry, but seeking to change the rules of that game so that partners in the South can work without being captured by those aid politics. In the hunger for information and for showing results, we need to be modest in what we can do, and critical about who we hold ourselves accountable to and about our own biases and agendas. This is not easy in the competitive aid environment, and calls for partnerships and solidarity instead of competitive relations.

RECONFIGURING RELATIONS BETWEEN RESEARCH, PRACTITIONERS AND POLICY MAKERS

Making things your own and autonomous knowledge creation imply that relations between research, practice and policy making are reconfigured. There is a huge demand for 'how to do gender'. Doing gender cannot meaningfully take shape without breaking down stereotypes and myths. Engagements between researchers and policy makers have to nurture that reflection, and then build from there. Who is using knowledge, for what purpose and in what way? Such questions call upon researchers to take additional steps in translating their insights and lessons to the realities of policy making and practice; and call upon policy makers to appreciate the value of knowledge and not foreclose insights and lessons from the specific frame of policy processes.