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From “Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment” to Global Justice: Reclaiming a Transformative Agenda for Gender and Development

Andrea Cornwall and Althea-Maria Rivas

Abstract

The language of “gender equality” and “women’s empowerment” was mobilised by feminists in the 1980s and 1990s as a way of getting women’s rights onto the international development agenda. Their efforts can be declared a resounding success. The international development industry has fully embraced these terms. From international NGOs to donor governments to multilateral agencies, the language of “gender equality” and “women’s empowerment” is a pervasive presence and takes pride of place amongst their major development priorities. And yet, this article argues, the fact that these terms have been eviscerated of conceptual and political bite compromises their use as the primary frame through which to demand rights and justice. Critically examining the trajectories of these terms in development, the article suggests that if the promise of the post-2015 agenda is to deliver on gender justice, new frames are needed that can connect with and contribute to a broader movement for global justice.

Keywords: Post-2015; global justice; gender equality; women’s empowerment

Introduction

On the cusp of 2015, we are in a different world from the one in which the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were first conceived. Acknowledgment of achievements, particularly in girls’ primary education and women’s political representation, has gone alongside a ‘deep concern with the overall progress for women and girls across the MDGs, which remains low and uneven both within and between countries’.¹ This staccato progress has been the topic of much debate as discussions on the post-2015 agenda have intensified. Amidst talk about a stand-alone gender equality and women’s empowerment goal and mainstreaming gender equality and women’s empowerment, it is perhaps time to ask: is this really the right way to address – and to wage a concerted effort to end – discrimination on the basis of gender? Is “empowering women and girls” and “engaging men and boys” – parcelling two genders into categories with one-size-fits-all universalising remedies, and ignoring anyone who does not conform – the way to create a fairer world for all?

Gender equality and women’s empowerment are, we contend, frames that have led feminist activists into a cul-de-sac and away from a broader-based alliance of social change activists. Both have been reduced to buzzwords that garland policy discourses in which there is little or nothing of the clamour for equality or equity that was once so powerful a part of the gender agenda.² Critical reflection on feminist efforts to transform international development policy and practice has led to a far more realistic view of the limits of enlistment of bureaucratic institutions – governments, UN agencies, donor bureaucracies – in the task of social transformation.³ This, in turn, has reinforced the importance of grassroots feminist organising as a motor of change, and of collectivisation and collective action as a counterpoint to today’s neoliberal ‘empowerment’ programmes aimed at the

self-optimising individual.⁴ It has also brought into sharp relief the larger canvas on which struggles for women's rights are fought, refocusing attention both on global capitalism and the inequalities it fosters, and on modes of organising and resistance that characterise the struggle for global justice.

It is with where these insights might take the 'gender agenda' that this article is concerned. We begin with a critical overview of the main debates about gender and the MDGs. From this we seek to trace a history of the present moment, following the trajectories of 'gender equality' and 'women's empowerment'. We then examine the potential that other frames offer for resolving the contradictions characterising the current focus on "girls and women" and "men and boys". We explore how the concepts of "accountability", "inclusion" and "non-discrimination" may offer potential for recuperating a transformative approach for alliance building that can deliver the kinds of deep-rooted structural changes that are needed to achieve a more just and equal world.

Gender Equality and the MDGs

The normative promise of the Millennium Declaration offered much to those concerned with persistent inequalities and the toll of discrimination on people's lives and livelihoods. The Declaration opens by expressing a determination to establish a 'just and lasting peace' in which there is 'respect for the equal rights of all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion'.⁵ Six guiding values are identified: freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility.

Together, these values would seem to offer an approach to international development in which equal rights and opportunities of all genders, social justice and a capacity to "cherish" rather than "fear or repress" difference could be enshrined. And yet in the translation of these principles into the language and targets of development intervention we saw an extraordinary shrinkage to a set of instrumentalist goals.⁶ Critiques of the MDGs from a gender perspective centre on a series of common themes. Firstly, they highlight the top-down nature of the process of developing the goals, which took place amongst a handful of UN officials in New York, far from those who would arguably be most affected by their implementation and, as Kabeer points out, 'many of the women's organisations that had participated in the UN conferences in the 1990s and were deeply committed to the frameworks and principles which had emerged from them'.⁷ Secondly, critics point to the limits of instrumentalist rationale that is adopted in the goals and their focus on the role that women and girls can play within projects and initiatives, rather than exploring issues of gendered power; making women work for development, rather than making development work for their equality and empowerment. And, as feminists point out, the goals do not include mechanisms encouraging governments to invest in and monitor progress in gender equality itself.⁸ There is little emphasis on addressing the underlying structural issues driving discrimination and inequality – including violence against women and diminished sexual and reproductive rights. Results defined in these narrow instrumentalist terms might be achieved without any dent being made in existing inequalities. In the Caribbean, for example, where MDG 3 in girls' education has been surpassed, there is little concomitant improvement in women's economic status.⁹

Critics have also focused on the spirit in which the goals were developed. Stress is placed on the need to return to the human rights and social justice lens, which underpinned the Millennium Declaration, but was lost in its translation into 'actionable' goals, targets and

indicators.¹⁰ After all, the MDGs and the preceding International Development Targets (IDTs) (1996) have been an organising platform for development priorities in the 2000s, but were also meant to reinforce the trajectory of earlier international commitments made in the 1980s and 1990s. These include the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995), the Rio Conference on Environment and Development (1992), the Vienna Conference on Human Rights (1993), the Cairo Conference on Population and Development (1994), the Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development (1995) and the Istanbul Conference on Human Settlements (1996).

In contrast to the MDG process, the buzzword for post-2015 is 'consultation.' A system consisting of a High Level Panel of Eminent Persons and a series of working groups, task forces, and geographically and thematically defined consultation bodies swooped into place to ensure the participation of external actors, including civil society and also private business. In terms of content, critics have demanded that issues neglected in the current MDGs be incorporated now, such as women's unpaid work, sexual and reproductive rights and violence against women.¹¹ These advocacy efforts have met with some success. In May 2013, the High Panel of Eminent Persons released a report in which 12 illustrative goals were proposed. Goal 2: Empower Girls and Women and Achieve Gender Equality has four targets concerning violence against women, child marriage, women's property ownership, and discrimination.¹² Recently, the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals identified gender as both as a specific area of focus and one interlinked with several others such as poverty eradication, food security, water, energy, health, education, employment, and economic growth.¹³

The rhetoric of inclusion has served to reframe, rather than challenge, problematic dominant discourses and policy prescriptions. For example, in the post-2015 agenda discourse, commitments have been made to 'ensure that the fight for the empowerment of women is at the heart of the international process',¹⁴ while maintaining that the cornerstone to poverty alleviation is encouraging open markets to produce open societies. Indeed, this equation is a central theme in both the 2012 World Development Report (WDR) on Gender Equality and Development and the 2013 WDR on Jobs.¹⁵ While improving women's opportunities for formal employment and access to increased wages is certainly important, and gender equality *can* positively stimulate economic growth, recent work has highlighted that the casual link is inconsistent and complex.¹⁶ This untidiness is neatly forgotten in this formulation.

Second, beyond the proposed standalone goal, the focus on women's empowerment and gender equality largely fades away, with only Goal 1 to 'End Poverty' and Goal 3 to 'Provide Quality Education and Lifelong Learning' having any explicit reference to women. Consistently throughout the report gender is linked to a call for more gathering of sex-disaggregated data. More importantly, the UN High Panel's 2013 Report seems to fall victim to the common trap of conceiving gender as referring only to women and girls and while the UN Open Working Group Report (2014) includes men and boys, both reports invoke gender as a descriptive, not analytical, term. Relegating gender to a descriptive home is an attractive option for those who want to talk the 'gender' talk in the absence of real debates about power. As Woodroffe and Smee explain: 'The targets chosen under a gender goal need to reflect a lasting change in the power and choices women have over their own lives, rather than just an (often temporary) increase in opportunities...'.¹⁷

Third – and this is the main issue elaborated in the rest of this article – the new agenda continues to be framed by old language. Feminists and civil society organisations

have challenged the discourse of ‘empowerment’ and ‘gender equality’ within the framework of the MDGs but have usually stopped short of reflecting on how these concepts have acquired their meanings. Even calls for a rights-based approach to women’s empowerment and gender equality have been elaborated without deconstructing many of the assumptions inherent in how these ideas are discussed and invoked. In doing so, they succumb to an assumed consensus about what they mean and the enticing comfort of gender myths and narratives that rest on essentialisms, often painting women as the deserving subjects of development’s attentions because of their inherent qualities.¹⁸ These discourses portray women as more hardworking, more caring, more responsible and more mindful of the environment than men. Women’s virtues form part of the narrative that presents women and girls as a good ‘investment’ for development – and increasingly for the plethora of corporate actors whose arrival in the development marketplace has had such a significant impact in recent years.

In many critiques of the MDGs, we see a discursive association of equality and empowerment with agency, justice, accountability, and human rights. These links, however, too often take place without recognition of the underlying structural connections and the relations of power that produce situations of inequality and discrimination. In the absence of serious discussion about these connections, much of this text and talk, though enticing, remains at the level of rhetoric. The resulting post-2015 narrative has yet to move too far away from an older familiar development discourse rooted in the desire to assist. It is accompanied by little critical inspection of what such ‘assistance’ brings with it, or the broader problematique of the relations of power created and sustained by the very fact of an international development apparatus in which some countries are considered as ‘donors’ and others as ‘recipients’. And in its emphasis on ‘extreme poverty’, this discourse allows richer country governments not to feel incumbent to do anything about social injustice and relative poverty in their own patch.¹⁹ There is in this framing an abject failure to consider the implications of structural factors and global processes of power.²⁰ The resultant policy implication, in this case, is the vagueness of references to ‘global partnerships’ ‘enabling environments’ and ‘transformative shifts’, into which talk of ‘women’s empowerment’ and ‘gender equality’ slips in comfortably without any apparent dissonance.

We hear talk about women’s economic empowerment and about “lifting” communities by investing in women, with scant consideration of the structural barriers to women’s individual self-actualisation, let alone their collective mobilisation. In effect, the “empowered” women we are shown in these narratives are unencumbered by gender relations; they are themselves “lifted” out of the very webs of social, cultural and economic relations that produce and sustain those inequalities and discriminations. And yet these representations are accompanied by others in which the social and cultural looms so large that it becomes the principal focus of attention: consider, for example, the dominant focus in popular development discourses in the global north on victims of trafficking, early marriage and female circumcision.

Women thus become heroines or victims. Where “gender equality” features in all this remains a moot point. The fog of consensus that makes it possible for “gender equality and women’s empowerment” to be mumbled in one breath contributes to the dulling of our understanding of what a truly transformative agenda might look like. Ultimately, a paradigm transformation²¹ is needed to reclaim the gender agenda and address ‘the underlying structures of constraint that give these inequalities the systemic character and the

persistence over time'.²² To get there, we need an analytical and political interrogation of the varied meanings that these terms have acquired over time.

Journeys of 'Gender' into Development

The term 'gender' entered the world of social science from two very different points of origin. The first was the work of sexologists in the 1950s who were coming to grips with what became known as 'gender dysphoria': people who experience their essential identity to be in conflict with the bodies in which they are born. John Money was the first to use the concept of 'gender identity' to define that sense of dissonance that transgendered people reported.²³ For 'transsexuals', as they became known then, gender identity was ontologically prior to anatomy. They sought transitions that realigned their bodies to match their identities. The malleable body became the site of practices that affirmed an essential notion of gender²⁴: forms of body modification undertaken by many women – such as the removal of facial and body hair; the use of cosmetics and clothing and more invasive measures such as cosmetic surgery and the use of sex hormones. In this domain of discourse, then, characteristics of sexual differentiation were something that individuals could modify to fit with their inner sense of gender.

The second point of origin, one that found influence amongst social scientists involved in international development through the foundational work of feminist theorists of the 1970s,²⁵ posited the converse relationship between 'sex' and 'gender'. In this discourse, 'sex' was the basis onto which 'gender' was mapped: 'gender' was malleable and 'sex' was dubbed 'biological' and treated as fixed. Out of this emerged the mantra intoned in many a gender training, "gender is the socially constructed relationship between women and men". For second wave feminists, it was the possibility of modifying gender – the beliefs, behaviours and practices associated with gender difference, and the power relations associated with the playing out of those differences in society – that was an impetus to action. It provided a basis for collective critical analysis of the effects of the naturalisation of male privilege, as well as for activism aimed at overturning male supremacy and the sexism, discrimination and injustice associated with it.

What the sex/gender binary offered was a set of politicised assertions with which to advance arguments for greater equality between men and women. There was nothing 'natural', feminists argued, about the persistent disadvantage of women the world over.²⁶ Nor was there anything necessarily 'natural' about the association of women with the work of bringing up children and sustaining their families – as Edholm, Harris and Young's foundational work showed, of three dimensions of reproduction (biological, social and reproduction of the labour force), only one had necessary rather than contingent connections with women.²⁷ 'Gender roles', it was argued, were social constructs, and anthropological evidence²⁸ provided grist for advancing the powerful political argument that as 'gender' was constructed, socially, culturally and historically, it could be actively *re*-constructed and refashioned in alternative, more liberating and egalitarian forms.

The sex/gender distinction provided British and American feminists with a metaphorical magnet that held together disparate fragments into two distinct categories, 'women' and 'men'. This permitted them to retain the category 'woman' as a foundational organising principle for advocacy and activism. Yet, like a magnet, the concept of 'sex' polarised 'gender', creating oppositional categories that appeared to repel each other as they pushed away that which was similar and accentuated that which was different.

'Gender identities' were cast as in themselves oppositional, framed in terms of what the other was not; commonalities between women and men as human beings were brushed out of the conceptual frame.²⁹ 'Gender relations' came to be framed in terms of an oppositional power relationship between men-in-general and women-in-general, limiting the analytical power of the concept of patriarchy to make sense of the oppression of men as well as women.

Feminist fears about what might happen if constructionism were taken to its logical limits – and the body and 'sex' itself were recognised as in themselves discursively constructed³⁰ – provided a brake on the use of the concept of 'gender' to theorise power. This impasse has not yet been overcome in relation to the concept of gender in international development, leading to two consequences. The first is that the radical contingency of the relationship between personhood and the body has proven particularly difficult to accommodate. The result has been persistent recourse to essentialism: the implicit belief that there is some kind of pre-existing essence that constitutes 'women' and 'men' as separate and different. This takes shape in rhetoric in the concept of 'sex', but in practice comes to embrace 'gender' also. Thus male violence is naturalised as some kind of bodily property of all men, inherent in maleness itself. It takes few moves from this equation to create a powerfully essentialising view of man-kind as "the problem". This is one of the frames through which 'gender equality' has come to be viewed: as not only about righting the wrongs of patriarchy by realigning opportunities, resources and positional power for women, but also about containing, reforming and reorienting men-in-general away from the potential harms that they present to women. This offers little scope to explore or indeed address the harms that patriarchy presents for men themselves, and especially for those whose subordinate masculinities are subject to stigmatisation, abuse and violation.³¹

Going beyond the sex/gender distinction calls for a view of 'gender' as literally *inscribed* in bodies shaped and transformed by its daily performance.³² This calls for recognition that gender, as power, is embodied. It urges closer attention to the political implications of the unreflective transposition of notions of male dominance or female vulnerability onto far more complex and diverse social relations. It is precisely these entailments that come to the fore in development narratives on women's bodies. These frames preclude consideration of the complexity of gender identifications, and the powerful forms of discrimination and exclusion associated with non-normative bodies and sexual and gendered expressions. This limits the conceptual and political scope for an analysis of power that can shift pervasive narratives of gender beyond simplistic assertions based on generalities to more effective strategies for transforming the relations of power that sustain social injustice.

"Gender Equality" as a Development Objective

By the mid-1990s, a disjuncture was evident. In the academy, 'gender' had begun to tease apart and address some of what Gayle Rubin termed the 'straitjacket of gender'.³³ But the newly emerging field of Gender and Development (GAD) came to be reliant on the gender binary for its frameworks and tools. "Gender training" consisted of equipping participants with the means to organise the world into two genders, dividing men-in-general and women-in-general into categories defined by their access to resources and opportunities, place in the market etc. Amidst vague talk about "intersectionality" that never translated

into thoroughgoing analysis of race and racism,³⁴ there was little scope to attend to class differences, or indeed to age, ethnicity, sexuality or any other marker of difference. What gender offered, however, was the prospect of going beyond a liberal concern with integrating women into androcentric development policy and practice. It brought back into sight the relational entailments of gendered difference: the fact that women did not exist in a vacuum, but in entanglements of affinity and connection.

It is worth tracing some of the radical ideas that framed the emergence of GAD. In her landmark piece, Ann Whitehead argued that 'any study of women and development... cannot start from the viewpoint that the problem is *women*, but rather *men and women*, and more specifically the socially constituted relations between them'.³⁵ Whitehead's analytical focus on the social *constitution* of gender relations is significant: with echoes of Rubin's evocation of the 'endless variety and monotonous similarity'³⁶ of women's oppression, Whitehead turns our attention to the social practices that constitute and maintain relations of inequality and injustice. She insists that to make sense of these practices we must seek to better understand lived experience in all its materiality. But Whitehead also highlights the nub of the problem that was to beset feminist engagement with development for the next two decades and beyond: that though 'women' is posited as an inadequate analytical category, it has nevertheless remained in use and indeed remarkably resilient.³⁷ It is perhaps especially ironic that the term 'gender' has provided the camouflage for its survival, and the preconditions for its re-emergence in today's talk of 'women's empowerment'.

Development narratives of gender equality presume a set of hierarchical and oppositional relationships between women and men in which women are structurally inferior. Obscured here is the contingent configuration of gender and power in women's and men's lives and therefore power relations and differences that matter. Molar Ogundipe-Leslie and Niara Sudarkasa, for example, highlight the significance of *other* gender relations in women's lives and livelihoods in Nigeria: relations of seniority, status and consanguinity.³⁸ Ogundipe-Leslie berates 'Western feminists' for their preoccupation with a part of women's lives that may actually be relatively marginal to their wellbeing or happiness: 'All African women have multiple identities, evolving and accreting over time, enmeshed in one individual. Yet African women continue to be looked at and looked for in their coital and conjugal sites...'.³⁹ The Gender and Development discourse tends to elide these 'coital and conjugal sites' with the totality of 'gender relations'. We are thus directed to a particular, sexualised, set of relationships as so emblematic of women's subordination that other male-female and indeed female-female gender relations barely make it into view.⁴⁰ As Jackson points out, other dimensions of heterosexual relationships – intimacy, co-operation and mutuality – come to be shrouded in images of the irresponsible and sexually voracious male, and the long-suffering and victimised female.⁴¹

There are two issues here. The first is that the term 'gender' comes to be equated with a particular configuration of male-female relations, with only negative aspects. Missing are any other hierarchies, relations of power or differences. The second is that 'gender' becomes an obfuscation that prevents a sharper focus on inequalities and discrimination precisely because it is too blunt and generalising a tool to get at some of the real issues at stake. To explain this, we need to look more closely at the effects of the sex/gender binary in order to identify the cul-de-sacs in current policy discourse. Rather than expressing the fluidity and contingency of the relationship between masculinities and femininities with male and female bodies,⁴² the use of the word 'gender' frames two oppositional categories.

Like all dichotomies, these are mutually exclusive. Anything that fails to fit the frame is shunted out of it. 'Men' are equated with 'power': 'woman' with powerlessness. 'Men' are the victimisers: 'women' are their victims. Efforts, then, are made to recalibrate these dualisms with talk of 'male responsibility', echoing the dualism in which women are responsible, and men are not; or of 'women's empowerment' in which 'men' are the ones with power and 'women' without.

These discourses are premised largely on making good that which is not. They do not offer us the radical reconfiguration of the frame through which social and gender relations are experienced. There's little here that would give succour to those seeking social transformation: 'gender mainstreaming' can only do as much as those institutions into which 'gender' is 'mainstreamed'. And if the mainstream international development agenda is about getting more women into corrupt and ineffective formal political institutions; or into low-paid jobs with poor labour conditions, this may bring benefits for individuals but ultimately offers little prospect of transforming the deep structures of inequality or redressing pervasive discrimination. It is easy enough to follow this logic through. By eliding 'gender relations' with 'heterosexual relationships', by presuming an imbalance of power within these relationships in favour of men, by transmuted that power imbalance to infuse society as a whole, and by simplifying societal power relations in the form of a zero-sum game, 'women' end up as 'the poor and marginalised' and 'men' continue to be the problem. Men's investments in shoring up an inequitable status quo are taken for granted; and women's investments in other subject positions are dislocated by compelling gender myths that place the goodness and rightness of women *as women* at their core. Men play a part only as perpetrators, never as themselves on the receiving end of the violence of other men, the structural violence of poverty or indeed of the institutionalised violence of conflict.⁴³

The ambiguity of 'gender' has sometimes served activists well as a Trojan Horse with which to imbue apparently innocuous interventions with radicalising potential. Yet when these efforts are rumbled, as when Cecilia Sardenberg and colleagues were told emphatically 'we wanted *gender*, not feminism',⁴⁴ the extent of the depoliticisation of 'gender' becomes amply evident. A related concern amongst practitioners and activists has been the extent to which 'gender equality' provides a convenient silo within which to house anything to do with 'women' – effectively insulating 'gender work' from engagement with broader issues of rights and justice. Ultimately, analyses of the failed promise of gender mainstreaming point to a dilemma⁴⁵: the framing of gender equality and the focus on formal institutions and policies has effectively circumscribed activism on core issues of citizenship, economic justice and political rights. Women's empowerment promised to bring all this back into view. But has it delivered that promise?

'Women's Empowerment' in Development

In contrast to the concept of gender, the concept of empowerment has a long history in social change work. A rich stream of work runs through fields such as popular education, community psychology and community organising, with pathways back to the 1970s, and a presence in many countries from Brazil, to India, Kenya, Zimbabwe, the US and the UK.⁴⁶ Feminist consciousness-raising and collective action informed early applications of the concept to international development in the 1970s. Women's empowerment came to be articulated in the 1980s and 1990s as a radical approach that was concerned with

transforming power relations in favour of women's rights, social justice and the transformation of economic, social and political structures.⁴⁷

In the writings of the 1980s and early 1990s, there was an insistence that empowerment was not something that could be bestowed by others, but was about recognising inequalities in power, asserting the right to have rights and acting individually and in concert to bring about structural change in favour of greater equality.⁴⁸ A narrative of empowerment emerged that was bound up with both collective action ('power with') and the development of 'power within' and 'power to' at the level of consciousness. Feminist work from this period emphasises the complex reciprocal relationship between women's 'self-understanding' and 'capacity for self-expression' and their access to and control over material resources.⁴⁹ What this work illuminates is the limits of contemporary women's empowerment interventions that seek simply to provide women with improved access to resources, through micro-enterprise. As Hania Sholkamy puts it: 'the enabling environment that confirms the right to work, to property, to safety, to voice, to sexuality and to freedom is not created by sewing machines or micro-credit alone'.⁵⁰

As evoked so eloquently in Batliwala and Kabeer's accounts of grassroots conscientisation and mobilisation in India and Bangladesh,⁵¹ the kind of empowerment envisaged in feminist writing of this era involves making strange those familiar social norms that are such a potent source of inequity and disempowerment. Kabeer describes how:

Strategies of 'empowerment from within' ... entail reflection, analysis and assessment of what has hitherto been taken for granted so as to uncover the socially constructed and socially shared basis of apparently individual problems. New forms of consciousness arise out of women's newly acquired access to the intangible resources of analytical skills, social networks, organizational strength, solidarity and sense of not being alone.⁵²

Three important insights emerge. The first is that empowerment is fundamentally about changing power relations. It is not just about improving women's capacities to cope with situations in which they experience oppression or injustice. It is about enabling women to question what they might previously have considered 'normal', and to begin to act to change that reality via the acquisition of a collective self-confidence that results in a feeling of "we can".⁵³ The second insight is that empowerment is relational in two senses: it concerns the relations of power in which people are located, within which they may experience disempowerment or come to acquire the 'ability to make strategic life choices',⁵⁴ and it is contingent on a prior or future state. Thirdly, we learn that empowerment is a process, not an end-point, let alone a measurable outcome to which targets can be attached. Although interventions such as legal changes, education policy or microfinance initiatives favouring women can be measured, as Malhotra, Schuler and Boender contend these should be seen as 'enabling factors' or 'outcomes' but cannot be interpreted as proxies for empowerment.⁵⁵ The work of external actors and interventions, then, may be conceived not as empowering women, but as clearing some of the obstacles from the path, and providing sustenance for women as they do empowerment for themselves.

Motorways and Pathways

The versions of empowerment that appear in contemporary international development policy primarily concern the acquisition of material means through which women empower themselves as individuals and of the benefits that come when they put their spending

power to the service of their families, communities and national economies.⁵⁶ Over the last decade, we've seen a return to 'women' in development that sometimes appears to represent an unbroken thread back to Women in Development (WID). WID was as much concerned with women's economic development as today's 'smart economics', although the rationale was different. WID was preoccupied by women's exclusion from remunerative labour; the occlusion of women's economic contributions; the failure of development interventions to consider women as economic actors.

There is now an inter-changeability in the representations of women produced by different actors which echo WID concerns. What might once have seemed like a disparate array of corporate and development actors with quite distinctive positions – the likes, for example, of Walmart, Oxfam, DFID, the Nike Foundation, Plan International and the IMF – are all apparently purveying the same message, sometimes even in the same words. We see a familiar series of tropes, most commonly the pronouncement of the intrinsic value of women's empowerment before proceeding to the real business at hand: 'unleashing potential' and harnessing the power of billions of women workers and their transformative economic effects as the producers and consumers who will drive growth.⁵⁷

At the heart of this discourse is a belief that women's business success is enough to overcome all other barriers to equality. This version of 'women's empowerment' is more appealing to international donors and banks than traditional feminist concerns with the more nebulous inequality and oppression. The 'business case' for women's empowerment emerges from this, which speaks in one breath about women being important in and of themselves and also a means to enhance economic efficiency. The 'chain of equivalence'⁵⁸ that once held 'women's empowerment' together with 'rights', 'equality', 'justice', 'collective action' has come to be replaced with new attachments to 'efficiency', 'investment', 'returns'. Empowerment becomes an individual resource to be maximised for efficiency.

What falls out of the frame are the relational dimensions that were so much part of feminist conceptualisations of gender, and that were fundamental to feminism's central focus on transforming power relations.⁵⁹ This is not a simple act of omission. Looking more closely at the ways in which feminist work on empowerment has been taken up by development institutions, we can see the stripping away of some of its foundational dimensions through a series of discursive moves. We see, for example, the influential definition of empowerment developed by Naila Kabeer⁶⁰ with its emphasis on the *ability* to make *strategic* life choices by those who were *previously denied* such an ability, transmute, in the World Bank's selective adoption of her work, into:

Empowerment is the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Central to this process are actions which both build individual and collective assets, and improve the efficiency and fairness of the organizational and institutional context which govern the use of these assets.⁶¹

The empowerment framework produced for the World Bank by Alsop and Heinsohn and adopted by a range of other development actors, offers a guide to identifying, itemising and measuring 'assets' and 'opportunity structures'.⁶² In the process of reducing empowerment to measurable outcomes, the relational dimensions of empowerment disappear, altering the meaning of the concept in the process. Individuals and groups may acquire assets and institutions may improve their governance, but these elements in themselves do not necessarily produce empowerment. As Cecilia Sardenberg points out, 'liberal'

empowerment is geared at benefiting individual women rather than transforming the shared situation of women; and ‘liberating’ empowerment calls for forms of collective analysis and action that are missing from the ‘invest in girls and women’ approach.⁶³ Empowerment, in short, is not something that can be rolled out like a motorway over any terrain with predictable outcomes. Its very nature is something more contingent and contextual, and ultimately far less predictable, than allowed for by development agencies’ quick fit solutions.⁶⁴

Towards a Transformative Agenda

To recap briefly: we began by looking at some critiques of the MDGs, and identified a series of problems with the goals and goal-setting process. We went on to look at gender in relation to the MDGs through a brief, schematic mapping of the trajectories of two core concepts associated with the gender agenda: gender equality and women’s empowerment. From there, we focused on some points of contestation and contradiction that are masked in the conflation of these terms. Looking at the trajectories of the concepts of gender equality and women’s empowerment in international development policy discourse, our analysis raised a number of issues. We saw in both cases a concept being denatured of its more radical possibilities as it is accommodated within the development establishment, something that is echoed in numerous analyses of similar terms and indeed of gender mainstreaming and gender itself.⁶⁵

But in this case, the conflation of the two terms comes at a point when their discursive dissimilarity could not be more striking. Mainstream appropriations of gender equality emphasise the relational aspects, often invoking men, as the “other half of gender” or as those who need to be “brought in” through “male involvement”.⁶⁶ Entry points for transforming relations of power that tend to be generalised in GAD to all gender relations appear, however, to be closed from view in discourses of women’s empowerment.⁶⁷ Indeed, it would seem that gender relations are of no interest to those concerned with promoting women’s empowerment. Representations of empowered women – running their own businesses, speaking up in public, sending their daughters to school – tend to be completely devoid of any images of the men in their lives. Where relationships come into view, they are generally of groups of women working together in imagined harmony. Men and boys are relegated to an entirely separate field of engagement.

It is an open question whether advocates of gender equality interested in transforming the ways in which women and men relate to each other seek the same objectives as advocates of women’s empowerment as defined by the contemporary business and development agenda of fostering women’s entrepreneurship. The result of the conflation of gender equality with women’s empowerment and of the polarities and differences highlighted here is an apparent consensus that masks substantial differences of perspective, politics, emphasis and theories of change. The lack of clarity is matched by the relegation of gender issues to a compartment that has little attractiveness to those outside it – including young women, who find more exciting and fulfilling avenues for their political expression elsewhere, including in digital spaces.⁶⁸

The issue, our analysis contends, lies in the limiting frames that are used to articulate the gender agenda and the cul-de-sacs that the discourses of gender equality and women’s empowerment lead towards. And yet the normative goals that the gender agenda seeks to advance continue to be broadly shared by not only new generations of feminists, but also

other social change activists for whom rising inequality, violence and unfairness provides a powerful impetus to action. The challenge, then, may lie *less* in finding new ways to make gender equality or women's empowerment matter to those engaged in the shaping of policy in mainstream development bureaucracies. It may instead be in creating new possibilities for alliance building that can take feminist engagement with development out of those cul-de-sacs and onto pathways taken by fellow travellers with a shared concern with social justice. But to do this, we need new words and frames. Or, at least, we need to either take our old language out of circulation for "cleaning",⁶⁹ or adopt terms from other contiguous domains of discourse and find in them a sense of common purpose. As Katherine Adams so rightly observes,

As progressive activists continue to look beyond identity politics and toward coalition structures that will link diverse identities and agendas, the need for new models of political discourse becomes ever more apparent.⁷⁰

Nowhere is this truer than in the current contestations around the UN post-2015 framework. Adams' analysis is a useful place from which to consider how a transformative agenda able to address inequalities and discriminations might bring together a broad constituency aligned around a set of common frames and values. Adams cites Friedman's exploration of 'narratives of relationality,' and account of identity 'as situationally constructed and defined and at the crossroads of different systems of alterity and stratification'.⁷¹ 'Thus,' Adams goes on, 'subjects differentiated by one set of identity constructs may be simultaneously connected by others that offer points of contact and "genuine connection"'.⁷² Adams takes us to Hannah Arendt, and a conception of what Arendt comes to call 'inter-est', geared not at the 'paralysis of collective singular subjectivity' or 'adversarial democracy' but that 'creates the conditions for reaching towards others and trying to become visible to them'.⁷³ Interest becomes, then, 'a means of centering difference and separation without shutting out the possibility of commonality'.⁷⁴ Citing Arendt: '[I]nterests constitute, in the word's most literal significance, something which *inter-est*, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together'.⁷⁵ As a result, 'through interest discourse, difference and alliance remain in tension, and identity remains always open to revision'.⁷⁶

(Re)framing an Agenda for Change

What Arendt's conception of 'inter-est' offers the feminist activist interested in transformation is, in Adams' words, 'an alternative to the universalised subject of disinterested discourse and the polarised subjects of sparring interest groups'.⁷⁷ Adams' analysis helps us imagine the articulations that might exist beyond the field of gender equality and women's empowerment, through which feminists could perhaps re-claim the discursive spaces of the post-2015 framework that currently appear so severely constrained. Importantly, it allows us to focus away from the sterile zone of gender frameworks and depoliticised instruments, and on those points of convergence where "inter-est" can bring together those concerned with global justice.

A closer analysis of the language of the post-2015 framework offers a set of entry points for such a task. Vital to the very bedrock of the UN is the ideal of rights to which all humans are entitled and responsibilities that have a universal character. Three of the concepts that underpin the human rights framework are especially important. The first is

accountability, and within this two further concepts: obligation and answerability, both of which place the onus on the powerful. This has much to offer gender discourse. To talk, for example, in terms of *holding to account* rather than ‘involving’ or ‘engaging’ men offers a frame that goes beyond gentle invitations to join in to harder talk about patriarchy, privilege and power.

The second concept is inclusion. Inclusion has become a mantra in the post-2015 agenda circus, with its ubiquitous rhetoric about ‘giving everyone a voice’. But genuine inclusiveness is not only about giving people chances to have a say, it is also about creating the conditions of mutual respect in which people can not only voice but also be heard. It is not only about inserting women into spaces created by others, be they patriarchal parliamentary institutions or the equally patriarchal institutions of religion, media, civil society and business. It is also about making the men in those spaces the objects of attention: making their exclusionary practices visible and unacceptable. Such an approach would refocus discourses of inclusion away from the “poor communities” onto the organisations that claim to be working in the name of the poor, at the local, national and international level. It would invite hard questions to be asked about who is at the table, who decides, who acts, who strategises and who benefits. And it would bring into the equation other questions, other oppressions and differences – of class, race, ethnicity, age, disability and sexuality. As such, it would present a means of going beyond the “add women and stir” approach, with all its pitfalls and tokenisms.

The third concept, and perhaps the most potent of all, is that of non-discrimination. Discrimination is explicitly invoked in the name of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Article 10 of the Beijing Platform for Action reads:

The full and equal participation of women in political, civil, economic, social and cultural life at the national, regional and international levels, and the eradication of all forms of discrimination on the grounds of sex are priority objectives of the international community.⁷⁸

Whether defined as ‘discrimination against women’ in CEDAW, ‘discrimination on the grounds of sex’ in the Beijing Platform for Action or a more 21st century ‘discrimination on the basis of gender’ which could accommodate a plurality of genders and recognise the stigma, violence and exclusion experienced by those with non-normative gender expression, the concept of non-discrimination is a very powerful normative ideal.

A shift in conceptualisation of this sort moves the focus from an “aiding the other” paradigm, to one that understands ‘the realization of rights as part of the response to injustice arising from structures of power and domination’ at multiple levels, global and local.⁷⁹ Such an approach goes beyond carving up the world into two classes of persons, the victims and the perpetrators. It is about holding the mirror up to each and every one of us to force us to examine the extent to which we harbour assumptions, myths, stereotypes, and limiting beliefs that prevent us from treating everyone with dignity and respect. As such, it can provide us with a tool for identifying laws, behaviour and institutions in which one class of people are treated differently to others and the material, psychological, symbolic or structural violence that results from such acts of discrimination.

Conclusion

Accountability, inclusion, non-discrimination – all these concepts are ultimately about relations of power. These are not ideals that are abstracted from culture and society; they are deeply, intensely, social. They speak to and about the everyday situations in which we live our lives, and can be applied to just about any international development setting, from interactions in the offices of international organisations, to debates in national parliaments and bureaucracies, to the interface between local NGO workers and the “beneficiaries” of their interventions, to our own domestic lives and relationships. There is nothing vague about the idea that we are all accountable for our attitudes and actions, that people should be treated with dignity and respect and that those who discriminate against others – deny them jobs, deny them space, deny them opportunities, deny them voice – are behaving in ways that are unacceptable.

There is every chance that a set of goals inscribing gender or women and girls as a goal and as a cross-cutting issue would have as little real traction in addressing the underlying structural basis for inequality as the current MDGs. We have sought to highlight the troubled trajectories of gender equality and women’s empowerment. Ultimately, we suggest, the gender agenda in its current incarnation is unlikely to deliver the kind of transformation that would create the more just, more equal and happier world that we’d all like to see. Rather than seeking to convert people through gender training or gender analysis, working with the interests that we have in common provides a far stronger basis for successful alliance-building. Addressing the dilemmas of ennui, internal divisions and ineffectiveness that have plagued the gender agenda in development may require, then, a return to the higher-order normative principles that underpin feminist engagement with development.⁸⁰

Cast as a means of placing at the centre of the new global framework the concepts of accountability, inclusion and non-discrimination, the human rights framework offers a powerful set of entry points around which to refocus that engagement and through which to build alliances with others. It gets us away from privileging one gender over others, from occluding the struggles and structural violence experienced by those with non-normative sexual and gender expressions, from the gender myths that caricature and essentialise women and men, and from the analytical and political cul-de-sacs that the concept of gender equality has taken us into. It also releases us from the gross discriminatory essentialism that discourses of women’s empowerment invite us to collude with, from the disregard of the violations of men’s rights and the rights of trans, queer, gay, intersex and gender non-conforming people, from the misrecognition of the effects of neoliberalism and patriarchy on people of all genders and from the dystopia that “investing in women” might lead us towards. Most of all, it takes us back to a recognition of our shared humanity, to the values of freedom, tolerance and shared responsibility, and to those very relationships – of solidarity, of collectivity, of struggle – that are so fundamental to achieving global justice and creating a better future for all.

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Notes

1. Commission on the Status of Women, *Challenges and Achievements*, paragraph 9.
2. Batliwala, "Taking the Power out of Empowerment"; Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead, *Feminisms and Development*; Sardenberg, *Liberal vs Liberating Empowerment*.
3. Mukhopadhyay, "Mainstreaming Gender"; Standing, "Gender, Myth and Fable"; Sandler and Rao, "The Elephant in the Room".
4. Batliwala, "Taking the Power out of Empowerment"; Kabeer, Sudarshan and Milward, *Organizing Women Workers*; Cornwall and Edwards, *Feminisms, Empowerment and Development*.
5. UN, *Millennium Declaration*, 1.
6. Hulme, "Lessons from the Making of the MDGs".
7. Kabeer, "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment", 4.
8. See the AWID library document, "Women and the Millennium Development Goals" for an excellent, concise, summary of the critiques raised by feminist activists.
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11. Commission on the Status of Women, *Challenges and Achievements*.
12. United Nations, *A New Global Partnership*.
13. United Nations, *Sustainable Development Goals*, 2.
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16. Kabeer and Natali, *Gender Equality and Economic Growth*.
17. Woodroffe and Smee, *Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality*, 16.
18. Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead, *Feminisms and Development*; Chant, "Dangerous Equations?"; González de la Rocha, "The Construction of the Myth of Survival".
19. We are grateful to Rosalind Eyben for this point.
20. Beck and Culp, "On the Role of Political Theorists".
21. Feminist Strategy Meeting, *The Feminist Declaration*.
22. Kabeer, *Women's Economic Empowerment*, 2.
23. Money, *The Psychological Study of Man*.
24. Heyes, "Changing Race, Changing Sex".
25. See especially Oakley, *Sex, Gender and Society*.
26. Oakley, *Sex, Gender and Society*; Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?".
27. Edholm, Harris and Young, "Conceptualizing Women".
28. Sacks, "Engels Revisited"; McCormack and Strathern, *Nature, Culture and Gender*.
29. Rubin, "The Traffic in Women".
30. Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Laqueur, *The Making of Sex*.
31. Cornwall and Lindisfarne, *Dislocating Masculinity*; Connell, *Masculinities*.
32. Butler, *Gender Trouble*.
33. Rubin, "The Traffic in Women", 137.
34. Wilson, *Race, Racism and Development*.
35. Whitehead, "Some Preliminary Notes", 10.
36. Rubin, "The Traffic in Women", 160.
37. Whitehead, "Some Preliminary Notes", 10.

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38. Ogundipe-Leslie, *Re-creating Ourselves*; Sudarkasa, "The Status of Women".
 39. Ogundipe-Leslie, *Re-creating Ourselves*, 251.
 40. Peters, "The Use and Abuse of the Concept of "Female-Headed Households"".
 41. Jackson, 2007, "Rethinking the Self".
 42. Cornwall and Lindisfarne, *Dislocating Masculinity*.
 43. Cornwall, Edstrom and Greig, *Men and Development*; Dolan, " Militarized, Religious and Neo-colonial", "Has Patriarchy been Stealing the Feminists' Clothes?"
 44. Sardenberg, Costas and Passos, "Rural Development in Brazil", 38.
 45. Mukhopadhyay, "Situating Gender and Citizenship"; Sandler and Rao, "The Elephant in the Room".
 46. Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; Batliwala, "The Meaning of Women's Empowerment"; Hope and Timmel, *Training for Transformation*, Zimmerman, *Empowerment Theory*.
 47. Batliwala, "The Meaning of Women's Empowerment", "Taking the Power out of Empowerment"; Kabeer, *Reversed Realities, The Conditions and Consequences of Choice*; Bisnath and Elson, *Women's Empowerment Revisited*.
 48. Batliwala, "The Meaning of Women's Empowerment"; Kabeer, *Reversed Realities, The Conditions and Consequences of Choice*; Rowlands, *Questioning Empowerment*; Sen, *Empowerment as an Approach to Poverty*.
 49. Kabeer, *Reversed Realities*; Sen, *Empowerment as an Approach to Poverty*.
 50. Sholkamy, "Power, Politics and Development", 257.
 51. Batliwala, "The Meaning of Women's Empowerment"; Kabeer, *Reversed Realities*.
 52. Kabeer, *Reversed Realities*, 245-6.
 53. Dighe and Jain, cited in Kabeer, *Reversed Realities*, 87.
 54. Kabeer, *The Conditions and Consequences of Choice*.
 55. Malhotra, Schuler and Boender, *Measuring Women's Empowerment*.
 56. Eyben and Napier-Moore, "Choosing Words with Care?"; Eyben, "What if Girls don't want to be Businesswomen?".
 57. Eyben and Napier-Moore, "Choosing Words with Care?".
 58. Laclau, *New Reflections*.
 59. See, for example, Whitehead, "Some Preliminary Notes".
 60. Kabeer, *The Conditions and Consequences of Choice*.
 61. World Bank, "What is Empowerment?", paragraph 1.
 62. Alsop and Heinsohn, *Measuring Empowerment in Practice*.
 63. Sardenberg, *Liberal vs Liberating Empowerment*.
 64. Cornwall and Edwards, *Feminisms, Empowerment and Development*.
 65. See for example Cornwall and Brock, "What Do Buzzwords Do for Development Policy?"; Eyben and Napier-Moore, "Choosing Words with Care?"; Sandler and Rao, "The Elephant in the Room".
 66. Bannon and Correia, *The Other Half of Gender*.
 67. Cornwall and Edwards, *Feminisms, Empowerment and Development*.
 68. Gurumurthy, "Feminist Visions of the Network Society".
 69. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*.
 70. Adams, "At the Table with Arendt", 1.
 71. Friedman 1998, cited in Adams, "At the Table with Arendt", 1.
 72. Adams, "At the Table with Arendt", 1.
 73. Ibid, 16.
 74. Ibid, 15.
 75. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 182.
 76. Adams, "At the Table with Arendt", 28.
 77. Ibid, 16.
 78. UN, *Beijing Declaration Platform for Action*, 8.
 79. UNESCO, *Global Justice*.
 80. Molyneux, "The Chimera of Success"; Woodford-Berger, "Gender Mainstreaming"; Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead, *Feminisms in Development*.