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GLOBAL CHANGE AND INSECURITY

Are Women the Problem or the Solution?

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INTRODUCTION

Tackling the subject of women and global change in the context of international insecurity in the 1990s illustrates an important recent change in ideas; a shift from considering women and gender relations within the framework of development to considering these issues in a truly international way – North and South, East and West, in which the context is not one of 'development' (see, for example, Grant and Newland, 1991; or Rowbotham and Mitter, 1994). This is a serious shift, as most researchers in this area have for a long period been working within a gender and development framework; i.e. examining the development process through a gender lens, and assessing development from a gender perspective.

Why is this shift important? First, because increasingly, the agenda of development is becoming more and more restrictive. Development increasingly means the set of economic and social policies, often, though not always, dreamed up outside countries where they are applied by a set of international experts – which are intended to affect the *material condition* of people, both men and women. Development means intervention by a development agency – a state, an international organisation, an NGO, in the lives of (poor) people with the laudatory aim of improving their situation – of meeting their basic needs.

Although this endeavour – of improving the lives and prospects of people for whom development policy is designed – is laudable, the ways in which 'gender policies' have been integrated increasingly leave one feeling as if such policies exist almost purely on paper. The international organisations, the research and teaching organisations, the well-meaning NGOs have put 'women on the agenda'; bilateral

and multilateral agencies are insisting that their staff have gender awareness training; technical assistance projects are monitored for their gender impact; there are women – even some feminists – who have achieved important positions in the hierarchy of these organisations. Nevertheless, the feeling remains that in spite of what they say, gender policies are not making sense, nor any difference in the usual activities of these organisations (IDS Bulletin, 1995).

Increasingly, one is left with the feeling that the important contexts and issues which affect women's lives lie outside of this 'development' world, in the *realpolitik* of international relations on the one hand, and in the policymaking international fora on the other, which while determining the direction and magnitude of international financial flows, cannot really be called development organisations. Both set parameters and constraints on macroeconomic and social policy in developing and other countries. In these contexts, together with the private lives of households, families and communities where gender relations and identities are constructed, women are seen as the problem at the heart of poverty, underdevelopment, environmental degradation, population growth, or – or even simultaneously – as the solution.

In this chapter, some of the major issues relating to gender and social policy in an international perspective are outlined, and an analytical framework is suggested which might help to forge policies in the 1990s and beyond.

GLOBAL INSECURITY AND COMMUNITY SOCIAL POLICY

First, the problem of global insecurity itself needs to be considered. The end of the cold war has not meant a cessation in international or intranational armed and military conflict; on the contrary, the world is witnessing an escalation in the number of armed confrontations – both high- and low-intensity conflicts – in the Gulf, Kurdhistan, Central America, Somalia, Bosnia, Palestine, Tajekistan, Mozambique, Angola, India, Sri Lanka, Peru and Rwanda/Burundi. These conflicts cover a wide range of political situations. Some of them are still echoes of the conflicts between the ex-superpowers seeking a political regime which reflects their ideological or strategic interests; others represent struggles for hegemony within national states, or struggles to destroy the patterns of former national states and replace them with new political entities. Still others represent struggles to assert or replace

regional, ethnic or religious domination within old or new state structures.

The end of the old world order has ushered in a new world disorder, in which insecurity rather than security, armed conflict rather than 'democratic' or other political forms are the principal means of articulating conflicting interests. While one has been conditioned to think of war and armed conflict in the twentieth century as being exceptional, the possibility has to be faced that it may be becoming the norm, the actual reality for increasing portions of the world's population (Tickner, 1992).

Armed conflict and military action are not the only ways in which global insecurity is changing the parameters of the world order. In many situations where there is not (as yet) overt military conflict, the old structures of the state are disappearing, or have disappeared, or are in the process of extreme modification. The most obvious example is the former Soviet Union, the least obvious is the curtailment of local government in the United Kingdom. The role of the supernational organisations within the United Nations system is also changing. It is increasingly required to play a belligerent – if policing – role within inter- and intranational conflicts, with its development activities marginalised in favour of operational activities and emergency actions.

What are the implications of the recognition that armed conflicts and the emergency state are becoming the norm rather than the exception? One of the most direct ways in which this affects women is how they carry out biological reproductive activities – conceiving and having babies. Normally, when we talk of reproduction, we generally refer to forms of social reproduction: nurturing infants and children, reconstituting male and female labour power on a daily as well as a generational basis, looking after those who are unable to use their labour power to secure (part) of their own reproduction costs – the sick, the infirm and the elderly (Sen, 1994). The conditions for carrying out these activities are constantly inadequate, and the assumptions about the financial resources made available for these activities are one of the major problems of male-biased economic and social policies in many countries.

However, the focus here is on other elements of women's reproductive role – sexuality and childbirth – which ironically have often been absent from feminist analyses of development, or from international relations.[1] A Ugandan woman told me the following story, in the context of a conversation about the reproductive responsibilities of

women compared to men. She told of a friend and colleague who was pregnant during the civil war in Uganda in the early 1980s. The woman had a breach baby. But at the point at which she went into labour, there was a curfew and as a result the baby was born with no medical attention, causing great suffering and damage to the mother, and causing irreversible and considerable brain damage to the baby, who requires constant physical care. The woman later had a second, healthy child. The husband tried to subject the disabled daughter to traditional healers, which the mother considered harmful and which she opposed. As a result, the husband deserted her, took the healthy child with him, and provides no material support for the mother or the child left with her.

Armed conflict can thus destroy all the material advances of social policies and investment which are designed to offer appropriate services for women fulfilling their reproductive role in childbirth. As is known, in the former Yugoslavia even a relatively sophisticated infrastructure of health and other services can be annihilated by conflict. But services do not have to be destroyed by armed conflict – they just have to be removed from the reach of women needing them by military blockades, by curfews, by destruction of communications or transport, by the interruption of the whole social fabric on which they depend.

In analysing social policies we should therefore take into account two aspects which this example illustrates; first, that regardless of the rhetoric about the priority of social policies to support women's reproductive role, these services will be suspended because of military and political conflict, which is becoming a more common reality in global terms. However, women's reproductive activities cannot be suspended. Therefore, policies and services which are *sustainable* within communities need to be considered, rather than relying on the provision of centralised services which, despite their efficiency in conventional economic terms, cannot be guaranteed during emergencies.

A second aspect related to the implications of global insecurity is the issue of *sexuality*. Even in times which we have learned to think of as normal, women's control over their sexuality – including the circumstances and the conditions under which they allow or enjoy sexual activity – is severely constrained by patriarchal gender relations. In a war or conflict situation even socially accepted patterns are destroyed as rape becomes a mechanism in which women's sexuality is used instrumentally to further strategic or political ends.

In Europe we cannot ignore the fact that the rape of women across social and age ranges has been used as a deliberate policy by Serbs (and perhaps by other groups) in an attempt to dominate and/or eliminate the viability and claims of minority populations. Systematic use of rape as part of military action is an acknowledged feature of military conflict in many contexts; it was used in military action in Uganda in the 1980s, and in the war in East Bengal in 1968 which resulted in the establishment of the State of Bangladesh; we know that rape was used against minority groups in Kuwait during the Gulf war; we know that both sides raped women in occupied and liberated parts of the war theatre during and after the Second World War.

Rape and other forms of sexual humiliation and torture have been a commonplace practice during the 'dirty wars' against the left wing 'enemy within' in Argentina and the left in Chile in the 1970s; Amnesty International has documented the use of rape and sexual torture against political prisoners by government security forces in many countries in the world (Amnesty International, 1995). It is probably only the fact that the electronic media have given the rest of the world contemporaneous knowledge of the ongoing situation in the former Yugoslavia which has made it a matter of discussion at international fora such as the EU and the UN; most of the widespread abuses by armed forces only come to the attention of the rest of the world some time after they are committed. Using physical power to appropriate women's capacity for sexuality and biological reproduction is currently manifested when the rape of Bosnian Muslims is justified in terms of forcing them to reproduce Serbian babies rather than Muslims.

However, the *alienation* of women's sexual and biological capacity is best illustrated by a statement of the Pope that women who become pregnant as the result of rape in Bosnia should not terminate these pregnancies, but accept and nurture the child. What can 'safe motherhood' mean when it is clear that it does not include any notion that women themselves should have some say over the conditions in which they exercise their reproductive capacities? If the objectives of safe motherhood are defined in terms of the priorities of the community, nation or collectivity, or even of 'development', not even a beginning has been made to formulate a social policy which affords women any kind of agency or subjectivity in carrying out their reproductive activities.

A third implication of global insecurity concerns the modification and in some cases the withdrawal of the state itself from social policies.

This is most clear in situations of drastic political change and conflict. Many of the social policies which have tried to ensure that women are taken into account and are gender sensitive, assume the existence of a state which has powers of resource allocation, powers of political and social support for 'liberal' equality and judicial fairness, has powers to initiate proactive and prefigurative action to protect women and to direct social change in the interests of women and gender equity. Examples include campaigns against dowry murder, domestic violence, and innovative policies to provide credit to women microentrepreneurs, to provide housing and income generation opportunities for female-headed households, and to increase educational opportunities for girls.

Increasingly, however, such social policies and campaigns will be conducted in situations where the state has changed, has died or has transformed itself into something else. The enabling and supporting state which offers some kind of juridical backdrop for social policy is being replaced by a state which regulates to preserve the opportunities for individual entrepreneurs and private organisations (including NGOs) against the encroachment of a powerful and counteracting state. Instead of a national campaign aimed at the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare which otherwise would provide the bench mark for gender-aware health and social security policy, the current reality is more likely to be a campaign aimed at a range of individual providers and private organisations, including NGOs (many of which are more effective and women-friendly than parallel state structures).

The point is that the state is no longer a central arbiter of standards and policies which have some universal applicability. This situation will drastically alter the ways in which policies which are designed to redress gender inequalities can be promoted.

THE INSTRUMENTAL USE OF WOMEN

A second feature of global change and insecurity is reflected by the macro-level policy environments of the 1990s in which women are incorporated into policy agendas, using women as instrumental solutions to 'development' or 'social' problems rather than assigning any subjectivity to women themselves.

There are two interconnecting fields in which such issues are relevant, which are discussed here; population growth and environmental degradation. In both these areas, it is clear that the recognition that women are central to the issue and therefore are to be influenced

by policy in order to achieve solutions, is not premised on any understanding of women's agency in biological and social reproduction nor in the reproduction of the environment. Women are viewed instrumentally as part of the problem and thus of the solution.

Population growth

Because major policy institutions are concerned about the rate of population increase and the (often erroneous) association of overpopulation with underdevelopment, the introduction of family planning policies has been part of the conditionality of structural adjustment programmes introduced by the World Bank. Very often these are couched in terms of the necessity to promote maternal and child health, though in some cases it is clear that this is not the major objective of such policies. In Bolivia the Bank carried out a study in 1987 in which it maintained that an important obstacle to reducing population growth and high levels of fertility was the limited diffusion of contraceptives in the country. The document stated:

> The reduction of fertility has high priority for humanitarian, equity and economic reasons. The maternal and infant mortality and morbidity is strictly related to frequent births, poorly spaced, and is concentrated in poor families. The high rates of population growth exert strong pressures on the still insufficient capacity of employment creation and public sector services and impede the growth in per capita income. It is therefore a crucial necessity to satisfy the increasing demand for contraceptives for families who wish to use them but are not doing so. This can be achieved via horizontal and vertical programmes and integrated programmes of subsidised sales (to increase the supply of contraceptives via the pharmacies) and increasing female literacy.

(Cited in Rance, 1990: 19–20)[2]

So the policy framework which is concerned about high population growth wishes to increase access to contraception in order to reduce the fertility rate – and the infant and maternal mortality rate of 'poor families' – which are an impediment to economic growth. Female literacy is a goal only to the extent that demographers and others widely believe that reduction in fertility is strongly correlated with increases in female literacy.[3]

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Such policy windfalls for women are at best conditional and at worst misguided, given that the conditions under which family planning services are made available can range from the coercive to the supportive. The conditionality arises from the fact that such programmes do not increase women's ability to determine the conditions and circumstances under which they exercise their sexuality and their biological reproductive activities.

It is unclear at this moment what will happen to the considerable developments of family planning programmes in Bolivia, now that the interim results of the population census indicate that the rate of population growth is considerably lower than the estimates on which the World Bank's policy is formulated (Pearson and Durrant, 1992). In many other countries, governments have adopted pro-natalist policies to support a national priority of *population growth* rather than reduction, where incentives to reproduce are targeted at educated women, rather than the poor and illiterate.

The assumption that two policy targets can be reached with a single policy instrument – what the World Bank has called 'win-win' policies – are deeply flawed from the point of view of gender equity, however. Using women's literacy and education as a leverage to affect levels of fertility rather than underwriting any commitment to support redistribution of resources to women's education and healthcare is a cynical reflection of the instrumentality of international development agencies' commitment to putting women on the development agenda.

Such policies disregard the actual conditions under which women exercise their sexuality and reproductive functions: gender relations in which women using contraception are equated with promiscuity, constructions of masculinity which are linked to high levels of marital fertility, and a political context which historically has not distinguished between coercive population control and family planning as a reproductive right.

Environmental degradation

The second area of global change and insecurity to be discussed here concerns environmental degradation. Again, it has been common to link the policy implications of macro issues – poverty alleviation, environmental conservation and women and development in what the United Kingdom's Overseas Development Administration (ODA) has termed 'synergistic interventions':

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[The] identification of *synergistic interventions* which will act simultaneously on population–environment–poverty problems presents an obvious way forward. Improving the rights and livelihoods of women, or the wider notion of Primary Environmental Care, may be promising approaches.

(ODA, 1991, original emphasis, cited in Jackson, 1992: 18)

The problems with this approach are two-fold. First of all, it presents policies to support women's income earning opportunities solely in the context of their instrumentality in wider (more important) goals such as 'population–environment–poverty'. This is a potentially dangerous strategy, since it assumes there are no contradictions in this approach and that what is good for the environment will be good for women and vice versa.

However, if one considers the *reality* of the ways in which gender relations impinge on the practices and processes of livelihood systems which affect the environment, it is clear that there is not necessarily an automatic identity between women's interests and the interests of environmental conservation. The ways in which women relate to the land and natural resources are mediated through both class and gender identities. The relationship also changes with age and stages in the life-cycle, so that a uniform category of women as the instrumental access to environmental conservation is misplaced. Existing patterns of kinship and land tenure in fact will often mean that women's relationship with the land is temporary and mediated through marriage, so that they do not have any notion of long-term benefits from investing in conservation.

An example from Zimbabwe shows that where women work land only in the context of virilocal marriage, commitment to land improvement practices, such as building contour ridges and planting trees, are not rational for women. They are unlikely individually – or through their children – to reap any long-term benefit from them (Jackson, 1992: 29–30). Even where women depend on tree products for fuel wood for cooking, they may have no role in tree planting because of the nature of gender relations. Moreover, the necessity for women to obtain cash incomes leads many to undertake domestic beer-brewing, which requires the slow burning of fresh green wood rather than the dry dead foliage and wood used in domestic cooking.

There is no single relationship between women and nature, and attempts by policymakers to assume one are done at the expense of

examining the complex reality of gendered activities which should be the guide to appropriate and gender-sensitive social policy.

CONCLUSIONS

What conclusions can one draw from this analysis? Aspects of global change and insecurity which in my view are central to the analysis of gender and social policy in the 1990s and which can be useful as a background for the following chapters are as follows. Social and economic policy must be informed by a comprehensive and contextualised understanding of the varied and conflicting nature of gender relations in different situations, rather than relying on some universal and timeless whole into which policies about women can be rhetorically dropped.

In spite of the increase of gender terminology in official rhetoric, it is not clear at the level of the macro policy environment that much progress has been made in this direction. The inclusion of the realities of women's reproductive activities against a backdrop of increasing global conflict and change in the 1990s, serves to illustrate the gap between the rhetoric and the reality.

We are confronted with the *presence* of women in the discourse. But their presence is not premised on an analysis or understanding of the nature of their *reproductive work* – just assumptions about their *reproductive role*. Moreover, the abstraction of reproduction to an idealised rather than a concrete understanding of what it involves and how it gets done, means that much social policy is formulated on assumptions about *ideal models* of social relations and social institutions, rather than confronting the range of actually existing relations and institutions.

This trend can be identified throughout the debates and analyses of a range of policies – housing, income support, credit provision, family planning, childcare and transport. They invariably assume a two-adult, male-headed nuclear family, a non-working/income- generating woman, with dependent children where decisions are made 'in the interests of all household members' and resources are shared according to priority of need.

Policies designed to meet the needs of other groups – female-headed households, single mothers, divorced women, survivors of domestic violence, refugees, teenage women seeking abortions, homeless adolescents on the streets of London – are always made on the assumption that these groups are minority deviants from the domi-

may lead to policy stalemates because the failure to analyse gender relations seriously means that policy objectives are actually conflicting rather than complementary.

If changes in the policy context of the 1990s – including the recognition of continuing global conflicts, the transformed role of the state, the necessity for sustainable social and economic systems on a local as well as a global level – are to offer the possibility of transforming 'women and social policy' initiatives into initiatives that are honestly targeted at eliminating gender inequalities, then the reality of the range and complexity of gender relations needs to be recognised. This includes a realistic assessment of women's reproductive as well as productive work and the social relations which underlie them.

NOTES

1 Ironically, childbirth and sexuality have been absent from the discussions of women's reproductive work because, generally, discussion of the latter has been aimed to show the 'work-like' nature of such activity, its complementarity to productive work and therefore the necessity to include it in the macro and sectoral policy agenda. Also, feminists who have tried to utilise a materialist analysis of social relationships, including gender, have been careful to distance themselves from anything which might be dismissed as biological determinism and essentialism (see Sayers, 1982). As this debate has translated itself into development discourse, concern for improved maternal health, women's education and services to support women's nurturing role, and even to provide appropriate family planning services has not problematised women's relations with their sexual capacity or biological reproduction as a process or activity *in itself*. The fact that women are not only alienated from the products of their own reproductive activities – their children, and even their own labour – has been usefully discussed by Elson (1992). But this framework needs to be extended to problematise the autonomy women have over the conditions under which they have sexual intercourse, conceive and give birth, which is affected not just by interpersonal intrafamilial relations with male partners and other kin, but also by social norms, including socially legitimated or dissident religious beliefs and practices, the degree of autonomy they have to access information about reproductive health and practices, macro and sectoral economic and social policies which dictate the priority and absolute expenditure on health and other relevant services, *and* issues of international (in)security and military strategy which can override all of the above.

2 The fact that the political debate about family planning in Bolivia forced the Bank to modify this document – although not to modify its