

# Men, masculinity and 'gender in development'

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*This article focuses on the implications of recent work in feminist theory, and on questions of masculinity, stressing the need to take account of the complex and variable nature of gender identities, and to work with men on exploring the constraints of dominant models of masculinity.*

Articles and training materials addressing 'gender issues' invariably talk about women. As Gender and Development (GAD) initiatives are specifically aimed at challenging and correcting the effects of gender inequality, this may seem hardly surprising. After all, the primary purpose is to work towards the involvement of women as equal partners in the development process. But the dilemmas faced by some of the 'other' gender, dilemmas that may equally be regarded as 'gender issues', are rarely given consideration. And gender training, one of the principal strategies of GAD practice, rarely speaks to men's experiences as men.

By disregarding the complexities of male experience, by characterising men as 'the problem', and by continuing to focus on women-in-general as 'the oppressed', development initiatives that aim to be 'gender-aware' can fail to address effectively the issues of equity and empowerment that are crucial in bringing about positive change. To make gender 'everybody's issue', strategies are required that take account of the complexities of

difference, and which return to the basic premises on which GAD is founded: that gender relations are fundamentally power relations.

## Gender and Development: time to move on?

The failure of many Women In Development (WID) projects led to the realisation that targeting women alone was not enough (Kabeer 1995). Drawing on the work of feminist academics in the 1970s, and on the distinction between sex and gender that came to influence much feminist work in the 1970s and 1980s, feminist development practitioners borrowed the concept of gender as a social construct. Feminist anthropologists demonstrated that taken-for-granted assumptions about women and men reflect the ways in which culturally-specific ideas about women and men had become 'naturalised' (see, for example, Ortner 1974, Rosaldo 1974). Feminist anthropologists contended that there was nothing 'natural' about the gender inequalities that take different forms in different

cultures (see, for example, MacCormack and Strathern 1980, Moore 1988).

In development, 'gender' came to refer to the socially constructed relations between women and men. The concept of GAD offered a new approach to including women in the development process; gender training became a 'means by which feminist advocates and practitioners... {sought} to de-institutionalise male privilege within development policy and planning' (Kabeer 1995:264). 'Gender analysis' offered tools for investigating the material bases of difference between women and men. Yet, gender analysis tells us very little about how gender identities and roles are experienced by individual women and men within communities. Rather, it is used to delineate distinctions between what women-in-general and men-in-general do, in order to guide planners. Sexual difference is taken as the starting point for analysis, and gross commonalities among women and men are presumed. This crude and simplistic form of analysis offers little in the way of understanding the dynamics of difference in communities. It tells us nothing of relationships among women and among men, nor of the intersection of gender with other differences such as age, status and wealth.

### **Bringing new thinking into development practice**

While feminist theory has moved on and become more sophisticated, the impact of new thinking on development practice has been limited. Tracking the ideas that have influenced GAD back to academia offers some insights into the shortcomings of current practice.

By the early 1980s, there was considerable unease in feminist circles about the ways in which 'women' were being constructed in feminist writing. It became apparent that by focusing on Universal

Woman, the mainstream feminism was disregarding differences between women: black, non-Western, working-class and lesbian women had their own struggles and faced other prejudices (see, for example, Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981). Western feminism and its category 'woman' was of relevance only to particular kinds of women and, some writers argued, failed to take account of the context of women's situations (see, for example, Mohanty, 1987).

On the other hand, if one could no longer talk of universals such as 'male dominance' or 'women's oppression', and if it was philosophically unsound to continue to assert broad-ranging theories about women's experience, then it seemed that there was little space left for feminist politics. While in the early 1980s, some feminist writers had begun to question the sex/gender distinction that had become so fashionable (see, for example, Gatens 1983), by now, debates about the usefulness of a category 'woman' and the concept of 'gender' for activism raised further thorny questions (see, for example, Scott 1989).

### **Useful new concepts**

The gulf between the academic world and those working in applied or activist fields has widened as complex theoretical language and concepts have come to dominate feminist writing. Dressed up in complicated terms and swathed in obscure language, much theoretical work on gender has become almost completely inaccessible to a casual outsider. In essence, however, a lot of recent gender theory seems like common sense. We all know from our own experience that how we feel or behave as women or men is influenced by the many different messages we receive from others about what is acceptable or appropriate; that over our lives, being a woman or man has different dimensions and that in different

settings we might behave quite differently, depending on whom we interact with.

New theoretical tools have given social scientists the capacity to explore in greater detail the processes through which gender is locally constructed and the interactions in which gender makes a difference.

**Discourse analysis**, for example, has been extremely useful in understanding the ways in which women and men come to adopt particular practices; work that shows a number of different, sometimes contradictory, discourses about gender offer the means to analyse how it is that people take up particular ways of seeing themselves and relating to others.<sup>1</sup>

**Deconstruction** — the principle of taking apart taken-for-granted assumptions to explore the contradictions on which they are based — is equally valuable. Deconstructing the category ‘woman’ or ‘man’ reveals a host of assumptions, ideas and judgements, that can be understood in terms of people’s experience and their cultural context.

### *Gender as a performance*

Analysis of the ways in which gender affects particular interactions, looking at **Gender as a Performance** (Butler 1990) or in terms of the ways people make others feel ‘different’ from them (Kessler and McKenna 1978), offers new ways of exploring the contexts in which gender makes a difference.

Each day of our lives and over the course of our lives, the identities we have as women or men are not fixed or absolute, but multiple and shifting (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994). Gender relations are context-bound: in one setting we might behave in one way, while in others we might behave differently. Thinking in terms of what Hollway calls ‘subject-positions’ allows us to consider how people’s behaviour relates to the specific contexts in which people interact. At home, at work, in the church or mosque or

temple, at same-sex or family gatherings the ways in which a woman or man interacts with others may be very different. And the ways in which people are thought of as men or women also vary with the context: consider, for example, the contrast between the different masculinities and femininities in the ‘subject-positions’ of power-dressed career woman, loving mother, or devoted wife; or between doting father, beer-drinking lad, and dutiful son.

When we analyse our own lives, we can see just how complex and contradictory ways of thinking about gender can be. None of us live every moment of our lives in a state of subordination to others. And the relationships we have with people around us may be ‘gender relations’ in the sense that these are relationships in which gender makes a difference (see Peters 1995), but are in no sense merely one-dimensional power relations. As women, we may have sons, fathers, brothers, male friends or male employees in our lives with whom we have quite different kinds of relationships than those with a male lover, husband or boss. It is, in many ways, quite obvious that sweeping generalisations about gender make little sense of our own realities.

## **Missing masculinity? Men in gender and development**

One of the most obvious gaps in gender and development studies, where new tools and new approaches are needed, is in relation to men. Old-style feminist theory dealt with them at one stroke: men were classed as the problem, those who stood in the way of positive change. And while feminist activism stressed change in attitudes and behaviour on the part of women in coming forward to claim their rights, it offered little more to men than a series of negative images of masculinity. Only by abandoning those attributes which are culturally valued as those

associated with masculinity could men relieve themselves. It is hardly any wonder that many men found this difficult. Not only were they told that they should give up positions that put them at an advantage, they were left without anything to value about being men.

Writings on men and on questions of masculinity are relatively recent, reflecting a belated recognition that men also have gender identities. Over the last decade, however, a great deal has been written on and by men. Some of this work could be seen as rather self-seeking, and lacks the critical edge evident in feminist work. There are, however, a number of excellent contributions to this field that have much to offer practitioners, such as Connell's (1987, 1995) work. In an influential early article, Carrigan, Connell and Lee (1985) outlined a theory of masculinity that drew on some of this recent thinking to argue that although there are many ways of being a man, some are valued more than others and men experience social pressure to conform to dominant ideas about being a man. They termed this 'hegemonic masculinity'. Not all men conform to the 'hegemonic' version; those who do not may find themselves disadvantaged, and even discriminated against.

Where the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' is most valuable is in showing that it is not men per se, but certain ways of being and behaving, that are associated with dominance and power. In each cultural context, the ways in which masculinity is associated with power varies (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994). Some ways of being a man are valued more than others. But this is not to say that all men behave in this way. Attributes that are associated with masculinity are not always associated with men: women too can possess some of these attributes. Not all men, then, have power; and not all of those who have power are men.

In each cultural context there is a range of available models of masculinity or

femininity. Not all men benefit from and subscribe to dominant values. 'Hegemonic masculinity' can be just as oppressive for those men who refuse, or fail, to conform. Yet, these men are often implicitly excluded from being part of processes of changing and confronting gender inequality because they are male.

Gender and Development work currently offers little scope for men's involvement. Resistance to messages about what may be interpreted as 'women's issues' makes more sense if the failure to adequately analyse and address men's experiences and gender identities is taken into account. Without an approach to difference that moves beyond static generalisations and works with and from personal experience to open up spaces for change, men will continue to be left on the sidelines and remain 'the problem'.

## **Implications for practice**

So how can these theoretical tools be useful to practitioners dealing with the concrete everyday problems of development work? Firstly, they offer ways to build greater awareness of the challenges that men may face in coming to terms with changing identities and practices. If certain ways of being a man are culturally valued, then asking men to abandon these identities altogether without having anything of value to hold on to is clearly unreasonable. But if men become aware that in their own everyday lives they are already behaving differently in different settings without losing a sense of their own identities, then it may be easier to recognise some of the implications of 'hegemonic masculinity' without feeling attacked or threatened.

Secondly, by demonstrating that many men do not actually match up to idealised forms of masculinity, spaces can be opened up for reflection about how men can be disempowered or marginalised. Rather than tarring all men with the same

brush, looking at dimensions of difference can offer ways in which men can begin to re-evaluate some of the difficulties they face as men, and enhance awareness of situations in which the roles are reversed. By recognising that men can also feel powerless, scope can be offered for men to reflect on their behaviour towards those they feel they have power over. As behaviour is learnt, it can also be unlearned and relearned.

Lastly, if empowerment means enabling people to expand their 'power within' in order to have power to make their own choices, then this can equally be applied in work with men. It is often easier to resist change and remain cushioned by the comfort of familiarity. Behaving differently can raise all kinds of anxieties and threats, especially when identities might be compromised. By deconstructing cultural assumptions about being a man, awareness can be raised about the ways in which some of these assumptions leave people in a no-win situation. And by working from this analysis to build the confidence to choose to behave differently, men can be offered the means to empower themselves to change. Men who have already begun to embrace change are allies, rather than part of 'the enemy', and opportunities should be made to involve them more in Gender and Development work.

If gender is to be everybody's issue, then we need to find constructive ways of working with men as well as with women to build the confidence to do things differently. Just because some men occupy subject-positions in some settings that lend them power over people, it does not necessarily mean that these positions are congruent with all aspects of their lives and therefore define them as people.

Relatively simple tools, drawn from applications of theoretical models, and the practical tools of approaches such as Assertiveness Training, can be used to raise awareness of contradictions and of the knock-on effects of resisting change.

By working with men as human beings, rather than constructing them as 'the problem', addressing personal change can have a wider impact on the institutional changes that are needed for greater equity.

It is time to move beyond the old fixed ideas about gender roles and about universal male domination. Time to find ways of thinking about and analysing gender that make sense of the complexities of people's lived realities. Gender and development currently lacks sophisticated tools for understanding difference: is it not time that we turned our attention to creating them? Taking complexity seriously does not mean that we need to abandon completely fundamental feminist concerns with women's rights. The shattering of the old grand theories can be liberating, rather than robbing us of a place from which to speak about inequality. We have the choice to use arguments as strategies, without swallowing them whole to mask the real contradictions they raise in terms of our own lives (see Fraser 1995). Where we do need to be careful is in confusing strategic arguments about women or men-in-general with the everyday experiences of real women and men.

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## Notes

1. One of the most accessible examples of this is Wendy Hollway's (1984) analysis

of gender identities and relations between young women and men.

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