



Conceptualising Policy Practices in Researching Pathways of Women's Empowerment

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The Research Programme Consortium (RPC) on Pathways of Women's Empowerment aims, amongst other things, to inspire a radical shift in policy. However, how feminists choose to conceptualise policy will influence their strategic choices in terms of what and how they seek to influence. In conceptualising policy as a dynamic process involving institutional arrangements, competing discourses and a changing set of actors, all of which are subject to the influence of overlapping networks of interest, we can develop strategies of policy change that are more relevant to the particular context in which we are working.

In international development practice the dominant mode of thinking about policy is the rational-managerial perspective of public administration or management science. This can be attributed to the influence of the World Bank and other global non-representative institutions which claim to provide objective and robust advice, uncontaminated by political



interest and operate on the assumption that planned intervention can

change society in the way the planners wish.



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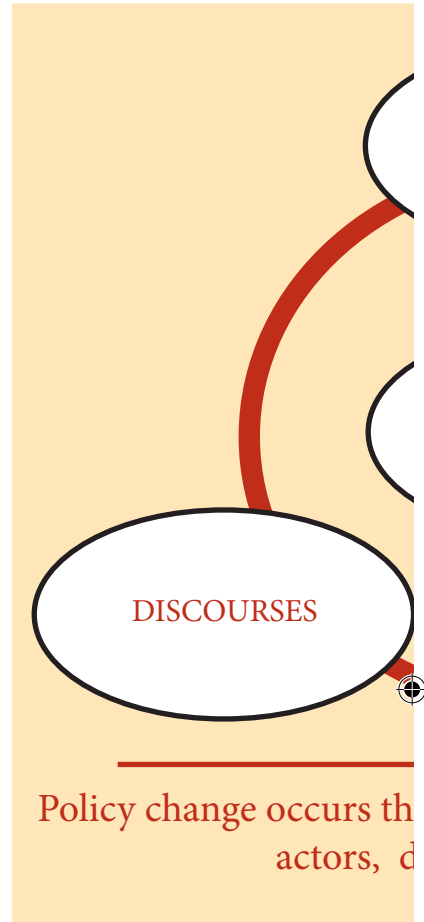
In light of this way of thinking much of the debate concerning the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming is whether policy change for women's empowerment can be secured by 'infusing' gender into existing ways of doing and organising things - and by so doing to incrementally secure real gains for women - or whether it can only be achieved through discursive and organisational transformation.

"In contrast to the top-down rational managerial perspective, policy can be understood as a dynamic process involving institutional arrangements, competing discourses and a changing set of actors, all of which are subject to the influence of overlapping networks of interest."

Whilst such debates are important, they only take us so far since their ap-

proach to policy change is limited by their implicit reliance on the top-down linear approach to policy implementation.

Institutional arrangements and associated bureaucratic organisations constitute the structure or building blocks of international development practice and include artefacts such as conventions, treaties, white papers, conferences, reports and so on; discourses refer to the way in which power is manifest in the concepts, practices, statements and beliefs that place a frame around what is considered thinkable, visible and doable; and actors includes the politicians, bureaucrats, consultants, grass roots as well as national and international activists, journalists and academics concerned with the practice of international development. Drawing on complexity approaches to policy change we can see

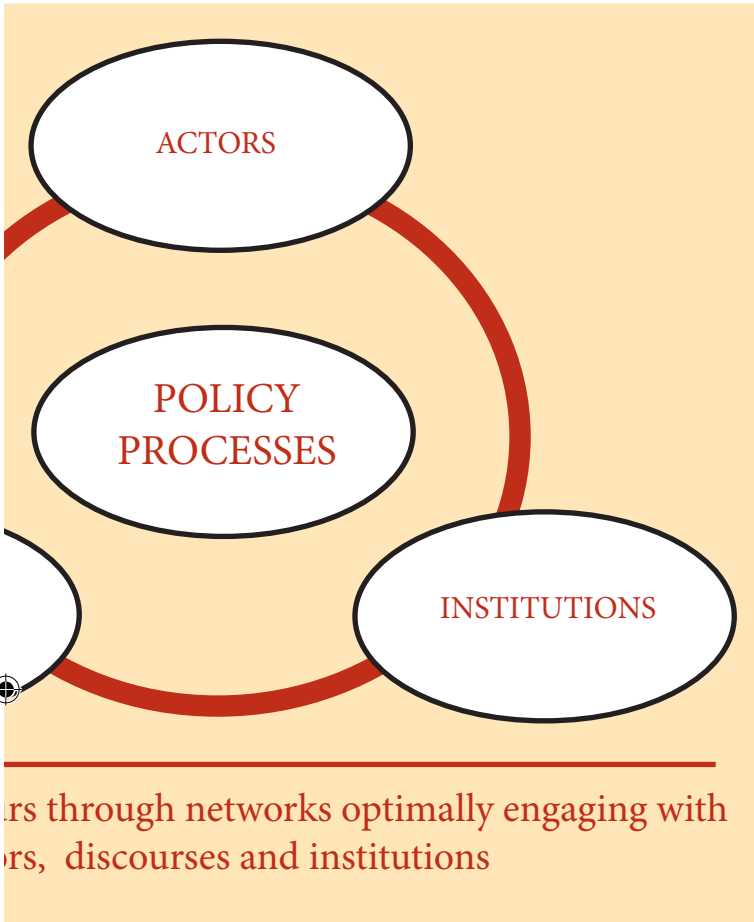


that 'networks' act as the active change agent that dynamically links these three elements together. Recognising this means that it is impossible to have a one model fits all approach to seeking policy change. Rather an activist network must fo-





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health and economic costs. At first glance, such an instrumentalist approach appears repugnant. However, within mainstream organisations such as DFID, for the first time it made violence against women a permissible subject of discussion, providing an entry point for subsequent recognition that this was a human rights issue. “

In understanding policy via this network lens we can move beyond an ‘us’ and ‘them’ approach to policy change and focus on asking what room for manoeuvre is available to the policy actors and how we can help them identify the options. This approach embraces rather than ignores the institutional or discursive constraints on actors and in a type of ‘planned improvisation’ responds to the dynamics of the political environment.

ocus on strategic interventions that consider the role and identity any one of us can most usefully assume in a particular context given discursive or institutional constraints.

“An example is the well-documented and well-analysed global campaign against violence to women. As part of that campaign, the 1993 World Development Report was used to demonstrate that violence against women brought





About us

Pathways of Women's Empowerment is an international research consortium funded by the UK government's Department for International Development (DFID). Co-ordinated by the Institute of Development Studies in Brighton, UK, the consortium is collectively run by six partners: BRAC University, Bangladesh; the Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy (CEGENSA), Ghana; Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK; the Nucleus for Interdisciplinary Women's Studies (NEIM) at the Federal University of Bahia, Brazil; the Social Research Centre (SRC) at the American University in Cairo; and UNIFEM, who in turn work with partners within their regions. Our research seeks to ground emerging understandings of empowerment in women's everyday lives, trace the trajectories of policies affecting women's empowerment and explore promising stories of change to find out what works and why to advance gender justice and equality for all.



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Credits

This brief was summarised by Nardia Simpson.

For further reading see: Rosalind Eyben, **Conceptualising Policy Practices in Researching Pathways of Women's Empowerment** Pathways Working Paper 1. This can be viewed at: www.pathways-of-empowerment.org/resources_pathways.html

This document is an output from a project funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) for the benefit of developing countries. The views expressed are not necessarily those of DFID.

