

Creating a world worth assimilating into

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The concept of making gender sensitivity and gender analysis an integral part of our frameworks of theory and practice is an old one, perhaps as old as the concept of gender itself. Feminists wanting to move in from the margins to the centre of the discourse demanded it as a right. Statisticians argued for data-gathering formats to be restructured so as to allow for sex-based disaggregation of information. Female politicians argued for the imposition of quotas and reserved seats for women in order to facilitate the entry of more women into mainstream political arenas. And throughout the 1970s and 1980s, activists fighting for equality for women countered formal, systemic and legal discrimination by calling for 'inclusion' of women and their interests in all arenas, social, political and economic.

Among my most critical memories of Beijing in 2005, and of the Fourth World Conference on Women is that of the debates around gender. One recalls, with some degree of humour, the confusion around the term 'gender' in Beijing; some representatives of governments thought it was a description of the biological difference between men and women, while others felt that it was a ruse to smuggle transgender issues onto the agendas of the Fourth World Conference on Women. One consequence of these debates was the inclusion of the concept of 'gender mainstreaming' into the Beijing Platform for Action. However, it is important to recall that some of the earliest discussions around gender mainstreaming in fact grew out of women's activism and campaigning around the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993.

Since then, gender mainstreaming has become a concept that one finds reflected in almost all the documents emanating from international donor agencies and financial institutions. It is part of the national policy documents on women of many states as well. Within the UN human rights system, the UN Commission on Human Rights has, every year since 1994, adopted a resolution on the integration of gender concerns system-wide. In many countries, the Ministries for Women's Affairs established in the 1980s have adopted gender mainstreaming as one of their fundamental guiding principles, and spend resources and woman hours promoting this principle in other Ministries. Donor agencies in turn have promoted the concept within their organizations as well as within the organizations and institutions they support in aid-receiving countries.

In the first instance, it is interesting to observe how the original concept of 'gender' as articulated by feminist thinkers to mean the socialization of masculine and feminine difference in human beings has been shifted over the years through the process of mainstreaming to mean sometimes something as simple and as ludicrous as the inclusion of men and male concerns into laws, policies and practices. In the second instance, it is interesting to note how the concept of 'mainstreaming' has shifted from being one of integration of women's concerns regarding gender relations as power relations to being one that looks primarily at the quantitative and often symbolic representation of women in structures of decision-making.

Gender as an evolving concept

In the 1970s, during what some now refer to as the 'second wave' of feminism, the evolution of the concept of gender to mean a social construction of the difference between masculine and feminine was part of a radical process of thought that examined patriarchal social relations as being intrinsically linked to male domination and female subordination, and examined the inter-sectional relationships between class, race and sex. Within this paradigm, the inclusion of equal numbers of women in decision-making structures was, along with equality in areas such as education and health and the elimination of legal discrimination, a small part. The greater canvas addressed issues of power and of power relations in society, raising conceptual issues such as the links between production and reproduction, calling for the recognition of housework as work and arguing for autonomous women's organizing and mobilizing initiatives.

This was an era in which the tone and tenor of these struggles by women were echoed by anti-colonial struggles in Vietnam, in Angola, in Mozambique. The links and tensions between the struggle for women's liberation and the struggle for national liberation, for example, were elaborated and debated by feminist scholars and activists who sought to locate their personal search for dignity within broader contexts of collective searches for social justice and the dignity of entire communities of people.

Women were actively involved in these social movements against colonization. The visual images of the era echo this thinking: women fighters are seen carrying a child with one hand and holding a gun with the other.

However, in the decades that followed, women's struggles for autonomy and dignity began to be couched more in terms of equality and rights. This was a period when the Cold War ended, when the Soviet Union collapsed, when the Berlin Wall came down. Many structures that had shaped the political framework of the world underwent rapid and sometimes unexpected transformation. Social norms and institutions also underwent their own processes of change and re-orientation. Liberal democracy was promoted as being the panacea for the ills ailing the world.

Since liberal democratic legal systems enshrined the concept of equality and freedom from discrimination in law, many women's struggles began to seek legal equality. Working to change legal and institutional structures brought with it different terms of engagement, as did the formulation of 'women's rights' lead to greater integration of the claims and demands for equal status of women within systems of governance at the national and international levels. As the development discourse turned its focus on to 'integration of women in development', the UN took on the issue of women's equality through the series of World Conferences on Women of the 1980s and 1990s and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

The creation of women's Ministries and so on can be seen as direct consequences of this shift. An interesting indicator also underlies the slow easing out of words such as 'organizing' and 'mobilizing' and their replacement by the words lobbying and advocacy. In this vocabulary shift you see the political shift. One need not be surprised that gender mainstreaming is a critical part of this process of shifting the parameters of the discussion on women's emancipation in the 21st century, given the general political context of growing conservatism and neo-liberalism. Moving from a political critique of male privilege and patriarchal social relations to a 'soft' arena of equal opportunities, equal access and equal participation suits the overall climate and obscures demands for social justice and political and economic transformation.

There are and continue to be feminist interventions on behalf of women's dignity and autonomy that refer to gender mainstreaming from a feminist perspective rooted in a framework of social transformation. For example, in the women's human rights movement, when we first talked about mainstreaming gender concerns, we did it from the point of view that there was a need to take into consideration the differences between men and women in their ability to enjoy human rights. This was particularly necessary because in the human rights movement in those days, there was no concern of what was happening to specifically to women.

Because of the exclusion of women as individuals and because of the exclusion of women's concerns and the specific human rights violations and abuses faced by women, we worked to include gender-specific information and analysis in the national and international documentation prepared for the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993. Thus we maintained an inclusive approach while at the same time being very clear that there are woman-specific violations of human rights.

Lack of government commitment

The progress of women's activism worldwide around the Beijing Platform for Action, the outcome of the Fourth World Conference on Women serves as a demonstration both of what is, and of what is possible. It is true that the Beijing Platform for Action represents some advances in terms of women's positions in society; nevertheless, it is a compromise document and the result of negotiations between States and international agencies. The irony of the situation is that while a large part of the women's movement considers itself to be bound to the Platform for Action, the States who negotiated it have proceeded to pay very little attention to it. Many feminists feel it is our framework – yet we are not responsible for it at all. In March 2005, in fact, at the 10 year Review of the Platform, for Action, the international community found itself unable to move forward even in small ways to protect and promote women's human rights.

Despite the disappointing lack of commitment by states to advance women's equality and dignity ten years after Beijing, many strong women's activist organizations around the world continue to frame their activism around the Beijing process. On the one hand, this brings a deep sense of frustration to our work. From a feminist movement that demanded women's right to control their

bodies in the 1960s, we are now reduced to taking various convoluted paths to stay away from the issue of abortion. Every time I want to talk about abortion, people want to reference it to the Beijing Platform for Action. There is a sense that unless one can justify something through referencing it to UN language around which there is global consensus, one should not bring it forward. This is a great barrier to much of our activism and the need to move our issues forward.

On the other hand you see that work on women's issues is also being reduced to some levels of professionalism without the equivalent levels of commitment to feminist principles. For example, among the groups that participated in the Asia-Pacific Forum for Beijing Plus Ten, most consisted of academic women within university structures, taking courses in women's studies and gender studies, as well as of women within state and non-state institutions. In real terms, the women who have been most active in Asia-Pacific region come from marginalized social groups and environments: they are, and work with, indigenous women, lesbians, bisexual women and transgendered persons, women who work with issues of migration and trafficking, sex workers, people living with HIV/AIDS. They were mostly absent from the main deliberations of the forum. The marginalization is internalized as well as publicly manifest.

Questioning unequal power relations

Our main critique as feminists of the present mode of 'gender mainstreaming' is that it does not question the unequal power relations that lie at the root of patriarchy and cause great injustices to women. It is because it does not challenge the patriarchal system that gender mainstreaming is very attractive to governments and donors. They feel comfortable putting money and resources into this, because it is perceived to be a 'safe' area of activity. In fact, in many countries, the practical impact of the present mode of 'gender mainstreaming' is to cut back on programmes and activities that are exclusively designed and implemented for women, and invest those resources in arenas in which men and male concerns can be addressed.

While it is absolutely imperative that men and women should, together, address issues that lead to women's subordination and marginalization in society, it is equally imperative that women-only spaces are preserved as spaces within which women can speak freely and express themselves without inhibition or fear of repercussion. This is why I see a danger in using the concept 'gender' in the present context, in that it allows for the dislocation of women-specific concerns and for the dislocation of women from the centres of debate and discussion. While it seems to be 'inclusive', in fact gender often leads to the neglect of women's concerns.

The feminist critique of this system, then and now, is that the uncritical focus on the inclusion of women within institutions that are framed by patriarchal norms and standards results in the 'disappearance' of key women's concerns. Some people argue that there must be a critical mass of women in institutions, politics and public life in order for women to make a difference. There is no doubt that the mere presence of physical female bodies in institutions has its uses, but it does not challenge gender roles if there is no feminist consciousness behind it.

If the process does not actively embrace the need to challenge and transform patriarchal social relations, having more women on the inside may not make any difference at all. Why call it gender mainstreaming if you are only trying to increase the presence of women in the bureaucracy and in structure of governance? It is only if we can enter the mainstream in sufficient numbers and with sufficient strength and a strong ability to challenge and change the mainstream that it will ever make sense to speak of 'mainstreaming' gender.

In the context of the new political and social dynamics of the 21st century, in fact, we have to confront the reality that gender mainstreaming is fast becoming an obsolete concept. This is so because in other areas of analysis we have developed an understanding of the inter-sectionality of oppression and discrimination, that tells us clearly that our gender identity and our sex identity, which are different from one another, form only a part of our totality. Other factors that shape your identity such as class, religion, education, sexual choice can all play a role in positioning you within sets of power relations and within structures of power.

If we don't begin to come to terms with the fact that we, as women, may have contentious or contending relationships with other marginalized identities, or communities, who are also struggling to be in the mainstream, such as dalits or indigenous peoples, then we stand severely handicapped in the modern world.

In terms of mainstreaming, this is why it is very important to have women as a 'critical mass' within the structures of power, while ensuring a strategic approach to these women in order to make sure that they are aware of the issues. There is no guarantee that they know the issues just because they are women. At the same time, we need to have new strategies to build alliances with other emerging social movements. The only way we can talk about feminist organizing and mobilizing for real social transformation is if we can figure out with whom we can ally, and in what moment.

We need to do some serious bridge building with women who are in other social movements to make the connection between what happens to women as women and what happens to other marginalized communities. For example, the struggle of indigenous peoples for the right to control their land and the issue of indigenous women's rights to own land in their own right are both present in feminist agendas, and are often juxtaposed as being in opposition to one another. If we can be more strategic in these matters, these tensions can be resolved.

In response to the horrors of the torture and abuse of prisoners in Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison, in which women were involved, noted feminist Barbara Ehrenreich wrote: '...we need a kind of feminism that aims not just to assimilate into the institutions that men have created over the centuries, but to infiltrate and subvert them. To cite an old, and far from naïve, feminist saying "If you think equality is the goal, your standards are too low." It is not enough to be equal to men, when men are acting like beasts. It is not enough to assimilate. We need to create a world worth assimilating into' (Los Angeles Times, 16 May 2004).

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