

What if the girls don't want to be businesswomen?

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Introduction

'Hello, everybody, I'm feminist'. Only because I had been requested to be 'provocative' and was also well-acquainted with global policy spaces that I felt bold enough to start thus my presentation at an official international workshop on women's economic empowerment. I had been placed to speak in the first session, immediately after opening speeches from very senior officials who had spoken of being 'honoured' to address this event and of gratitude to their hosts. By deliberately breaking with this convention, I hoped my audience of gender specialists working in international development organisations might be stirred to remember, and importantly to articulate why gender equality was important for them.

From the podium I saw an array of apparently de-personalised donor bureaucrats, in pre-assigned seats each behind their country's or multilateral organisation's name plate; sprinkled among them in correct alphabetical order a few recipient government representatives, invited as speakers. I then noticed the NGO representatives seated towards the rear of the room, each once again with a name plate, including next to a Bolivian NGO activist an empty seat, awaiting me once I had spoken. High up behind a glass panel on the back wall were the interpreters whispering into their microphones. I wondered what the Russian for 'feminist' was.

The very senior official immediately preceding me had stressed that women's economic empowerment is gaining recognition as critical to economic development.

[It] has proven to generate both micro-level efficiency results through increased household productivity and macro-efficiency, and through positive synergies between indicators of gender equality and economic growth. Women's economic empowerment is good economics.

The line she was taking was no surprise. It has become the dominant gender discourse in official international development agencies – not only those in the World Bank but also in United Nations and many government aid organisations. But in these agencies are some who worry that the instrumentalist arguments have gone too far. They realise that this discourse, initially employed as a tactic to capture the attention of top management and of ministries of finance in

recipient countries was insidiously becoming their own habitual mode of thought. Hence my invitation to provoke which I had interpreted as invitation to remind participants that before the era of 'gender equality is smart economics' – a slogan coined by the World Bank (2006) - empowerment carried the meaning of transformation in societal and economic relations (Batliwala 2007).

A concern of this special issue of *Development* is whether empowerment discourses essentially say the same thing and whether similar interventions are promoted irrespective of context. In this article I relate to that concern through a case study of the role of international development agencies in standardising discourse and practice. I wanted to find out whether it would be possible to contest a currently prevailing discourse of empowerment, one that has largely been created and then regularly reproduced in global spaces such as the event at which I was invited to speak.¹

Women's empowerment' as used in global policy spaces carries multiple meanings that variously wax and wane in their discursive influence. The meanings that individual gender specialists give to empowerment shift also from moment to moment in relation to context and positionality (Eyben and Napier-Moore 2009). What would happen, I wondered, if a deliberate effort were made to de-stabilize positionality and context? If I were to convey the messages: 'We are not just bureaucrats, we are also feminists'; and 'Let us dismiss the formality of global policy gatherings and rather than mouth 'development speak' let us have serious conversations about matters that are really important to us and our agencies that we represent'.

In my presentation I also proposed an alternative concept of economic empowerment as being able to imagine the world's current economic arrangements differently and to realise that vision by changing the relations of power that sustain the status quo.² It was this alternative that also shaped my vision of change - on a miniscule scale - in this conference room. I wanted people to imagine their world differently; but because of how power was at work in this highly formalised space, I was concerned that many of them would find this difficult, if not impossible.

¹ I had sought the prior agreement of the organisers to using this experience for the purposes of the present article, stressing I would respect anonymity.

² Taken from Eyben, Kabeer and Cornwall (2008)

I understood power not as centred in particular individuals, for example in the very senior officials opening the workshop, but rather as the capacity of habitual practice to affect how and what we are able to think and say (Hayward 2000). This meaning of power comprehends the interaction between historically derived and culturally structured patterns of relationships – the habitual – and the individual or collective agency that sustains or transforms these relationships. Thus, I visualized the workshop space as bounded by an invisible but tangible membrane. Could this membrane be expanded or even pierced to accommodate greater diversity of perspectives about economic empowerment? And what the tactics of those, including myself trying to change the discourse and habitual practice – as well as of those concerned to keep the membrane tight and impenetrable?

Discursive surrogates

The organising principle behind the workshop was for case studies of economic empowerment to be identified by the development agencies represented at the workshop, nominating speakers from the organisations they were funding to be invited to present the work they were doing. Because many agencies wanted to participate in this way the result was a large number of panels and speakers. On the first day there were seven successive panels and 27 separate speeches and presentations with the last session ending at 7pm. This meant very little time for many questions and comments from the floor and no provision was made for small group discussions.³ Furthermore, many of the interventions from the floor that time permitted related more to participants promoting their own organisations' work rather than responding to points made by the panel or to drawing wider conclusions from what was said. Showing off how good they were at doing women's empowerment often appeared to crowd out opportunities for critical reflection. Was this, I asked myself, how habitual practice prevented deliberation and debate, thus allowing the dominant instrumentalist discourse to be sustained by default.

Yet, the workshop programme had been subject to continuous negotiation for at least six months prior to finalisation only a couple of weeks before the event.⁴ For example, a group of donors keen to discuss gender equality and international trade were only belatedly successful in getting a panel on this issue. They did not

³ Apparently, there had been some disagreement among the conference organisers concerning the programme structure, some arguing for break out groups.

⁴ Part of the reason for this was because economic empowerment, while the principal theme, was not the only one.

just want to focus on micro-level empowerment activities but to explore 'how global political economic arrangements and trading systems affect women locally'.

Perhaps in response to this, the organisers' background note to the event touched on the current global crises. It noted that 'evidence indicates that women's economic empowerment and women as agents of change... are elements of the solutions to the crises.'⁵ In my presentation, however, I contrasted this statement with a recent report on women's own experience of the crisis in five developing countries and that found women are working far harder for small additional earnings (Hossain 2009). Using this example, I asked whether international development agencies wanted to help such women support the economic status quo or help them change it in favour of greater gender equality. I noted that missing from the workshop agenda were words relating to collective action and bargaining power, equal wages and working conditions and most importantly anything relating to recognising and valuing all of women's work. 'Making markets work for women'⁶ is not enough to secure economic justice, I suggested.

In the subsequent comments from the floor several officials announced that they also were feminists. They also introduced other words absent from the agenda such as 'rights', and 'injustice'. One asked why the care economy was missing from the agenda. Yet another stressed how economic empowerment cannot be de-linked from other aspects of empowerment, such as the political. My unconventional opening remarks may have given these officials permission to speak against the prevailing discourse that had been established by the very senior officials and in the conference agenda.

Nevertheless, although in the absence of my intervention, they might have stayed silent about their feminism, I subsequently realised this did not mean they were not actively challenging the instrumentalist agenda. As I shall examine in the next section, during the course of the event different panellists were articulating varied understandings of empowerment, indicating a greater discursive diversity among the donors who had invited them to the workshop than the official documentation for the workshop indicated. Arguably the invited speakers were the surrogates in a discursive battle never made transparent or recognised in the design of the programme.

⁵ To preserve conference participants' anonymity, no citation is provided for conference documentation from which these and other quotations have been taken.

⁶ <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGENDER/Resources/Abstract.pdf>

Conceptualising empowerment

The first panel session after coffee was 'building the foundation'. Two presenters from an international NGO that works with children spoke of 'building the assets and capabilities of girls', followed by a recipient government official on introducing entrepreneurship into the school curriculum. The final speaker represented a cosmetic company that was also a member of a private sector consultative committee established by one of the multilateral banks represented at the workshop. Her company employs women on a commission basis to sell beauty products and has an 'economic empowerment initiative' that provides business training to their 'consultants'. It was, the speaker explained, a 'win win' situation: the women earned more money and the company made more profits. 'It was all about empowerment – *'lo imaginamos, lo hacemos'*. Her Spanish phrase was almost a literal translation of the definition of empowerment I had proposed earlier in relation to extending our imaginary horizons and acting accordingly. Except that power was missing.

As an elderly second wave feminist, is this empowerment, I asked myself, learning how to persuade your poverty stricken neighbours to spend their money on cosmetics? My Bolivian neighbour was evidently equally irritated. She turned to me in frustration when the chair ignored her hand waving from the back of the room and closed the session. However, that afternoon she was on a panel about social protection. 'I am a militant feminist', she declared to the workshop. What the cosmetics company had presented as women's economic empowerment she saw as the exploitation of women by a multi-national corporation. In Bolivia, she said, we are building an economy based on the notion of *'vivir bien'* – living well in harmony with nature and with each other.

That evening I tried to find out what participants thought about these sharp differences in perspective. Some were genuinely puzzled as to why my Bolivian neighbour should have been so outraged. What was wrong in enlisting big business in reducing poverty? The Bolivian's radical perspective may have been too challenging to absorb. Even my more modest references to transforming the economic status quo were misunderstood by one aid official who agreed with me that we needed to change the economic system. 'If there had been more women employed in the financial markets we wouldn't had the crisis over derivatives'.

More subtle in his response to my question concerning the Bolivian challenge was someone from a multilateral bank. His disarming tactic left me temporarily speechless, allowing him to move away through the crowd before I could muster a satisfactory reply. 'She warmed the cockles of my heart, Rosalind', he said.

'Scratch [his bank] staff members and you will find we are all socialists underneath.'

Throughout that day the over-riding refrain had been 'women's entrepreneurship as a pathway to economic and social empowerment'. The first panel after lunch was of African businesswomen. Their sense of individual accomplishment was palpable. 'I've gained confidence and self-esteem' stressed one of them as she explained how she saw herself as a role model for others. A donor commented on 'these very dynamic women from Africa' [who can] 'thrive if we fuel them'.

Not everyone was equally enthused. At the next session when an NGO speaker talked about teaching girls to be entrepreneurs 'from an early age', one participant asked whether we wanted to keep girls in school or de-rail them into learning to make money. 'What if the girls don't want to be businesswomen but nurses?' And later another participant wanted to know how and whether economic empowerment projects changed gender norms. What research had been done to demonstrate the relationship between individual success stories of women entrepreneurs and general poverty reduction?

On a panel on land as 'a basis for economic security', several NGO speakers, from Latin America and Africa introduced notions of collective empowerment, along with references to 'women organising'. One speaker exceptionally in this workshop frequently referred to how the grassroots groups her organisation was accompanying interpreted their own situation. This same speaker, from an international NGO with a reputation for being more radical than some of the other NGOs represented in the room, commented to me she had regretted coming to the workshop when noticing how much emphasis was placed in the programme on individual entrepreneurship and the related absence of a concern for those in poverty.

That growth rather than poverty reduction should be the focus of donor efforts to support economic empowerment was emphasised by an African government official speaking on a subsequent panel. Her government, she said, has '...done enough of poverty. Now we are into wealth creation'. Her other remarks about donors needing to conform to the Paris Declaration principle of country ownership possibly made it difficult for any of the international aid officials to contradict her arguments.

Drafting key messages

At the end of the first day a multilateral bank representative ⁷ had been given the task of summarising the key messages from the 27 speakers and 7 panels. He concluded that donors should focus their efforts on the doubly and triply disadvantaged women (who presumably would not benefit easily from trickle down). This appeared to represent a residual welfare school of thought with which I had become familiar when working for the British government's aid ministry during the Thatcher administration. And the panel's chairperson from one of the official development agencies did not agree with that conclusion. Donors, she said should look for where there was the greatest potential to support social transformation.

Afterwards, at the reception, that same bank representative sardonically congratulated me on my 'rabble rousing' at the start of the workshop but despite the chairperson's closing remarks I was not sure I had much evidence of having stimulated many substantive objections to the prevailing discourse. Nor had the alternative perspectives on empowerment offered from Bolivia and the African land rights activists appeared to have stimulated many lively arguments. It was not just that the programme had been so packed with speakers there was little time for comments from the floor, even in the reception only a few people had appeared interested in debate. Possibly everyone was too exhausted. So it seemed that the instrumentalist discursive framework of the workshop's background note might almost by default be reflected in the eventual summary of the proceedings.

Thus I was surprised to be invited to be part of a small ad hoc group to draft the 'key messages' from the workshop. We met after breakfast in a little office across the corridor from the conference room. Someone noted that there had been 'a strong call for changing the way we think about empowerment' and that one message should be the need for donors to facilitate change in the economic status quo. She then went on to stress the importance of strengthening relations with the private sector. 'Multinational corporations create wealth and that's OK.' Then after some points were made about legal identity, vouchers and land rights, someone asked, 'Should we have a message about measuring economic empowerment?' The problem here, the drafting group concluded was that there was no agreement about the concept and therefore what could be measured.

The same group met again after lunch to continue drafting and just as the penultimate panel was drawing to a conclusion, so the conference organisers

⁷ Another than my interlocutor who claimed to be a closet socialist

were ready to read out the key messages to the plenary. The first message concerned changing the way we think and redefine women's economic empowerment, stressing the inter-connections with other forms of empowerment. The second message was from my power point presentation:

'Making markets work for women is not enough for economic justice. Focusing exclusively on increasing women's labour market participation and entrepreneurship will not produce a balanced distribution between men and women in both productive and reproductive work. Policy makers need also to address the right to decent work and equal wages and recognise and value all women' work.'

The remaining messages had been judiciously selected from some of the presentations and included no mention of 'growth', 'macro-efficiency' or 'good economics'. They were chosen without any considered deliberation and debate among workshop participants whose influence on the outcome was a consequence of who they had decided to invite to the workshop. Advantage was taken by the drafting cabal of the conventional way in which the workshop had been run. This allowed the creation of a closed space inside the event into which only certain people had been invited. Because of the workshop's non-participatory mode, those excluded from the drafting group appeared to voice no complaint about this process. The membrane had not been pierced, only expanded.

Conclusion

At the end of the event, a group of women from Latin American NGOs told me they had been puzzled as to what their role was meant to be and how strange they had found the room arrangement with everyone behind name plates. They had been surprised by the extremely non-participatory way of running the meeting with the many long panel sessions and little space for discussion. 'It's not the way we feminists do things in Latin America', they said.

When I first saw the agenda and the accompanying background note, I assumed that the workshop was going to be uncontested space for re-affirming the dominant instrumentalist discourse that is current in international development agencies. What the event taught me was the need to look beneath the surface and to study the subtle tactics at play in relation to consolidating and challenging discourses of empowerment. De-personalised bureaucrats are as political as social movement activists. They just do it differently.

The different donor agencies had succeeded in collecting a variety of social actors that brought into the workshop space different understandings of empowerment. While the programme had been framed largely in terms of entrepreneurship and wealth creation, and many of the invitees spoke to that agenda, it was far from everyone. There was sufficient discursive dissonance in the room for the key messages to be seen as reflecting the (largely unexpressed) mood of the meeting. It was just a question of deciding what to include and what to leave out.

My aim at the workshop had been to explore the scope and means by which an alternative understanding of women's economic empowerment could be introduced into a global policy space in which apparently only one discourse held sway. I learnt that the discourse is not as dominant as I had thought and that there is greater dissonance than activists seeking international development financing might imagine being the case. That an alternative discourse was successfully captured in the summary 'key messages' provides I believe some scope for a similar exercise to be repeated in other global spaces, thus possibly contributing to a discursive back lash to the current efficiency arguments for women's empowerment, clearly something some of the workshop organisers are seeking.

On the other hand, the workshop also revealed something about the nature of practice in global policy spaces. That the selection of key messages was decided in a non-participatory and non-transparent manner could be considered irrelevant bearing in mind the greater lack of accountability and representation in the decisions taken about who should be invited to the workshop. Thus while the prevailing discourse of empowerment had been successfully contested, the event had failed to transform the way in which it gets habitually constructed in global spaces.

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