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RETHINKING GENDER PLANNING: A CRITICAL DISCUSSION OF THE USE OF THE CONCEPT OF GENDER

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CONTENTS

Introduction

The introduction of the concept of gender in planning circles makes it possible to view practices that are oppressive to women not solely as women's issues but as concerns deeply embedded in the social relations between women and men. The concept of gender has given gender planners as well as feminist social scientists concerned with development theories and practices an important tool to analyze those relations and to help formulate policies to improve women's conditions in many locations.

Gender has become such a widely used concept in both the theory and the practice of "Women and Development" that since its introduction the Gender Analysis in Development (GAD) approach has gradually replaced the Women in Development (WID) approach, which was mainly based on the groundbreaking work of Boserup in the early 1970s. The WID practitioners aimed to integrate women into development, as women were seen not to profit from the supposed benefits to the development programmes which had been set up after the Second World War. The GAD approach emphasizes the centrality of the analysis of the social relations of gender at various levels of policy making, from socio-economic concerns to macro-economic structures. A particularly popular approach in this respect is Moser's work on the distinction between practical and strategic gender needs. Her guidelines have become so popularly used in planning circles that feminist planners and theoreticians complain that gender planning has become "moserized".

In this article I will first discuss the origins of the concept of gender. I will stress its radical and comprehensive elements. I will then deal with the concept as it is used in three major texts on gender and development, recent books by Kabeer, Moser and Young. I will argue that in the present-day development literature the concept is used in such a watered down version that women's issues have become depoliticized, that sexual oppression has been rendered invisible and that concern for women's issues has been reduced to the socio-economic components of women's lives. I will then criticize more extensively the problematic aspects as I see them in Moser's conceptualization of the distinction between practical and strategic gender needs.

In the concluding part I will give some suggestions on how to avoid the problems sketched earlier. I will try to give the concept of "gender" back its critical edge and stress the broad range of issues it actually can and should cover. I will argue that women's empowerment, which is a major goal of gender planning, can only be addressed meaningfully if the full range of issues women are confronted with, from physical to symbolic, political and economic concerns, are tackled. I maintain that in development processes no preconceived models should be dropped "from above" on the women concerned, and that social planning is not a process in which easily quantifiable goals should be set. I stress that feminism, as the process and politics of the transformation of the social relations of gender towards a greater equality between the sexes, should be the basis of gender planning. And I suggest that if we don't consider that gender oppression is mainly acted out on women's bodies, that the control of women's sexual and reproductive powers is a central element of women's socio-economic exploitation, we simply don't go deep enough and we will apply only a palliative where major surgery may be needed.

I maintain it is particularly important to critically engage in a theoretical debate on major concepts used in the women and development literature as they relate to gender planning, as there is a proliferation of short programmes for gender training which churn out impressive numbers of self-styled gender experts. I am often appalled by the low level of theoretical understanding of even the basic concepts of feminist theories many of these so-called "experts" have. Some of them argue that the poor women they work with are better helped with practical work than with abstract theories. I maintain however that by their untheoretical insistence on "practical work" they leave the major structures of women's subordination intact. Women's subordination cannot be reduced to its socio-economic components. Reductionist theories therefore cannot address the major issues at stake.

Gender planning: a radical practice?

Gender planning can be defined as that approach to development planning which is based on an explicit recognition of the unequal gender relations between women and men in society, which are justified by symbolical codes, normative concepts and institutionalized practices. The effects of

these unequal social relations between the sexes include a skewed sexual division of labour, unequal access of women to basic resources and assets, a limited political representation of women, a certain tolerance of male violence against women and gendered processes of identity formation.

Although the concept and practice of gender planning is of recent origin and reflects the growing realization that women's issues cannot be dealt with in isolation but should be seen in the context of the power relations between women and men, efforts to address women's concerns in development processes date back to at least the International Women's Year in 1975. Various approaches have been distinguished, including the welfare, equity and anti-poverty approaches (Buviniç 1983), and the efficiency and empowerment approaches (Moser 1989). Of these the last approach seems to be the most useful.

Many advocates of the empowerment approach, especially those from the South, such as the activists and scholars from the DAWN network[1], insist on the relevance of feminism for women's empowerment. Rather than speaking of feminism or the women's movement I suggest to refer to feminist processes and practices which are always historically and culturally specific and thus need to be contextualized. Feminism should be understood as a highly complex, multi-layered set of political practices and ethics, elements of which may be in contradiction to each other, and intersect with other transformative practices, such as the struggles against oppression on the basis of class, race, ethnicity and sexual preference. Feminist processes are located at the intersection of the material and the symbolic. De Lauretis (1986) asserts that feminism enables the rethinking of the materiality of the ideological. Feminism is not only a transformative political practice, but also a discursive process, a process of producing meaning, of subverting representations of gender, of womanhood, of identity and collective self (Wieringa 1995).

The interweaving of the symbolic and the material, of the conceptual and the political, is one of the major sites where the transformative potential of the empowerment approach should be located - the construction of a collective self of women who see themselves as vocal subjects, able to define and defend their gender interests. As De Lauretis asserts, the identity of a woman is the result of her own interpretation and reconstruction of her history, as mediated through the

[1] DAWN stands for Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era. This group of scholars and activists published their own document in preparation for the 1985 Nairobi Third World Conference on Women (Sen and Grown 1985). Since then the group has considerably expanded.

discursive context through which she has access. To empower women to critically and creatively reshape their worlds, women's own concepts of themselves have to be decoded and reinscribed. This is a difficult and often painful process. Vargas has analysed this process for the Peruvian women's movement and demonstrates that women are often "fearful of the new", not daring to discard the old and to embrace the unknown (Vargas 1995). Although the old may be painful and uncomfortable, it still provides the security of tradition and the consent of one's social surrounding.

Because of its insistence on the relevance of feminist theories, its potential openness to the diversity and complexity of social relations and its stress on co-operation with women's groups and organizations, the empowerment approach to my mind is the most fruitful way forward for issues related to gender planning. However, in order to fully ensure its potential, serious attention must be paid to the conceptualization of gender. What do the three adherents of the empowerment approach I will discuss below actually mean when they use the concept of gender?

Gender: a radical and contested concept

Gender theories are mainly embraced by Anglo-Saxon theorists, while many French feminists prefer theories which stress sexual difference (see Braidotti 1991a, Marks and De Courtivron 1981). Yet the French feminist Simone de Beauvoir (1947) is generally seen as the precursor of gender theorists in the present wave of feminism in the West, although she herself did not use the concept. She formulated a critique on biological determinism, introducing the famous adagio that "woman is not born but made". She was the first one to point out the distinction between "natural" sex and "cultural" sex roles which became the basis for later sex/gender theories. There are some major problems with De Beauvoir's theories. In the first place she did not attack patriarchy as such, although she attempted to deconstruct women's "otherness". In her view the way out for women would be to transcend their otherness, and become subjects of history and knowledge, just as men have established themselves. In the second place, De Beauvoir located the site of women's "otherness" in women's bodies, that is in sexuality and motherhood. She did not problematize the body and biology as such, as postmodernist feminists do. "Woman" remained the problem, the

deviant one, the one to be explained, while "man" was the norm (see also Braidotti 1991b, Flax 1990).

Some twenty years later Gayle Rubin introduced the concept "sex/gender system" which she defined as "the set of arrangements upon which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied" (1975:159). I will deal with her views in some length, as many theorists in gender and development quote her as one of their sources.

Rubin combined insights from French structuralist anthropology, mainly Lévi-Strauss, Freud and Marxism. From Marxism she took her views on this sex/gender system as operating comparable to the system of political economy under capitalism. She accepted the ideas of Lévi-Strauss on the "exchange of women" as the basis of kinship systems and thus of society. This led her to postulate the circulation of women in marriage as the key to the sex/gender system which is thus based on a male homosocial contract. In this view women are merchandise in a patriarchal system, the symbolic and material capital upon which the process of accumulation rests. Rubin thus points to a male-controlled heterosexuality as the basis of women's oppression. Adrienne Rich (1980) takes this view one step further by pointing to the workings of "compulsory heterosexuality" as the basis of the present-day gender system.

There are several problems with the work of Rubin. In the first place she based her insights on at least two unstable founding fathers. The gender blindness of Marxist theories has been stressed by several authors (Coward 1983, Barrett 1991). Lévi-Strauss's theories on the universality of the exchange of women seem untenable in the light of matrilinear systems in which men can be seen to circulate, rather than women (see also Peletz 1996). It appears that he has taken that which he should explain historically, ie male domination, as given, as the basis of his theories. Flax (1991) points to a second problem in Rubin's theories, her inability to trace the links of the sex/gender system with other systems of unequal exchange, such as the economy. In Rubin's view these systems exist parallel to each other, rather than that they interact. A third issue is that Rubin based her insights upon dichotomies, such as those between the biological and the social, instead of deconstructing them. This means that Rubin is unable to see women's or men's bodies as simultaneously natural and cultural, in which the natural too is part of a cultural system. This Nicholson (1995) calls the "coatrack" theory of gender. The body is seen as stable, natural,

unchanging, differences have to be accounted for by analysing what has been hung over it in various socio-historical contexts. Yet in spite of these problems Rubin's analysis remains powerful in her insistence on the importance of the way women's sexuality is controlled in present-day patriarchal systems.

Scott (1989) tackles some of the major problems in the conceptualization of gender which were left unresolved after Rubin and Rich. She is one of the major theorists of what has come to be called "social constructivism". She focuses on the way the concept of gender can be used as an analytical category to designate the social relations between the sexes. In her view gender theories need two central elements, a historical perspective and a deconstruction of the terms of sexual difference. She conceptualizes gender as functioning in a dual way, as a constitutive element of social relationships and as a primary way of signifying a relationship of power (1989:94). She stresses the need to study the interrelationship among four elements which together make up a gender system and the way they change. These elements are the symbols in which gender differences are couched, the normative concepts used, which often operate in systems of binary opposition, the political and social institutions in which a gender system is embedded, such as kinship and the economy, and lastly the formation of a subjective identity. Scott's stress on the functioning of gender relations within a system of power, and her view of gender as operating in the whole field between sexuality (here she refers to Rubin approvingly), language, the economy and the political make her theory on gender highly comprehensive.

Recently Nicholson (1995) has taken the postmodernist debate on the conceptualization of gender one step further. After criticizing the "coatrack" view of gender in which sex (the body) and gender (the social) are seen as two distinct categories, she conceptualizes gender as "the social organization of sexual difference", including "the knowledge that establishes meaning for bodily differences". For, she explains our "knowledge about sexual difference cannot be isolated from its discursive context" (1995:39). The body is not the stable category that Rubin and other radical feminists see it. We cannot "know" our bodies in some pure form, for every form of knowledge is a product of the discourse in which it is constructed. So we can only "see" our bodies through lenses that are always already social. The "natural body" thus disappears from her texts; instead it becomes a "historically specific variable whose meaning and import is recognized as potentially different in different historical contexts" (1995:61). In this extreme constructivist position the scope

for political action becomes very limited, viz reduced to the giving of, and the unearthing of, meaning. While Scott left a theoretical place for the inclusion of the sexual in analysis, Nicholson denounces any form of "biological foundationalism", in which the body and its signals is accepted as given. As such Nicholson is firmly opposed to any remnants of essentialism which in her eyes "difference feminists" keep falling prey to[2].

Several present-day radical feminist theorists deplore the turn "strong" constructivism has taken. Barry (1996) for instance argues that by disconnecting sex from gender, theory has become divorced from politics. There is no room any longer for attention to issues such as sexual behaviour and desire, battering, rape, incest, reproductive violence or femicide. Similarly Bell and Klein advocate a view of patriarchy "as a universal value system, though it exhibits itself in different forms culturally and historically (1996:14).

The most fruitful approaches to the understanding of gendered differences seem to be those which see the body neither as an analytically unchanging category, nor as the passive recipient upon which "culture" acts (see also Butler 1990 and 1993). Cross-cultural analysis suggests that not only sex and gender are culturally divergent variables, but that also the relation between them, as well as the relative "weight" both have in relation to identity formation, is subject to cultural variation (see also Moore 1994). A theory of gender relations should thus avoid the scylla of essentialism and the charybdis of cultural determinism, but instead analyse both sex and gender, both bodies and cultures, in the ways they interact and mutually shape each other.

Gender and development

The above short overview of some of the major positions in the debates on the conceptualization of gender gives an indication of the complexity of the debate, and of the major issues at stake. I will now briefly discuss three major textbooks on gender and development issues which were recently

[2] Recently Blackwood and Wieringa reviewed the debates on essentialism versus constructivism extensively. In our introduction to an anthology of women's same-sex relations and transgender practices crossculturally, we argued that "there is no sexual desire outside of a cultural ontology that mediates between bodies and culture, and there is no culture that is disembodied" (1998:16).

published and which are widely used. How do the authors view gender? Which position do they take in this debate? What issues do they see as vital concerns for an analysis of women's oppression? My starting point for this critique is Rubin's insistence on the centrality of sexuality in sex/gender systems and Scott's rich conceptualization of gender.

On the cover of her 1993 "Planning Development with Women; making a World of Difference", Kate Young presents her book as arguing for "the need for a gender perspective in development planning, in order to support and enhance women's participation and empowerment". Gender thus is a central concept; it is used throughout the book. It is defined as pertaining to the area of social relations "shaped and sanctioned by norms and values held by members of a given society" (1993:138) as a "structured set of social behaviour" which is "underpinned by ideology" (1993:139). In Young's analysis the sexual division of labour receives special attention as an area in which women and men are socially connected yet artificially separated. Marriage is seen as one of the specific institutions in which such cooperation is structured. The issue of (hetero)sexuality as the basis of the conjugal contract is not mentioned in this context. Sexuality does appear in Young's discussion of women's empowerment. Young aptly criticizes mainstream empowerment approaches as too economistic, limiting the concept to enhancing women's entrepreneurial self-reliance. Feminist visions of empowerment transcend this view, Young argues, in their insistence that women's subordination must be tackled. Women's subordination is then defined as resting on two pillars, the "regulation and control of female sexuality and procreation, and the sexual division of labour which allocates women a heavy burden of responsibilities while denying them control of valuable social resources" (1993:158). Empowerment thus is not only an individual, but also a collective process, which, Young warns "implies some degree of conflict" as those "currently holding power" (ie men) should "relinquish" it (1993:159).

Young advances no suggestions as how to end male control over women's sexuality. Even though she recognises that sexuality is an important area of concern, there is no special section in the book devoted to the topic. Instead there are chapters on agriculture, manufacture and the urban informal sector. The book is heavily biased towards productive processes and economic sectors. In her chapter on concepts and assumptions, male domination and men's control over women's sexuality is again ignored. Instead the chapter discusses the distinction between productive and

unproductive work, the conceptualization of women's employment and the household. Where intra-household relations are discussed, the focus is again on economic relations, on consumption and decisionmaking patterns. These are the kind of issues which featured prominently in socialist feminist circles of the 1970s.

Thus while Young recognises that gender relations imply a degree of male control over women's sexuality, and while she mentions that women's empowerment carries with it an element of struggle, both these issues, which were crucial to the way Rubin (heterosexuality) and Scott (both analysis of social relations and relations of power which span the whole range between the symbolic and the political) defined gender, are virtually ignored. These authors are not even mentioned. What remains is an analysis of social relations which foregrounds their consequences for the socio-economic sphere.

Naila Kabeer, in her book "Reversed Realities; Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought" (1994) does refer to Rubin's groundbreaking article. She uses Rubin's insistence that capitalism cannot explain the existence of various forms of "Byzantine, fetishized indignities" (quoting Rubin, 1994:40) and other forms of violence perpetrated against women in various times and places to refute the Marxian thesis of the primacy of relations of production and class struggle. As Young does, Kabeer advocates the gender relations approach as the most fruitful way to deal with issues related to women and development. However, while Kabeer refers to male control over women's sexuality, (hetero)sexuality never receives the analytical emphasis it has in Rubin's work. Instead, Kabeer delegates the issue of sexuality to the sphere of kinship and family and generally refers to it in the context of gender role socialization and relations of reproduction and contraceptives.

In Kabeer's view, a gender relations approach can be particularly helpful in the following ways: it shifts the focus away from the earlier WID approach on women and development issues; it points to the fact that gender is not the only relation of inequality in which men and women live; it extends the Marxist concept of social relations beyond the production of objects and commodities to the production and care of the human body and human life; it is concerned with the complex process by which the simple "facticity" of biological difference becomes socially constructed as gender difference and gender identity; and it seeks to avoid the universalist generalizations that

characterize the more structuralist approaches which see women's oppression as produced by the capitalist mode of production or by a global patriarchy (such as suggested by Mies 1986).

The topics that receive most attention in Kabeer's analysis are household economics, poverty and population policies. Kabeer advocates women's empowerment, as does Young, but she pays no more than lipservice to the link with (hetero)sexuality and the struggle against male control over women's sexuality. Issues related to ideological and political empowerment are hardly addressed. Women's empowerment, Kabeer notes, should take place in the context of addressing women's "strategic gender interests", an approach I will criticize below (see also Wieringa 1994). Kabeer starts the discussion by listing the strategic gender interests Molyneux, who introduced the concept, paid attention to: abolition of the gender division of labour; removal of institutionalized forms of discrimination (actually, Molyneux wrote about the "alleviation of the burden of child care and domestic labour on women"); establishment of political equality; reproductive choice; measures against male violence, the sexual exploitation of women and coercive forms of marriage" (1994:301). On the same page Kabeer adapts this comprehensive listing into use for policy makers and development planners; they are then reduced to: "legal reform, reproductive choice, employment promotion, access to new extra-household resources, organizational activity". Any analysis of sexuality, politics, and "other institutionalized forms of discrimination" has disappeared from the list. Likewise the centrality Scott gave to gender as a relation of power is diffused into a discussion about the way in which gender planning can build up an infrastructure to assist in the process of women's self-empowerment. Kabeer is hardly concerned with the realm of the symbolic, processes of identity formation and the sphere of the male-defined political.

Moser wrote her book "Gender Planning and Development; Theory, Practice and Training", to describe the "conceptual rationale for a new planning tradition based on gender roles and needs" (1993:cover). Like Kabeer she refers to Rubin's work, as one of the authors who make a distinction between sex, "biological differences from men", and gender "that is, the social relationship between men and women, in which women have been systematically subordinated" (1993:3). On the same page she remarks casually that "the critical distinction between sex and gender is well known"(ibid). However, Moser ignores the centrality of sexuality in Rubin's work, and doesn't refer to the critical work by Scott and other authors on gender mentioned above. Moser recognises that power

struggles play an important role in any attempt to end women's subordination. As she writes. gender planning, with its fundamental goal of emancipation, is by definition a more "confrontational" approach [than Women in Development]. Based on the premise that the major issue is one of subordination and inequality, its purpose is that women through empowerment achieve equality and equity with men in society" (1993:4). Apart from the question this statement raises about the nature of society and the role men play in it (those don't need to be transformed in Moser's view, as with De Beauvoir women just need to catch up with men for the problems to end) it points to the need for feminist struggle. Yet this is exactly where Moser withdraws. Whereas Kabeer is supportive of feminism, Moser seems to be more concerned about the bad name the concept has in some planning circles. Adapting Molyneux's distinction between practical and strategic gender interests (1985), she explains why she propagates to pay attention to practical gender needs:

> It has become very popular for policy-makers and the media alike to label any policy or programme associated with women as "feminist" or "women"s lib". Such terms are used by many in such a derisory manner that they provoke a hostile and negative reaction from female and male planners alike. The differentiation between practical and strategic gender needs provides a critical planning tool. This allows practitioners to understand better that planning for the needs of low-income women is not necessarily "feminist" in content. Indeed, the vast majority of interventions for women world-wide are concerned with them within the existing gender division of labour, as wives and mothers. These are intended to meet their practical gender needs. While such interventions are important they will only become "feminist" in content, if, and when, they are transformed into strategic gender needs.
>
> Gender needs differentiation therefore, can provide a useful tool for planners. Not only does it help diffusing the criticisms of those who find "feminism" unacceptable by showing them that working with women is often not "feminist". In addition, it is helpful for policy-makers and planners responsible for meeting the practical gender needs of women, in assisting their adoption of more "challenging" solutions. (41).

As I already mentioned in my discussion of Kabeer's text, I am critical of the distinction between practical and strategic gender needs or interests. As I will explain below I maintain it is theoretically unfounded and empirically untenable (see also Wieringa 1994). Moser's above statement reveals the underlying reasons for her adaptation of these concepts: she is afraid the word "feminist" may antagonize too many people. Yet, as I will argue below, fear of the word "feminism" is in itself a

major tool to maintain women"s subordination. Instead of accepting this resistance to use the concept and avoiding it, it should be analysed, and adapted to the relevant socio-economic situation. Feminism should be made as common a word as say "socio-economic equality".

As are Young and Kabeer, Moser is most concerned with addressing the needs of poor women. The issues most frequently addressed in her book are the gender division of labour, the household, employment, relations of production and reproduction, health and housing. Sexual relations and issues of symbolic representation or identity formation receive only scant attention. In the concluding chapter, in which Moser broadens her topic of gender planning to discuss the way planners can build links with women's movements and organizations, again the issues of sexuality, political transformation or consciousness raising are ignored. A short section on intra-household relations in this chapter focuses on the importance of women's economic independence. Domestic violence and fertility control are mentioned in passing, and it is advocated that rape crisis centres and battered women's homes might be established as a local planning solution (1993:206). One other reference follows to the Bombay Forum against the Oppression of Women which organized around rape and domestic violence. However an analysis of issues related to body politics such as rape and sexual violence against women is in no way integrated into her discussion of gender planning. Sexuality is only discussed in the form of male violence against women. The existence of physically non-violent ways to regulate sexuality is ignored nor is sexuality seen as a potentially empowering force. No attention is paid to Scott's rich and critical insights into the conceptualization of gender.

Practical versus strategic gender needs or interests

Moser's work is best known for its insistence on the distinction between strategic and practical gender needs. These terms are often used in a static, rigid binary way in gender planning projects; critics have deplored the widespread "moserization" of planning practices. I have some serious problems both with the way she defines these concepts, and with the unquestioning acceptance of them in planning circles. Molyneux (1985) originally introduced the difference between practical and strategic gender interests to address some of the criticisms levelled at the performance of the Nicaraguan Sandinistas. She started her discussion with making a distinction between "women's

interests", for which women could be mobilized as women, and "women's gender interests", which referred to interests deriving from the social relations of gender. While this distinction is a useful one, I am less convinced by that between "practical" and "strategic" gender interests.

The way Moser adapts Molyneux's original concept is confusing. She shifts from the use of gender interests to gender needs and adapts the usage of these terms to a much wider range of development practices. Moser defines the distinction between them as follows: "strategic gender needs ...are formulated from the analysis of women's subordination to men" while "practical gender needs ... are formulated from the concrete conditions women experience in their engendered position within the sexual division of labour" (1989: 1803). As both needs are derived from women's engendered position in society the difference seems to be that we can only speak of strategic needs if this position has been analysed, while practical needs arise where such analysis is not available. The way Moser defines the distinction between the two kinds of interests thus points to a problem of accountability and representation. Who actually decides what are "strategic" or "practical" needs or interests? Planners, or women from the target groups themselves? The above formulation leaves little space for a more complex analysis of women's shifting, contextualized conditions. Molyneux (1985, 1998) herself is more aware of the complex relation between subjective agency, identity formation and mobilization.

Moser's conflation of needs and interests means that the more flexible, intentional and therefore political category of interests is replaced by the more static category of needs which better fits in planning discourse (see also Molyneux 1998). In the following discussion I will use the concept of gender interests when referring to the political process of women's collective action (see also Wieringa 1994).

I have a number of other problems with the distinction between "practical" and "strategic" gender interests. In the first place it should be pointed out that th concept of "interests" goes back to a nineteenth century utilitarian view on social relations[3]. Secondly I am wary of introducing another binary opposition. Binary oppositions such as those between mind and body, nature and culture, woman and man, are intrinsic to Western science. Feminist theorists have sharply

[3] See Chhachhi and Pittin referring to Diamond and Hartsock (1981), who argue that this view reduces the "human community to an instrumental arbitrary and deeply unstable alliance, one which rests on the private desires of isolated individuals" (1996:99).

denounced this exercise of the dualistic ordering of reality, as the attempt of male scientists to control nature and women (Braidotti 1991a, Haraway 1991, Braidotti, Charkiewizc, Häusler and Wieringa 1993). The distinction between practical and strategic interests is another attempt, in the words of Foucault, not to explain reality, but rather to control and normalize it (Foucault 1972).

Further I would like to point to the impossibility to make an empirical distinction. Although Molyneux defends her theory as a "heuristic" device, she claims more universal theoretical status for it. However, in a comparison of two women's organizations in Indonesia, the communist-oriented women's organization Gerwani and the state-led mass organization PKK, I found that the distinction between strategic and practical gender interests was not helpful at all (Wieringa 1992). Gerwani attempted to mobilize women to fight for their gender interests as well as for justice and equality in general, as defined by Indonesia's "leftist family" of the time. The organization was banned after the coup of 1965, and many thousands of its members were brutally killed (Wieringa 1995). PKK is one of the organizations set up by the military bureaucratic government of President Soeharto to control and re-subordinate women. The activities of both organizations show a remarkable resemblance and as they are in both cases based on the problems women face in their daily lives, could be categorized in Moser's terms of addressing women's "practical" gender interests. However, the context in which they were carried out, and the political consciousness behind it, determine the effect of these activities. Gerwani's programmes included strong elements of consciousness raising, while similar activities of the PKK aim to make women obey the military leaders of their country. I concluded that it is not the nature of the activities concerned which determine whether they affect the relations of oppression women are faced with, but the context in which they take place, and the political motivation behind them. In other words, the distinction between strategic and practical gender interests is empirically not tenable[4].

Any planning intervention may be empowering if it is carried out in ways which specifically aim to do so, just as any programme which may be potentially interesting to women can lead to a continuation of women's subordination, if dominant interests are being served. A cooking course of Gerwani for instance can have a transformative potential if it is embedded in discussions about the

[4] Both Chhachhi and Pittin (1996) and Jónasdóttir (1988) have argued along similar lines. They stress that the concept of "interests" may be useful when taken in its original meaning as referring to participation in public life, to the extension of choices. It becomes then linked to notions of citizenship. On the other hand the content of the the interests can only be soio-historically defined, never in an essentialized way.

sexual division of labour, price rises, women's discrimination in the labour market or domestic violence. Cooking courses with similar recipes can strengthen patterns of gender subordination if they are taught in the framework of women's duty to serve their men and ultimately an autocratic regime, as PKK's courses do. I suggest it is more fruitful to focus the analysis on increasing the transformative potential any planning intervention may have, than to try to find out whether the project of policy concerned addresses practical or strategic gender interests (Wieringa 1994, see also Young 1993, who speaks of "transformatory potential").

In this context it is critical to realize that women's gender interests are constituted in shifting and diverse social and political settings. Women are located at the crossroads of many intersecting and at times contradictory relations of oppression[5], engaged in a process in which their identities are constituted by these relations while they are at the same time reproducing them. Women's gender interests cannot be conceived in an abstract, universal manner. They have to be contextualized, and seen as elements in a continuous process of identity formation and political conscientization. Analyses of women's collective action, upon which gender planning programme and policies should be based, should reflect more complex debates on identity formation, subjectivity and gendered forms of collective agency than mechanistic and heuristic divisions between practical or strategic concerns allow.

Critique

This short excursion into three major texts which address GAD issues reveals the limited way in which gender is conceptualized. Although Rubin is quoted regularly as one of the founding mothers of the distinction between biological sex and social gender, her insights are presented in such a watered-down and reductionist version that their critical edge is lost. The issue of sexuality as a major element in constructing women's subordination is ignored; the concept of gender has thus lost the analytical and critical importance that Rubin gave it.

[5] Some of the most stimulating authors within the postmodernist tradition who explore these theories are Flax (1990), Haraway (1991) and De Lauretis (1986, 1987).

Even more remarkable is the fate of Scott's theoretical contribution to the debate on gender. I regard her as one of the major theorists on the analytical potential of gender relations, yet her insights are completely ignored - she is cited by none of the three authors discussed. Thus the strength of her comprehensive view of gender relations is lost. As discussed above, she stressed that a gender relations analysis should pay attention to four elements, symbols, the normative concepts, the political and social institutions and the formation of subjective identity. This was necessary, she explained, as gender relations are involved in the whole range of social relations between the sexual, the symbolic, the economic and the political. The three texts discussed above limit their analysis of gender relations to the socio-economic realm and the household, and the area of political and social institutions. Some attention is paid to the working of some basic binary opposition, eg the divide between the public and the private. The realm of the symbolic is hardly touched. Scott's emphasis on subjective identity is drowned in vague references to socialization and the rather functionalist way in which Moser deals with the issue of "gender roles". Thus the three textbooks discussed above have undertheorized and desexualized the gender concept and they have depoliticized its critical potential.

A recent report on specific initiatives and projects aimed to benefit women in major sectors of World Bank project lending provides an illustration of the consequences a limited understanding of the concept of gender can have. The authors, Buviniç, Gwin and Bates, note that

> In theory the shift to gender requires confronting the root sources of women's subordination to men; in practice gender has taken on a much more apolitical connotation in the Bank and other development institutions. Since gender analysis examines the roles and responsibilities of women relative to those of men, gender has been interpreted as being inclusive rather than exclusive of men. Because of this perception, gender tends to be more palatable to Bank clients and staff than the term WID. Thus, instead of understanding gender as the complementary approach or a tool needed to address women's needs in development, it is viewed by many as a substitute for WID. Indeed, several Bank staff interviewed, uncomfortable with a specific emphasis on women, willingly embraced gender (1996:23-4).

How come that in recent GAD debates the discussion is so economistic and reductionist? That gender has lost its political, critical potential and has become "palatable" to many who would be unwilling to take feminism seriously? And that sexuality and the symbolic have been made invisible? And what are the consequences of this reductionist and debilitating treatment of the concept of gender?

I suggest some of the reasons lie in the background of these authors. Formerly it was "not done" to link one's academic work to one's history, affiliations or preoccupations. Feminist epistemology with its emphasis on positionality has stressed the importance of disclosing those aspects of one's personal history which are reflected in one's work (see for instance Haraway 1991). Still hesitantly, I therefore venture the following remarks.

To start with, the three authors discussed share a more or less Marxist or at least socialist feminist past. Although all of them denounce the gender blindness of Marxist theories, and at some stage engage in a critical encounter with Marxist-feminists theorists (see especially Kabeer for her critique on Mies), they retain the Marxist focus on material conditions, on relations of production (to which since the early 1970s relations of reproduction were added), and they share the inability of historical materialists to deal meaningfully with the realm of the symbolic and the sexual.

Secondly the authors discussed share an Anglo-Saxon background and/or training, which may have left a legacy of Victorian prudishness to discuss anything related to sexuality. This is surprising, because I have found this one of the topics the women I worked with were always ready to discuss. This is also the experience of Evelyne Accad, who has done research on women in the Middle East: "It also became clear to me that, contrary to the perspective of many intellectuals and political women and men involved either in the United States or in the Middle East, rural and urban women from the lower strata of society are very outspoken on the subject of sex, love, and their relationships to their husbands and family" (1996:467).

Another reason the three authors discussed here are so silent about sexuality may be the outcome of their attempt to avoid being perceived as essentialists. Essentialism still carries with it the odour of biological determinism. However, a "strong" constructivism which rejects any mention of the body and sexuality as essentialist falls prey to reinforcing the binary opposition between the body and the social which constructivism set out to criticize in the first place (see also Fuss 1989). In ignoring the sexual and the symbolic they cannot be analysed either in their relation to the cultural. By its analytical outsider status the body thus becomes homogenized and ultimately essentialized. In my view it is important to look at the body - not as the product of an unchanging biology, but as the site in which embodied needs and desires interface with cultural values. Another consequence of this fear of essentialism is the inability of the authors to analytically accommodate

the bodily demands around which women readily organize. Thus they ignore an important strategic moment in the processes of women's empowerment.

Another aspect worth noting about the way sexual relations is treated in the three texts, is their focus on control and misery: rape and domestic violence are seen to be issues which need redressing. Women are thus presented as victims of male aggression. This has two consequences. In the first place other processes in which women's sexuality is regulated to suit a particular (hetero)sexual domain are disavowed, including women's internalized (hetero)sexism. Secondly by ignoring sexual desire, the wide range of sexual practices and sexual object choice (see Blackwood and Wieringa 1998), the authors undermine the potential for women's agency and collective and individual empowerment these issues might have. For instance lesbian groups are typically omitted from the discussion on women's organizations.

The consequences of the way gender is treated in these texts are manifold. Ignoring the way these authors differ in their theories on empowerment, feminism and transformation, several commonalities in their treatment of the concept of gender can be noted. In the first place the discussion of women's issues is depoliticized and women's sexual oppression is rendered invisible, as are symbolic aspects of women's subordination. The neutral, "scientific", descriptive way in which gender is used feeds into patriarchal fears of feminism. Feminists both in the South and in the North who do try to link socio-economic with sexual relations, and the realm of the symbolic with that of the political are not only seen as "radical feminists" but also as theoretically backward - wasn't gender the bright new concept that would lead us to a world of gender equality?

Secondly the reductionist and economistic treatment of gender issues has led to an emphasis, in proposals for funding projects for instance, on socio-economic aspects at the expense of projects and campaigns which link these issues to body politics.

Thirdly these theorists actually reinforce the gap between the South and the North. By ignoring issues of sexuality they imply these issues are not relevant to the South. That in those parts of the world socio-economic issues are primary. And that sexuality and the symbolic are concerns of Western radical feminists only. Northern women have body politics and struggle about issues of performance and representation, Southern women have GAD and focus on the socio-economic. At the same time these texts reinforce the gap between development institutes and agencies and

women's organizations all over the world. This is the more remarkable as sexual rights for women was an important point in the discussions around the Platform for Action in Beijing, September 1995. There the world's women agreed on the importance of sexual rights for women all over, not just in the North. In fact it was a black woman from South Africa who spoke on behalf of lesbian rights. In the end this issue was defeated, but this was the first time a discussion on lesbianism was held at such an international forum[6].

Lastly, the insistence that gender is an issue of importance to both men and women has downplayed the power struggle between the sexes. Scott already warned that the way "gender" is often substituted for "women", as it sounds more neutral and objective, carries with it the danger that it is dissociated from the politics of feminism. This is, I fear, exactly what is happening in many places in the development scene, as illustrated by the report on the World Bank discussed above. Instead of a rigorous analysis of male domination, care is taken that men too should benefit from gender projects (as if they are not already the beneficiaries of the other 95% of the projects). And I have even heard complaints that in order to ensure gender equity men were appointed to direct gender desks (as if they don't already control most of the other desks and agencies).

Some concluding suggestions

In what ways can the depoliticization of feminism and the invisibilization of sexuality and the symbolic be addressed in women and development thinking? How can we avoid a further "moserization" of gender planning? In the first place I suggest that when women and women's oppression are discussed, these exact words are used, "women" instead of "gender" (see also Chhachhi and Pittin 1996). The use of the word gender should be reserved for those instances when an analysis of gender relations is important. Secondly this gender analysis should then encompass the full range of analytical moments that Scott distinguished, and it should be sensitive

[6] See for the full text of the Platform for Action and the other documents and speeches produced at the Beijing conference, including the speech of Palesa Beverley Ditsie on lesbian rights, Volume XXIV of Women's Studies Quarterly, Spring/Summer 1996.

to the whole field of relations between the economic, political, symbolic and the sexual. Gender should be given back its critical potential. And development should be conceptualized as a much more holistic process than is done at present, with its narrow focus on the socio-economic. This does not mean that I advocate a return to an earlier welfarist model of WID practices. The shortcomings of WID have been aptly exposed. However, its focus on women as the major beneficiaries of women and development projects should be maintained. We should likewise keep from the GAD approach its insistence on the power differentials between women and men as embedded in a set of social relations.

In my view gender planning can best be seen as a set of situated practices of feminist activity. Practitioners should learn to ask new, ethical questions, based on an explicit concern with the relations of oppression women face, both in terms of gender and in terms of the gendered effects of race, class, ethnicity, age and sexual preference. Women's gender interests are incorporated within a network of imbricating power relations. The basic question of planners should be: does this intervention make a difference? What is its transformative potential? Does it empower women to critically assess their own situation and to creatively imagine and shape other, less oppressive social relations? These questions will not be answered easily and not always in quantitative terms.

In the third place women and development theorists and practitioners should be aware that they are dealing with power relations between the sexes which are historically created, and that feminism is the name of the game to address the changing patterns of male domination. Instead of buying into the patriarchal fear of "feminism", using a bland version of gender to make women's concerns more "palatable" to non-feminist planners, the concept of feminism should be hotly debated and its contents adapted to the present socio-cultural situation. After all, there is not one kind of feminism, there are many feminisms. Instead of disassociating any gender project from feminism, such programmes should instead be made as "feminist", as defined in its particular socio-historical context, as possible. Any project concerned with women can potentially entail a transformative element.

In the last place I maintain that the dichotomy between essentialism and constructivism be deconstructed. The body cannot and should not be ignored so easily as "strong" constructivists propagate. By virtually ignoring the bodily the authors discussed here are unable to see the body as

interacting with culture in processes in which both are being transformed. This is important not only because the binary opposition between the body and the mind, and between nature and culture need to be deconstructed, but also because women's bodily needs, their desires and their pain are to a considerable extent the basis of their consciousness as actors in this world. Ultimately a disembodied, depoliticized gender discourse hardly holds out the hope for transformation and women's empowerment that is also harboured by the three authors discussed in this article.

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