

PATHWAYS OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

SCOPING REPORT: PROGRAMME OF RESEARCH INTO GLOBAL POLICY PROCESSES

Summary version, 4 September 2006

1. Introduction

The process of global policy making merits study in its own right, rather than just being treated as a 'black box' that impacts for good or for ill, on people's lives in specific localities. The global programme of the RPC is concerned with the actors, norms, beliefs, ideas, networks and institutions associated with global policy processes that impact on women's empowerment. Its aim is to work with and support those feminists active in global arenas – in civil society networks, inside governments, in international development agencies, academia or in the media – with new ideas and knowledge for making more informed decisions as to where and how to invest their energies and thus through their actions be more fruitful in supporting the construction of pathways of women's empowerment.

This present document is a summary of a longer scoping paper, drafted by Rosalind Eyben with inputs from Nancy Okail and advice from members of the global programme's steering group. The contents are based on a consultation process and literature review that took place over six months from February to August 2006. The aim of the consultation was to identify research issues in relation to the question "How can global policy and international practice better respond to the challenge of securing and sustaining tangible improvements in women's lives? Another aim was to recruit a group of stakeholders to stay in contact with the research and contribute in one way or another in the programme over the next five years.

The principal consultation was a scoping workshop in May. Participants were global civil society activists, researchers and international aid agency staff; some potential participants could not come because of their very busy agendas involving constant global travel, revealing a challenge to the programme in engaging with its stakeholders, indicating that the most sensible strategy may be to piggy back onto other events. This is was the case when UNIFEM organised two consultation events in New York in February during the meeting of the Commission of the Status of Women and involving representatives from the UN Inter-Agency Group on Gender, on the one had, and global civil society activists and diplomats on the other. Likewise DFID facilitated Rosalind Eyben to hold a consultation on the margins of a DAC GenderNet workshop in July on the implications of the new aid agenda on gender equality.

Finally in terms of inputs to this report, following a drafting of an initial concept note after the scoping workshop, Nancy Okail undertook a literature review to determine the extent to which the emerging ideas represented research gaps..

2. Women's empowerment contextualized

2.1 Global actors and policies

A great number of organisations, alliances and individuals spend much time, energy and money concerning themselves with decisions that can affect the lives of people who live in localities very distant from their own homes. This report understands such activities as 'global'. It is worth remembering the RPC owes its own genesis to such efforts.

Compared with the 'regional hubs', the concept of global is more problematic. The utility of the term, as distinct from 'international' is it provides intellectual openings for exploring ideas and actions that may be relatively autonomous from what happens within the boundaries of a single country or region. Thus this report does not conceive global as just the just aggregate of many locals, meaning 'large scale', based on the idea of magnification by which the global is the 'big picture' that contains very little detail, compared with the local that contains much more detail, albeit on a smaller scale. Rather, this report *conceptualises the global as researchable from a range of scales and intensity of magnification*, bearing in mind that different disciplines – economics, political science, anthropology, geography - offer a variety of methodologies for handling these differences in scale.

In the context of this interpretation of global, policy is understood as a bundle of intentions, values, and methods, underpinned by a certain way of seeing the world and of understanding change. In this sense, policy is negotiated by a variety of political actors and re-shaped throughout the process of design and implementation as a result of contestation and resistance from others with (a) the deliberate intention of shaping what happens to economic, social and political relations in many local places and/or (b) an interest in ensuring that global policy is shaped to a specific local set of interests.

Thus, *global policy actors* can be distinguished between (1) those whose primary concern is to enter global policy arenas so as to shape what is happening back home in their own locality and (2) those whom we might think of as 'full-time' in the global, whose primary interest is to influence people's lives in many different localities. Yet, with reference to the first category, intention must be distinguished from effect. While, the actors might have an interest in just their own locality, empirical research might discover that through their actions in global spaces they are actually having an unintended impact on other localities.

The potential scope of enquiry is enormous, considering the global policy actors *our feminist activist stakeholders* are concerned with. Here, we can be guided by the priorities of the regional hubs where some of *their* principal stakeholders – for example national women's organisations or governmental machinery – can be considered as the global programme's secondary stakeholders. On the other hand, we might not want to lose sight of how some of our principal stakeholders are engaging primarily with other 'full time' global actors - for example the multinational corporations, the media or

international aid organisations – to influence indirectly changes to women’s lives in many different localities.

2.2. Perspectives on women’s empowerment

Debates with our feminist global activist stakeholders during the consultation process concerning what is women’s empowerment were largely non-reflexive; they tended to look ‘out there’ rather than at their own role. A clear challenge to the global research programme will be to encourage feminists working in global spaces to see themselves as worthwhile subjects of research because their actions may indirectly have an influence on the lives of many others. This means encouraging greater reflexivity as a means of recognising rather than ignoring one’s own positionality as academic expert or senior bureaucrat.

One particularly interesting strand of discussion that emerged in all the consultation meetings concerned the *normative dimensions of ‘empowerment’*. Whose empowerment are we talking about? Do we as the RPC hold certain values about empowerment? Do these reflect a concern for the wider social good as distinct from individual empowerment? In that context, how do we theorise how change happens in favour of empowerment? Our choice of theories in that regard affects both the choices we make as activists as well as the subject matter and methods selected for research. Being alert to this provides the possibility for different kinds of action and different kinds of research, each potentially illuminating various facets of reality which would remain invisible if we stick to just one way of understanding change.

Exploring assumptions about how change happens allows us to throw new light on the gender mainstreaming issue. Those at the Gendernet meeting linked women’s empowerment more closely to gender mainstreaming which was understood as the way in which gender equality and women’s empowerment would be achieved. As such their point of view reflects much of the recent literature. Nevertheless, when introduced to the central theme of the RPC, namely that we look for where positive change has happened, rather than research why gender mainstreaming has failed, most of those consulted participants gave a very positive response.

3. Current priorities, progress and gaps

3.1 Approaches to women’s empowerment in global policy spaces

Among international aid agencies ‘women’s empowerment’ is less commonly used than the concept of ‘gender equality’ which became prominent at the time of the Beijing Women’s Conference, along with ideas of gender mainstreaming that most agencies and observers believe have not lived up to their promise. Many global civil society groups who have been significant actors in shaping global policy agendas for women’s empowerment have expressed discouragement that the vision and commitments of Beijing have become largely eroded.

At the same time, because the last few years have been a time in which donors have sought to more closely co-ordinate their work in support of common objectives and have sought to increase financing for development, there has been a growing interest in the efficiency of aid and a resurgence of a view that aid must be seen to contribute to economic growth to justify its investment. Gender advocates inside international bureaucracies are returning to the efficiency arguments of the 1980's in order to make a case for financing women's empowerment.

Many recent evaluations of INGO and bilateral aid agencies' gender work have been negative with evidence that less staff time and financial resources are devoted to the issue than ten or even five years ago. Financing of women's groups and organisations within civil society has declined significantly in the last decade. While among international NGOs, there appears to be a nascent revival of interest in women's empowerment and gender equality after some years in the doldrums, the current reform process in the United Nations has so far failed to make women's empowerment central to the international development agenda.

3.2. Global feminist activists and networks

The last two decades have witnessed a proliferation of transnational feminist networks whose goals are to challenge the hegemony of global organizations whose operations are seen to have negative impact on gender equality. Many of these networks have concluded that mainstreaming is too narrow, marginalizing women's concerns from the main political and macro-economic agendas. The literature reveals a lively debate on the roles and challenges facing feminist transnational networks including the need to address their own internal power relations and the fact that many of them are funded by government and other aid agencies, possibly putting their autonomy at risk. At the same time, with the growth of transnational activist networks, some have become more organized, institutionalized and more linked to the state and formal UN organizations, raising the question concerning the extent to which they have shifted from a radical to a reformist position. Yet another perspective on such networks illuminate more complex links between formal institutional and civil society policy actors with external activist support enlisted by feminist bureaucrats to promote policy change from the inside. In addition to globally organised efforts to improve the lives of women working in the informal sector, there are also increasing numbers of networks engaging with the global formal private sector on women's labour rights. The extent to which women have participated in wider global civil society responses to economic globalisation is disputed.

3.3 Recent progress and blockages in shaping policies

How and with what success are global feminist activists currently engaging in the RPC themes of voice, work and body? ¹ With regard to *voice*, interest in political dynamics

¹ The full scoping report is not organised around these themes but rather around concepts, actors, organisations and standards, on the assumption that the specific thematic framing papers will be addressing global policy issues and contestation in relation to these themes. On the other hand, however

has grown but the full dimensions of how political processes affect gender equality and ongoing efforts to achieve it are not yet well understood. Activists' efforts have been concentrated on promoting and protecting international norms and standards so that they can be used at the national level as the source of legislation for women-friendly policies. Conversely, it has been argued that if the various forms of political inequality are not rectified at the national level such international standards and legal frameworks cannot lead to power transformation for real gender equality. There are however, some examples in the literature that illustrate the use of CEDAW and other international framework as an instrument for promoting women's empowerment at the local or national level. These successes are usually attributed to special conditions in the country with a strong political will and solid connections with international advocates. Finally, while Resolution 1325 can be considered as a watershed political framework that makes women – and a gender perspective – relevant to negotiating peace agreements, planning refugee camps and peacekeeping operations and reconstructing war-torn societies, the question remains why the Security Council is more prepared to commit itself to stronger resolutions with associated monitoring procedures in relation to child soldiers than it is to rape of women and girls in armed conflict situations.

Regarding *work*, feminist research and organising has largely been concerned with the gendered impact of globalisation bearing in mind that women are more likely than men to be employed in insecure forms of employment with low earnings. One of the challenges facing activists is that the requirements for high levels of technical expertise on economic and trade matters if networks are to engage effectively with transnational corporations and international institutions such as the WTO and the World Bank, potentially cuts them off from their own grassroots based in specific localities, particularly when the speed of negotiations may prevent opportunities for wider consultation with local constituencies. Hence, the growing interest in strengthening citizen voice in global arenas through increasing economic literacy.

The *body* theme is hotly contested in global spaces where organised resistance and 'unholy alliances' are strongest in relation to women's sexual and reproductive rights, perhaps most clearly illuminating how power shapes and constrains pathways of possibilities. The International Women's Health Coalition has reported several actions taken by the US administration that is blocking women empowerment. These actions vary from using political power to refuse ratification of international convention, limiting freedom of speech and release of information that support reproductive health and sexual freedom, up to limiting funds for organizations or programs that promote such efforts. At the same time, judgements concerning the effectiveness of the global campaign against violence against women appear to depend on whether the glass is judged as half full or half empty in terms of the translation of national legislation into effective implementation.

cursory the treatment, it was felt useful to introduce the three themes within the outline paper for purposes of discussion at the inception workshop in September.

4. Directions for the RPC

It is proposed that by the end of this phase of the RPC, the seven member institutions of the consortium and their funder, DFID, will have expanded the capacity and influence of feminists working for change from a diversity of global locations (including INGOs, international research institutes and official development agencies, as well as feminist networks) to acquire, apply and advocate for an enhanced understanding of how global policy processes, international standards and the aid architecture present constraints and provides opportunities for activism within global, national and local arenas. It is suggested that this purpose will have been achieved through a diversity of research outputs for a range of audiences with a variety of methods, including quantitative, qualitative, participatory and reflexive. Listed below are suggested outputs with some possible research questions.

The first output would contribute to the further refinement of the research activities in the subsequent outputs without however waiting for these to start before this first output would be completed. In relation to these subsequent outputs, the intention would be to achieve the programme's purpose through different entry points. Thus the second output enters through a study of networks as drivers or blockers of societal change in favour of women's empowerment; the third focuses on institutional arrangements and aid organisations as the drivers; the fourth takes international standards for women's empowerment as the potential change agent; and the fifth is concerned with global policy processes and negotiations over standards in relation to matters, such as climate change, trade or migration that might deliver unplanned consequences for women – for good or for ill.

4.1 A critical review of assumptions about the role of global policy and international practice in supporting women's empowerment.

This would include:

- A consideration of different understandings of how change happens that informs contrasting assumptions about the role of global policy and international practice;
- How feminist scholarship has contributed to shaping these assumptions, using specific examples from economics, political science, philosophy etc;
- An examination of the assumptions driving the work of trans-national networks and those within international agencies working for women's empowerment, including assumptions about the usefulness of working on international standards (such as CEDAW) and internationally agreed commitments (such as the PfA);
- The relevance of current debates beyond feminist and development studies on scale, discourse coalitions, spaces, cosmopolitanism, globalisation etc in relation to these assumptions

Methods would include both academic debate and review of the relevant literature and participatory workshops with activists exploring their assumptions of change that shape their choices for strategic action.

4.2. Global networks.

How do global networks pursue their objectives and inter-connect with each other, governments, the corporate sector and civil society to shape, promote and constrain opportunities for feminists to advance a women's empowerment agenda? This potentially means researching not only the transnational feminist networks (discussed in 3.2. above) but the many other kinds of networks involved in global policy arenas, including official or quasi-official policy networks on development issues; networks organised explicitly around broadly shared perspectives on the global political economy and networks with a specific agenda of blocking the fuller realisation of women's rights. Possible research projects undertaken in association with the RPC's regional programmes could include:

- Comparing trans-national feminist networks, such as DAWN, AWID, WIEGO, the global alliance for women's health; women's global network for reproductive rights; Commonwealth women parliamentarians etc, with other kinds of trans-national networks, for example on environmental issues, looking at how they link and connect with national and local networks for change and identifying the implications for action that can be applied from such a study;
- Studying the involvement of women activists and feminists in and the potential trajectories of impact on women's lives of the World Economic Forum and the World Social Forum;
- Making contact with and studying networks for women's empowerment operating within, for example, global religious institutions or the global media;
- A review from a safe distance of those networks and alliances specifically operating to block women's empowerment

More specifically researching feminist networks:

- Studying how feminist networks deal with their own class, colonial, radical, and ethnic divisions and hierarchies – including a reflexive study of our own Consortium;
- Exploring how sources of funding influence or shape the agendas of translational networks and investigating how autonomous are these networks from pre-set global agendas;
- Identifying who has access to global spaces? Even when local agendas are pursued in global spaces, how representative is this of the local demands and needs?
- Exploring how sources of information on women shape the global policy agenda of transnational networks. In what way, for example, does the media and the communication of research influence the effectiveness of transnational feminist networks efforts?

4.3 The international aid architecture

What are the implications for women's empowerment arising from structural or systemic changes to *the international aid architecture* in relation to its potential effectiveness in supporting country-based efforts e.g. the current UN reform process; the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness etc. Research projects could include:

- Participatory action research case studies of operational and policy effectiveness by *feminist activists working within international development organisations* at head offices and in the regions and including our partners CARE and UNIFEM and our funder, DFID, as well as for example, Action Aid, Oxfam, Norwegian official aid, the IFIs and selected others who belong to the DAC GenderNet and UN Inter-agency group.
- A study of the challenges facing INGOs in emerging trends in impact assessment planning and relationships mapping that aim to strengthen accountability to women living in poverty
- A review of the constraints and opportunities offered by the new aid modalities for delivering differently to women on the ground (in association with regional RPC members).

4.4 International norms and standards as pathways of women's empowerment

What are the possibilities for feminist activists seeking to strengthen the opportunities provided by *CEDAW and other internationally agreed standards and goals*? Research activities could include:

- A mapping of disjunctures within and between global spaces where such norms and standards are debated, including how key global policy actors, such as the US administration, may undermine and neutralise their own (or their stated?) intent through internal contradictions and conflicts;
- Exploring the extent to which national legal frameworks are aligned with CEDAW with case-studies of the achievement of successful alignment
- Stories of how CEDAW and other internationally agreed standards and goals such as the MDGs were used for mobilization and activism by women at the local and national levels (in association with RPC regional partners)
- An investigation of how feminists can strengthen the accountability mechanisms in relation to internationally agreed standards, such as security council resolution 1325 and other commitments relating to women's empowerment.
- Enquiring as to how international norms and standards shape and possibly constrain the imagination of what is possible in terms of pathways of empowerment, including mobilising strategies to counter resistance?

4.5 The impact on pathways of women's empowerment of other internationally negotiated standards and associated institutions

This output still requires more detail but perhaps most easily lends itself to research specifically related to the separate themes of body, voice and work. To date, most feminist research has been in relation to work because it is in the field of economics and trade that international standards and global institutions are most developed. Other aspects of formal global governance, for example the workings of the Security Council or the International Criminal Court are also potential research areas in relation to voice. In relation to the body theme, ideas include the global management of epidemics, for example not only HIV/Aids (already well researched in relation to gender issues) but the plans for managing avian flu. In terms of women's global organising in relation to these standards and institutions, such research would be closely linked to possible projects in 4.2.