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Author(s): Jyotirmaya Tripathy

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How gendered is Gender and Development? Culture, masculinity, and gender difference

Jyotirmaya Tripathy

Gender studies in general, and Gender and Development (GAD) in particular, through their belief in a cultural conditioning of gender behaviour, use the idea of 'culture' in a restrictive sense which perpetuates a conceptual difference between men and women, and also between First World and Third World women. There is a tendency among gender experts to magnify the difference between men and women, and categorise them into two radically different realms. This article argues for a gender project based on the idea of culture as lived experience. It approaches gender not as a category of exclusion but as a problematic construct that is constantly restructuring itself.

Quelle est la dimension 'genre' du genre et du développement ? Culture, masculinité, et différence entre les hommes et les femmes

Les études de genre en général, et de genre et développement (GED) en particulier, de par leur croyance dans le conditionnement culturel des comportements sexospécifiques, utilisent la culture dans un sens restrictif, ce qui perpétue une différence conceptuelle entre les hommes et les femmes, et également entre les femmes des pays industrialisés et celles du Tiers Monde. Il existe une tendance parmi les experts du genre à amplifier la différence entre les hommes et les femmes et à les catégoriser dans deux domaines radicalement différents. Cet article soutient un projet de genre fondé sur l'idée de la culture comme une expérience vécue et aborde le genre non pas comme une catégorie d'exclusion mais comme une construction problématique qui ne cesse de se restructurer.

Até que ponto Gênero e Desenvolvimento são influenciados pela questão de gênero? Cultura, masculinidade e diferença de gênero

Os estudos de gênero em geral, e Gênero e Desenvolvimento (GAD) em particular, apesar de sua crença em um condicionamento cultural do comportamento de gênero, utilizam a cultura em um sentido restritivo que perpetua uma diferença conceitual entre homens e mulheres, e também entre mulheres do Primeiro Mundo e do Terceiro Mundo. Existe uma tendência entre os especialistas de gênero de exagerar a diferença entre homens e mulheres, e classificá-los em dois domínios radicalmente diferentes. Este artigo defende um projeto de gênero com base na ideia de cultura como experiência viva, e aborda a questão de gênero não como uma categoria de exclusão, mas sim uma construção problemática que está constantemente se reestruturando.

¿En qué medida los estudios sobre Género y Desarrollo están condicionados por el género? Cultura, masculinidad y diferencias de género

En general los estudios sobre género, y sobre Género y Desarrollo en particular, utilizan la cultura en un sentido limitado debido a su convicción de que existe un condicionamiento cultural en el comportamiento de género. Este hecho perpetúa una diferencia conceptual entre hombres y mujeres, y entre mujeres del Primer Mundo y mujeres del Tercer Mundo. Las expertas en género tienen a incrementar la diferencia entre hombres y mujeres, y a crear categorías para ellos en dos ámbitos radicalmente distintos. Este ensayo identifica la necesidad de crear un proyecto de género basado en la idea de cultura como una experiencia vivencial y en visualizar el género no como una categoría de exclusión sino como una construcción que se recrea constantemente.

KEY WORDS: Gender and diversity; Methods

Introduction

Both Women in Development (WID) and its critique Women and Development (WAD) were fixated on women as a coherent category – eternally exploited by either a social patriarchal order or a capitalist system – and created an impression that women’s interests are essentially different from men’s. Gradually the focus shifted from women to gender, with the recognition that maleness and femaleness are not biological categories of exclusion, but refer to relations between them in a given culture. Challenging the essential vulnerability of women, Gender and Development (GAD) proposed that stereotypes are not natural, but are based on gender ideologies and are socially constructed. ‘Gender as relational’ thus appeared to offer a nuanced approach to gender inequality and questioned a prior assumption of automatic male privilege. By taking into consideration culturally learned characteristics, GAD apparently pre-empted the possibilities of a uniform male and female, and their supposed intrinsic strength and weakness. Since their assumed weakness could only be cultural, there was a possibility of women’s empowerment.

The intention was clear: focusing only on women, as in WID, ignored unequal power relations between men and women, and so failed to challenge the systemic nature of women’s subordination. In order to make development gender-equitable and truly inclusive, social, political, and economic structures were to be re-examined. Maxine Molyneux (cited in Mitchell 1996: 140–43) distinguished between women’s practical and strategic interests, arguing that development must address both. Practical interests, Molyneux believed, resulted from women’s subordinated position within the sexual division of labour and included support in basic health care, education, family welfare, etc. Addressing only women’s immediate concerns for survival did not challenge the patriarchal frameworks of power, and in a way it perpetuated them. This approach also had a tendency to become paternalistic, binding women to their subordinated position. For this reason, Molyneux argued, women’s strategic interests should be addressed which ‘challenge women’s subordinate position by, for example, legislating against discrimination’ (in Mitchell 1996: 140). When practical interests meant compliance with the *status quo*, focusing on strategic interests questioned that order and its way of producing economic value. Caroline Moser (1993), building on Molyneux’s insights, believed that fulfilment of strategic needs (like Molyneux’s strategic interests) will bring about changes in prevailing gender relations, help women to end their subordination, and transform their present situation. Although most gender literature brackets Molyneux together with Moser,

there are significant differences between their conceptualisations of interests/needs. The vocabulary of interests is more about in-country and in-culture power relations, whereas the vocabulary of needs is located in the realm of aid and development planning. Yet both are concerned, at conceptual and delivery levels, with a transformation of the existing order.

However, the movement from WID to GAD has not been without unanswered questions; in fact GAD raises more questions than it answers. There is a lot of confusion at the conceptual level as to what gender is about; whether it should accommodate men to prove the elasticity of the term gender, or sustain the difference between men and women. There is ambiguity in the question of authenticity: who is a gender expert or who can speak authoritatively about it? Although doubt lingers over the issue of representation, GAD is usually seen as the realm of an exclusive group of gender experts, mostly Western women, who decide what constitutes gender awareness and devise ways to implement this agenda. The remaining part of this article engages with these gaps and problematises easy explanations. The first part exposes the rescue narrative of First World gender analysis, and the second part questions the elision of men as gendered subjects. The use of terms like First World/Third World or North/South here is merely descriptive, although these terms often sound categorical and judgmental. The inconsistencies and contradictions involved in the use of these terms are acknowledged.

The rescue narrative

To give absolute determining power to culture, as in much of the gender literature, not only questions the functions of biology, but also puts culture beyond the reasonable scope of criticism. One of the reasons why culture is not put into question, or believed to suppress human agency, is that it is used synonymously with tradition, somewhat fossilised and frozen in time. It is implied that there is nothing that the individual can do to question or change it. Culture, particularly of the Third World, is seen as unchanging and oppressive. Although gender experts acknowledge different constructions of femininity by different cultures, they somehow believe that specific cultures produce their notions of gender uniformly, thus falling into a kind of cultural essentialism. Although they acknowledge the difference of cultures at a broad level, they tend to see particular cultures as fixed and so fail to see its constructed nature. These generalisations create totalising categories, for example 'Muslim women', 'Asian women', 'African culture', and so on, which subsume individual differences and their agency. The project of gender experts then becomes to blame culture. Indigenous cultures are regarded as cultures of poverty and as impediments to development. This formulation rationalises the need for an expert, usually from the industrialised North or a Westernised native intellectual, who appears to be culturally neutral. Thus Indian intellectuals tend to locate and confine culture to some unhealthy practices like *sati* and witch hunting. This is how Puja Roy sees the practice of witch hunting in some pockets of North India (where many widows are labelled as witches and are persecuted) as being embedded in cultural values and beliefs. She goes on to say that 'these practices are not always condemned as violent, but seen as culturally acceptable' (Roy 1999: 96).

My critique of Roy's argument is not intended to justify inhuman practices such as *sati*, but to question the tendency to fetishise certain abominable practices as not only constitutive but also defining of a particular culture. Another example of this gaze is the over-emphasis on and obsession with *burqa* as a symbol of oppression and medievalism, when in fact women of particular cultures may not think so. Hoodfar (cited in Schech and Haggis 2000: 106), in a study of Egyptian women, found that *burqa* helps educated women in working outside home, and at the same time helps them to be accepted as good wives. It puts women in a strong position to legitimately demand the respect of their husbands and recognise their Islamic rights. Yet the effort of funding agencies remains to exclude indigenous values as detrimental to women's

development. Nawal el Saadawi offers an unambiguous critique of this mindset when she says: 'they tend to depict our life as a continual submission to medieval systems' (Saadawi 1980: xiv).

Seyla Benhabib sees the difference between this outsider – the anthropologist, the development expert – and the insiders (experiencing and living it) as the difference between the social observer and the social agent. She says perceptively: 'from within, a culture need not appear as a whole; rather it forms a horizon that recedes each time one approaches it' (Benhabib 2002: 5). The social observer tries to understand and impose some kind of unity and coherence on a particular culture and looks at it as a whole, something that s/he thinks is already complete. On the other hand, participants of culture experience it even while contesting and resisting it. Culture has a life that can be used by participants to their advantage. Culture does not just create ideas or values that individuals must accept; it also creates its own notion of acceptable dissent that is, in a way, required for every culture's evolution. The problem of the outsider is that when everything in the South is changing, these aspects of change may be perceived by them as unchanging and timeless. In reality, however, culture is produced not as a seamless account of some distant past, but through contested narratives of human actions.

The GAD approach, which was intended to transform women's lives by addressing issues of systemic inequalities, fails to grapple with these nuances and replicates the same victim-narrative of Third World women who are seen as too weak to challenge their culture. Although GAD seeks to transform women's lives, it has a tendency to homogenise Third World women, who are seen as less advanced and civilised than their Western 'sisters'. It is ironic that the term 'gender' believes in the cultural production of femininity, implying that there are multiple femininities, as there are multiple cultures, while at the same time projecting White women as the real subjects of counter-development, and Southern women as backward, in need of rescue. These poor women are elided not only in the so-called mainstream development, but also in gender-oriented counter-development schemes, and they remain 'objects' of development packages. Inherent in this paradigm is the assumption of the South as a place of conflict and exploitation, where development will remain elusive without the intervention of gender experts from the North. In the absence of such experts, it is believed that a Western-educated native will serve the purpose, since her Western education confers automatic legitimacy.

Thus Bina Agarwal's idea of bargaining approach in her study of land-rights issues in South Asia, though both theoretically and ethically convincing, is too sweeping in creating an impression of the household as a battle ground. Her case for land rights can be seen in light of GAD's strategic needs, whereby Agarwal tries to make the home a level playing field for women. Although she admits the fact that there are both co-operation and conflict in the household, she also believes that 'members of a household cooperate in so far as cooperative arrangements make each of them better-off than non-cooperation' (Agarwal 1994: 54). Even when there is co-operation among family members, there is conflict among those co-operating, and the outcome depends on the relative bargaining power of members, particularly the fall-back position or outside option of particular members. Thus she questions the model of unitary household, where it is often assumed that everybody's interests are the same. What she ignores, however, is that most Southern families are run on the basis of mutual trust and understanding, and not bargaining power. The vocabulary of interest, fall-back position, and bargain is misleading in articulating the philosophy of the family as a market. This is an exaggeration of the dissent that all families experience; seeing families as places of bargaining and getting one's pound of flesh is taking it a bit too far. My intention is not to hold up the family as the most sacred of all institutions, but simply to argue that conflict does not define our households. Robbing a family of its sense of responsibility and security for its members makes the whole world uninhabitable for women.

While implicating gender agenda located in this rescue narrative, I by no means deny the existing conceptual independence of Third World cultural and gender theory. Nor do I claim

that Third World feminists have not adequately challenged this perception. In fact a whole body of literature from the Third World feminist movements has sought to break away from this Western gaze. In spite of that, these challenges remain peripheral to gender planning and then are conveniently appropriated. They are referred to as feminist backlash or Third World feminism, which places them at the margin of what is real and authentic feminism. Another practical difficulty in realising a gender agenda that is autonomous of the hegemonic Western understanding is the location of funding and aid agencies in the rich industrialised North, which expects gender planning and practice according to the models set by them and which leads to the professionalisation and NGO-isation of the gender project. Although gender power relations in the South have their own geographical roots and contexts, their transformation becomes difficult, if not impossible, in the conditions described here.

Rather than directly engaging with the gendered nature of reality and the way in which culture works in the production of meaning, a tacit attempt is made in gender literature to celebrate not only the victimhood of women, but also of the system that produces its female victims. This is a travesty of the gender agenda, which is theoretically to subvert the prevailing working of power and to empower women to be subjects and change agents. The practice, however, remains not just in maintaining the idea of an essential antagonism between men and women, but also in creating and sustaining a story of victimisation of Third World women. The moment a woman transcends the victim-narrative, she is no longer seen as a feminine subject; femininity cannot exist without victimisation. The agenda of many gender discourses remains to highlight Third World difference and to draw redemption from benevolent intervention, although the subalterns themselves may not want to seek that intervention. Thus gender studies sustain and thrive on a kind of self-inflicted marginalisation that is essential for the continuation of that victim-narrative. Any attempt to transcend that condition may put an end to the narrative, and so to the occupation and pastime of many gender experts.

In weaving the story of the muteness of the feminine subaltern, gender experts thus create more contradictions in the field. As Spivak says, subalterns are irretrievably heterogeneous and so cannot be represented in one voice.¹ If they can speak, it means that the dominant discourse was not dominant and ruthless enough. If they have been silenced completely, then they are unredeemable because the possibility of the subject's own agency is dead and gone. Their silence authorises the feminist intellectual to represent (or misrepresent) the subaltern, and since the essence of a subaltern is victimhood, she must continue to remain a victim. This celebration of victimhood within much of the GAD literature has perpetuated categorical thinking wherein spaces are sharply divided between the masculine and feminine, ignoring the fluidity and cross-pollination of male and female behaviour. This homogenisation is fraught with reductivism because of its marginalisation of issues like race and class, and its over-emphasis on gender as the only site of difference.

An alternative understanding would be to see culture as different from tradition, and which has nothing fixed and static about it. To say that culture traps women underestimates the resilience of women as subjects, and also the transformative character of culture. Culture is not the sediment of all that is best to be heard or known and gathering moss, but refers to myriad ways through which people make sense of the world: as such there is nothing static about it. Our experience shows that cultural practices change over time, accommodating new ideas and new actors who bring new dimensions to various forms of expression. Thus culture has a life that serves those who use and practise it in accordance with the needs of that time. It is this ability to reinvent themselves through which cultures transform and regenerate themselves. This is what gives an everyday character to culture to which individuals can contribute, and which they can make and unmake. It is in this mutability that there is hope for redemption, which means that if a culture conditions behaviour in an unacceptable way, it can always be

revised. Thus the individual emerges not just as a passive recipient of what has been accumulated and fossilised over generations, and over which one has no control, but rather as an agent with free will. This interventionist ability of the individual can make it possible to challenge inequalities, rather than justifying them. Culture as lived experience, and not a set of rigid patterns, refers to this dynamic relationship.

The other gender

Although culture is believed to produce ideas of masculinity and femininity, the GAD literature generally remains a one-sided affair, with its tunnel vision of women and women's issues as gender issues to the exclusion of men and masculinity, with men appearing as shadowy characters at best and problems at worst. It divides the world into two razor-sharp realms, where women are pitted against men. Although gender relations signify all kinds of relations between men and women (mother/son, brother/sister, etc.), the GAD approach always locates these relations in oppressive and heterosexual frameworks which according to Andrea Cornwall constitute a kind of 'subtractive analysis' (Cornwall 1998: 5) so as not to disturb the categorical thinking of GAD. In this mode of analysis women are universally disadvantaged; yet positive changes can only come from them, and not from men. Essentially a relative term 'gender' thus becomes an absolute domain of women, which in a way erodes the very meaning of gender; and if Cornwall is to be believed, this elision of men 'is in itself an act of power' (Cornwall 1998: 5). It is assumed that women develop their gendered characteristics by association with men in ubiquitous male-dominated cultures, but that men's sexuality is a given. This insufficient analysis of the gendered nature of reality leads to there being only one gender. If the intention is to exclude men, then gender studies becomes an essentially insiders' field which will produce predictable knowledge justifying the vulnerability of women.

Although theoretically gender is about socially and culturally learned characteristics associated with masculinity and femininity, and the latter are negotiated interpretations of what it means to be a man or woman, gender praxis has remained a female bastion. Since gender inequality is believed to favour men, and GAD initiatives are targeted to put an end to this inequality, all literatures and plans engaging with gender issues highlight women and make an unproblematic connection between men, masculinity, and power – terms which are then used synonymously. By casting men as the problem in gender development and disregarding complexities involved in male experience, the so-called gender-specific initiatives and programmes 'fail to address effectively the issues of equity and empowerment that are crucial in bringing about positive change' (Cornwall 1997: 8). It is only by addressing issues head-on, rather than evading them, that we can engage with the most fundamental of gender issues: power. It is because WID failed to achieve the target that development practitioners borrowed the idea of gender from academic feminism to question the naturalised ideas of men and women. Although gender, in theory, came to be associated with socially constructed relations between men and women, in practice GAD approaches are used to sustain the difference between men and women in general, rather than provide means to transcend it. El-Bushra exposes this mindset among gender experts who assume that women 'who value their relationships with male partners and relations more than their autonomy are suffering from "false consciousness" about the nature of their oppression' (El-Bushra 2000: 57).

Different strands of feminism coming from the Third World, black authors, and Marxist feminists have questioned this essentialisation of female as victim and male as oppressor. Maria Mies (1982) shows the difference of priorities in women of different cultures.² She demolishes the idea of a cross-continental sisterhood and shows how the shoelaces made by poor working-class women were connected with the world market and were bought by the

White 'sisters' of America. Chandra Mohanty has also spoken about this kind of gender analysis as a kind of Orientalist move to create stereotypes of the Third World women, 'setting in motion a colonialist discourse which exercises a very specific power in defining, coding, and maintaining existing first/third world connections' (Mohanty 1991: 73). She exposes the class and race blindness of Western feminism in creating a unitary category of women while actually articulating a value-added Western feminist understanding and casting men as permanent villains who will keep all women across continents and cultures together.

Although gender is about culture and power, and gender identity concerns both men and women, mainstream development takes men's gender identities for granted, and the movement from WID to GAD did little to change this preoccupation with women. Sarah White (1997: 14–22) recognises the limits of GAD for its narrow focus on women and its inability to accommodate anything else. But her thesis that men need to be discussed so as to make women's empowerment possible makes her project instrumental and establishes the idea of intrinsic male supremacy. However, White remarks that any discussion of gender should engage with (and not obscure, as it does now) larger issues of power and inequality, both among and between sexes – which means 'reorienting GAD practice from assuming gender as the endpoint to making it the entry point for further analysis' (White 1997: 21).

The problematisation normally found in the formation of a feminine subject is not encountered in male subjectivity. Masculinity is seen as a monolith whose construction and function are very simple and transparent. This reductionism subsumes the diversity of men, and masculinity emerges as a kind of universal ontology. This mindless combination of men and masculinity into an abstraction called 'man', which then coalesces into institutional practices, is very simplistic. The gender literature always focuses on this abstract man, who is often described as patriarchal, misogynist, etc. It is this monolithic and abstract individual against which the concept of woman is made to derive its meaning. There are at least two inconsistencies in this approach. One is that it ignores alternative ideas of masculinity and harps on about hegemonic masculinity to which most men do not conform. Second, it is largely forgotten that masculinity does not define itself only as the negation of femininity; it also distinguishes itself from other 'aberrant' and subordinate masculinities.

That masculinity is not an acultural monolith has been established in some sections of gender research. Blee and Tickamyer (1995: 21–30), in their study of racial difference in men's attitudes, argue that there is no singular standard of manliness that is common to all cultures, and that conflicting notions of manhood co-exist within different racial, cultural, and ethnic boundaries. They also argue that masculine attitudes towards women and the latter's roles vary. Blaming men as the defining attribute of feminism thus confines the applicability of the feminist project to certain cultures, because 'the idea that women's roles should be circumscribed by home and family may reflect only a narrow segment of White, middle-class, heterosexual men' (Blee and Tickamyer 1995: 21). This establishes that masculinity and femininity as two exclusive spaces of experience may have very limited appeal and little relevance for many societies. So there is an urgent need to move beyond these dualistic antagonistic categories before we destroy ourselves through mutual suspicion.

In the International Women's Year Conference in 1975, Chungara, the wife of a Bolivian miner, exploded the myth of a universal construction of feminine gender pitted against a hegemonic masculinity. Her speech proved the existence of cultural differences in the production of sexuality and upset the idea of a universal feminist project. The problem is that this kind of approach, which has the potential to overturn the conventional understanding of gender, remains marginal. Although Chungara's arguments prove that cultures create different sexualities and set different agendas, they do not destabilise gender myths in development circles and are not recognised. She offers a culture-specific argument where 'the home can

become stronghold that the enemy can't overcome' (in Schech and Haggis 2000: 88). What is interesting to note here is that home is not seen as an institution of male domination, but rather a place of sharing in order to be protected from predatory capitalism. This goes against the conventional formula of 'home bad, outside good' or 'men bad, women good'. Chungara adds that 'the first and main task isn't to fight against our *compañeros* (husbands), but with them to change the system we live in' (cited in Schech and Haggis 2000: 89). Here the alliance that women like Chungara build is not with women, irrespective of class differences, but rather with their men against a ravaging capitalist class. But in conventional gender analysis, poor Third World women are seen as victims of patriarchy and unable to represent themselves, whereas First World women appear as legitimate subjects of counter-history.

Although this problematisation brings new insights to gender debates and exposes the pitfalls of generalisation, gender analysis in development has been univocal in casting men as the root of the problem. Although it is acknowledged that different cultures construct different ideas of femininity, the conventional understanding of men and masculinity is one of uniformity and singular formation. This means that women's attributes across cultures may be different, but men in all cultures are the same. Feminine universality may be a myth, but masculine depravity is a given; feminine identity may be culture-specific and hence local, but masculinity is immutable. Cultures work differently on women, but uniformly on men. Therefore either masculinity is immune to cultural specificities and is a matter of pure body/sex, and so robust enough to thwart cultural meanings; or perhaps cultures are inherently the same, an idea which challenges the foundation of cultural differences and hence the whole theory of gender. Both are fraught with problems. It means that cultures are essentially against women's empowerment; that women's causes are doomed to fail; and that men are intrinsically evil and hence cannot be corrected. This goes against the very idea of social change and ascribes culture with a motif of its own: either too powerless or too powerful. It is interesting to see the use of maleness as a sex rather than gender, thus presenting gender as a typical feminist subject because maleness, by virtue of its perceived unchangeability, remains a sex, and hence outside gender studies. Only women and their needs can change according to time, except that they cannot conquer male sex. This shows the ultimate vulnerability of culture *vis-à-vis* male biology. Masculinity is reduced to a sex, femininity is always already gendered.

For an objective analysis of gender we need to de-link men from power in order to make masculinity and femininity equally subjected to culture, and not placed above and outside culture. This will contribute to, but not define, masculinity, which will in turn open up more possibilities. If women are believed to play shifting and dynamic roles in different situations, men cannot remain fixed and static and merely concentrate on playing a role already scripted as an inalterable essence. Cornwall visualises a situation when there will be alliances between men and women, and power will not be seen as zero-sum. Since developmental change cannot occur without corresponding structural changes, the foundation should be laid for masculinities to be an issue in gender planning without which 'we would not only be missing men, we would be missing out on opportunities to make a difference' (Cornwall 1998: 8). These possibilities will revision gender as a problematic construct rather than a natural, taken-for-granted reality. Masculinity and femininity thus are not something which men or women have, but are constantly re-constructing themselves in a context of shifting priorities.

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Notes

1. Gayatri C. Spivak (2006: 28–37) questions the very possibility of authentic representation of subalterns. For a detailed argument, see her canonical essay.
2. Maria Mies (1982), one of the foremost critics of WID, sees contradictions and tensions within a cross-cultural feminine universality which ignores the capitalist mindset of such a project.

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The author

Jyotirmaya Tripathy is Assistant Professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology Madras. His areas of interest include gender, culture, and development theory. His edited volume *After Globalisation: Essays in Religion, Culture and Identity* was published in 2007 by Allied Publishers, New Delhi. <jyotirmaya@iitm.ac.in> or <jyotichrist@rediffmail.com>