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Introduction, Feminist Solidarity and Collective Action

Caroline Sweetman

'. . . rather than hundreds or thousands of women who identify with a particular agenda rushing around incoherently doing different things, movement-created organisations help them create coherent, cohesive, planned actions that can have greater effect'
(Batliwala 2012, 17).

This issue of *Gender & Development*, on Feminist Solidarity and Collective Action, goes into the realm of power and politics, to examine the links between the women's movement and feminist ideas and practices on the one hand, and international development organisations and their work on the other. Both feminist activists and progressive development draw on ideas about challenging inequality through mobilisation and solidarity. They emphasise the need to draw on collective power - 'power-with' – to overcome the 'power-over' of domination by elites. Social, economic and political change can come from individuals realising their common interest in challenging unequal power relations, and asserting their full and equal rights as members of society.

Feminist solidarity and collective action are both aims in their own right, and ways of working to attain gender justice and women's rights, not only in developing countries but also in the global North. As concepts and ideals, feminist solidarity and collective action have relevance for development workers and researchers working on gender issues at all levels: from programme planning and implementation with grassroots women to further practical goals in ways which foster solidarity, to campaigning and advocacy undertaken in coalition with women's movements on issues ranging from food security, the rights of women workers, to protecting women victims of gender-based violence. This issue of *G&D* focuses on how the ideals of the feminist movements have been heard, absorbed and responded to by development and humanitarian policy and practice: both as ends in themselves, and as critical elements in the process of attaining economic, political and social rights for all.

As stated above, the concepts of feminist solidarity and collective action are founded on beliefs about the role of individuals in engaging with others to bring about radical, visionary change, standing and acting together. Articles here examine how insights about solidarity and the role of groups in the collective empowerment of

women have been adopted – and, critically, adapted. Their translation from feminist theory and practice to development practice has significant implications, since it determines the extent to which development interventions are actually able to support the feminist goals of gender equality and women's rights.

Authors whose research and experience are featured here highlight the need to understand the complex inequalities which shape women's and girls' lives, and the structural barriers which constrain their space to challenge gender-based marginalisation, discrimination and abuse. Development organisations and states working on gender issues need to collaborate more, and better, with the women's movements and feminist groups, working to further their interests and lobby for institutional change.

Women's movements invested great hope in the mass adoption of gender mainstreaming as a strategy for transforming human development at Beijing[1]. The vision which informed gender mainstreaming came from feminists, and organisations adopting it as a way of working are answerable to them.

The message of this collection of articles is clear. Development workers can best, and most sustainably, support the goals of gender justice and women's rights by working to support women – not only as individuals, but collectively - to challenge gender inequality. This means resourcing and supporting feminist activists at all levels: from women's groups at grassroots level, to international women's movements advocating change in global governance and understandings of human development. It also means supporting men working to advance feminist goals through challenging patriarchal attitudes and beliefs[2].

Defining our terms: collective action and feminist solidarity

Collective action involves women discussing their lives, analysing their shared experiences of injustice and oppression, and developing common goals. Fundamentally, it is about understanding and challenging gender-specific constraints on women's options, which prevent them from achieving their true potential. In gender and development literature on women's empowerment, collective association and action is depicted as politically essential in supporting them to challenge male oppression (Kabeer 2003). The company of women represents an alternative form of social network which enables individual women to move away from dependency on the traditional social relations available to them via engagement with the family, marriage and the household. Collective association and sharing of experience challenges women's isolation, 'outs' women's sense of injustice, and raises hopes that gender relations can, and should, change.

Collective action is a concept which is familiar to all development policymakers and planners, and community activists, regardless of whether they are politically right-wing or left-wing, see themselves as feminists, or work on specific interventions promoting gender justice or women's rights. Development organisations committed to

rights-based approaches to development have developed ways of working which support and encourage people living in poverty and marginalised from decision-making to find the strength and solidarity to tackle gender, class and race-based structures of constraint as they experience these working in their lives. Developing a sense of entitlement and realising that change is possible is a key part of empowerment processes, which were a major focus of attention for progressive development organisations from the 1980s onwards.

The idea of political claims groups achieving change 'from below' and rendering states accountable to them has been expressed more recently in the idea of 'active citizenship' (Green 2008) – which can be seen as an individualistic notion, but which is paradoxically also the basis for much feminist activism in different regions worldwide[3]. Taking action to assert one's entitlement and rights may feel impossible for individual women or men whose lives are shaped by economic and social factors which constrain them from taking action in isolation. A sense of empowerment arises from collective association and action, and this process has been well-documented in the gender and development literature: 'From a state of power-lessness that manifests itself in a feeling of ''I cannot'', empowerment contains an element of collective self-confidence that results in a feeling of ''we can''' (Kabeer 1994, 245).

Feminist solidarity can be defined broadly as the principle of mutual support between individuals, groups and organisations working on gender equality and women's rights. The word 'feminist' is used to refer to advocating or supporting the rights and equality of women (Oxford Dictionary of English 2010, 642). Language is itself a tricky political concern, but whether development workers or activists in different parts of the women's movements choose to identify as feminists or not, when they work on these issues they are pursuing feminist goals.

Feminist writers on women's empowerment emphasise the importance of building feminist consciousness through women's groups. Collective action does not necessarily begin around a clear political vision of feminist change. There are different views on the extent to which individual women are aware of the full picture of gender inequality, rooted in different understandings of consciousness of power and the way it operates, and of their interest in challenging gender inequality.

Feminist solidarity strengthens the power of women to challenge gender-based violence, abuse, marginalisation and poverty. Through taking action collectively, women can draw on their pooled skills, knowledge and resources, enabling them to take courses of action which would not be available to individuals. It also enables them to lessen the risks associated with isolated resistance. Collective action has a long history in feminist action in both post-industrialised and developing contexts (as can be seen from analyses from the 1980s – for example, Jayawardena 1986).

Gender and development and feminist visions

Gender and development was developed by feminists working in research, policy-making and practice whose aim was to show that the empowerment of women living in poverty in the global South should be both an end in itself, and a means of attaining the goal of dignified and sustainable human development for all. In the wake of women in development (WID) approaches of the 1980s which focused only on including women in existing visions of unequal development, gender and development as a field of research, policy and practice was informed by a powerful analysis of gender-, race- and class-based inequality, and saw feminist solidarity and collective action as key to its vision. Feminist writings from inside and outside international development focused on the need for policymakers to support programming which empowered women as a collective marginalised group, not only as a goal but as a means of working. It called for priority to be given to support women's movement-building in the global South, and suggested that the role of international development donors should be to resource the home-grown political activism of Southern women to enable them to shape development decisions at all levels (Moser 1989).

This ideal was of course rarely enacted in practice, due to the power dynamics between the global South and North which make international development organisations very much more powerful to determine priorities than the Southern women's groups they were supposed to be supporting. Over the past thirty years, connections between the feminist movements which gave birth to gender and development, and development organisations themselves, have loosened. Trust between feminists working in development organisations and feminists working 'outside' in the wider women's movements cannot be assumed. Diversity among feminists – including diversity along the lines of race, class, political and religious creeds – creates different views about progress on women's rights and gender equality.

Gender and development has become depoliticised in the eyes of many feminists working in the wider women's movements worldwide. The agenda of international development all too often continues to focus only on women's rights and gender inequality when these can be seen as important to achieve other aims: economic growth, reduced fertility, and other goals which have little to do with the goals of extending the choices of women and girls to determine their own lives, or with human development with equality, human dignity and sustainability (Sandler and Rao 2012).

At the same time, there is currently a backlash against much of the progress on women's rights made in the 1990s, amid complex economic, social and political crises. International development organisations that are serious about women's rights and gender equality need to do more than they are currently doing to support the international, national and local women's movements who are developing political responses to the crises as they play out in different contexts. This involves feminists

with different identities and locations working in solidarity to protect advances made on women's rights, and take them forward.

The role of women's movements in effecting change

Recognising the role of women's movements and their contribution to political, economic and social change is a critical part of examining collective action and feminist solidarity. Gender and development can support feminist movement-building by channelling much-needed resources to women's feminist organisations and grassroots groups: 'The project of women's empowerment is dependent on women's organisations, and social movements in particular have an important role to play in creating the conditions for change and in reducing the costs for the individual' (Kabeer 2000, 457).

Despite the challenges to activism coming from difference between women, women's movements (variously identifying as feminist or not) have made strides towards the attainment of structural gender equality in many countries. In their article here, Mala Htun and Laurel Weldon present evidence from a study of 70 countries from 1975–2005, which reveals that the most important and consistent factor in policy changes on violence against women in these countries was a strong, vibrant national women's movement, which used international and regional conventions and agreements to influence policy reforms. They observe, 'Strong local movements bring home the value of global norms on women's rights' (this issue, 231). From the point of view of development practitioners and policymakers reading this article, the 'take-home' point – to support women's movements to grow, flourish and transform their contexts with home-grown solutions – should be clear.

Many feminist organisations who identify as part of global women's movements focus on campaigning to change hearts and minds about key issues of importance for them, or embark on actions to hold governments to account, pressing for women's full and equal rights. Some of this advocacy aims to promote reform of structures of governance to ensure that key institutions uphold women's claims to resources – including not only material resources, but the law and social services – in such a way as to promote women's strategic gender interests (Goetz 2003), and effect structural transformation - for example, to the law and legal systems - with the object of enabling women to live lives in which their full potential is realised.

The collective grassroots political action of women at all levels of society is a crucial complementary force to formal political participation where this exists, and a key mode of political activism for women in states where it does not. The state may play a role in conjunction with grassroots action, or in sequence with it. In her article, Amy Dunckel-Graglia focuses on the role of the state in supporting collective action by making the cityscape safe for women. In Mexico City, violence against women on public transport and in streets was preventing women from acting collectively. In order for them to confront the violence, they needed the state to take initial measures to

protect them, while they confronted their attackers and the general cultural acceptance of male violence against women: 'Finding a sustainable solution to safe transport for women demands feminist action to challenge gender inequality, and this demands feminist action and solidarity between the city authorities, and women's organisations – both state machineries, and civil society feminist movements' (this issue, 266).

In their article, Selina Mudavanhu and Jennifer Radloff focus on another city-focused feminist initiative, in Cape Town, South Africa. The 'Keep Saartjie Baartman Centre open' e-campaign aimed to create sufficient support to lobby the city authorities to keep a shelter for abused women open in the face of cuts to funding. This article is a fascinating account of e-activism in a world in which global mass action is possible, on issues of concern ranging from the global to the local.

Collective action from the top down: women's rights in socialist states

A key aspect of collective action is that it is seen as a strategy for change which emphasizes the power of women and men at the grassroots. The ways in which feminist solidarity and women's collective action were taken up by socialist states and delivered by centrally-led state machinery have been documented by feminist political scientists over the decades. In some countries, transition from Communism has created a challenge for feminists since women's rights were closely associated with the former regime (Molyneux 1991). In their article in this issue, Gabi Waibel and Sarah Gluck, focus on a little-studied example. Their article looks at the Vietnam Women's Union (VWU): one of the oldest and largest machineries for women's issues in the world. The article explores how this state-led, top-down mass membership organisation in a socialist state is currently responding to the agenda of gender equality, to address the realities of women's daily lives and gender relations in Vietnam. It considers the very interesting question of the extent to which a mass state-led organisation is able to address feminist solidarity.

Putting collective action and feminist solidarity into practice

In her analysis for the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) of the concepts and practices of feminists worldwide, Srilatha Batliwala maps out a complex terrain on which different movements and organisations work on women's rights (2012), and explores the role of international development organisations in supporting – or, at worst, hindering - progress. This section focuses on how collective action and feminist solidarity have been integrated and understood – or are missing – from development policy and practice.

The roles of development organisations, gender and development policymakers and practitioners, and feminist activists should be complementary, if the messages of

transformational gender mainstreaming have truly begin to flow along the 'mainstream' of development. However, the range of different strategies adopted in the name of gender mainstreaming in development shows how much more complicated real life is. Feminist notions of solidarity and collective action are, of course, key to 'stand-alone' development work with women, whose main goal is to further women's rights and gender equality, but 'gender mainstreaming' in work in different development sectors – and perhaps most notably in work focusing on production and livelihoods – has also adopted and adapted them.

Meanwhile, feminists working inside development organisations often feel unsupported and beleaguered as they grapple with the challenges of getting their institutions to shift from integrating gender analysis into programmes with little or no impact on the structural inequalities which shape the lives of poor women in the global South, to a more transformative way of working which genuinely supports those women to make real changes to their status, as well as their practical daily lives.

Empowerment without solidarity: approaches focusing on individuals, not groups

Many programmes undertaken with women, ostensibly to 'empower' them, do *not* focus on solidarity and collective action. The relationship between meeting women's practical need for resources of different kinds – from money, to land, to education and learning – and furthering their strategic interests in challenging gender inequality has been much debated in feminist research in development. While controlling material resources has been linked to empowerment of individual women – increasing their bargaining power within marriage and the household, and enabling them to have a stronger voice in intra-household decision-making – to claim that this will lead to wider societal change is to make a very complex, context-specific chain of processes much more simple than it actually is. Naila Kabeer suggests that 'individual empowerment is an important starting-point for processes of social transformation, but unless it leads to some form of structural change it will do little to undermine the systemic reproduction of inequality' (Kabeer 2003, 175).

It is quite possible to dream up development interventions – the obvious example being micro-finance – that focus on supporting an individual woman to increase her control over resources, without giving attention to the vital elements of social, economic and political transformation which will only occur in response to women demanding these changes as a collective marginalised group. Missing from these politically conservative development programmes which focus on women making their own way in the current economic and social system is a feminist analysis of structural subordination under patriarchy – and intersecting analyses of marginalisation based on race and class. Changes need to be made at all levels of society, and to do this requires empowered women acting as a constituency.

Currently, women's movements are fighting to preserve the real gains in women's rights made in the 1980s and 1990s – many of which are off the radar of those neo-liberal development donors (including not only international financial institutions, but business corporations) who currently see it as 'smart economics' to invest in developing and resourcing young, dynamic women – without focusing on dismantling structural barriers to their progress (Chant and Sweetman 2012). In the absence of opportunities for decent work, provision of high-quality health services, and a framework of legal and cultural change emphasising women's full and equal rights over their bodies, lives and futures, real widespread change for women cannot be achieved.

Working in solidarity as 'movement-allies'

Taking feminist solidarity and collective action into account as both ways of working and as goals in their own right requires working in equal partnership with women's movements, respecting their expertise and their legitimacy in representing their constituents. In advocacy and campaigning this translates into working as 'movement-allies' (Batliwala 2012, 18), in solidarity with women's movements. This role requires respect for their right to lead, and for their legitimacy in representing their constituents, their expertise and their experience.

The rights of workers are taken up by activist organisations including unions, but working to support the collective action of women workers involves particular challenges, due to the nature of their work. In their article, Naila Kabeer, Kirsty Milward and Ratna Sudarshan focus on the experience of women workers' organisations furthering the rights of their members to decent and dignified work. It focuses on the challenges facing organisation among the hardest-to-reach working women in the informal economy. They point out that the complex disadvantage that these women face, not only from gender inequality but from a combination of other identity-based forms of discrimination. They face fear – of losing their livelihoods, of violent reprisals, and of losing their means of survival by alienating those who give them the means to eke out an existence, while exploiting them.

Part of being an effective movement ally is ensuring that mainstream organisations working to further social justice themselves integrate a concern for gender equality, so that their work is complementary to the work of women's movements. In their article, titled 'Why gender matters in activism: feminism and social justice movements', Manjima Bhattacharjya, Jenny Birchall, Pamela Caro, David Kelleher and Vinita Sahasranaman focus on recent case studies developed as a part of a research programme on gender and social movements. Feminist action aimed to change the nature of the work of the three social movements featured in the article, to include gender equality principles and practices. The social movements are the global human

rights movement (with a focus on Amnesty International), the CLOC-Via Campesina movement in Latin America, and the Occupy movement in the US.

Exploring collective action in transformative community work with women

Development and humanitarian work with women living in poverty can be planned and implemented in ways which support incipient activism on the part of women and girls (and men and boys), moving beyond a focus on practical issues to work in ways which spot the potential in their work to improve women's status in society. This could be seen as 'movement-serving' (Batliwala 2012, 19), but feminist consciousness and solidarity can in fact develop from providing acutely resource-poor women with opportunities to meet and evolve strategies for collective action, so perhaps it is more accurately about supporting movement-building!

When working directly with communities, development and humanitarian workers need to focus on supporting what Kate Young (1993) termed the 'transformative potential' in interventions focusing on delivering other goals – for example water provision, food security or community education. Each of these can be designed and implemented in ways which give maximum support to the equal participation and leadership of women. They can also support feminist activism and the emergence of new movements by creating opportunities for women to organise as a group, enabling their strategic interest in challenging gender inequality in their own ways. This involves understanding the processes of feminist organising and movement building, founded in ideas about the collective and individual empowerment of women which come from decades of thought and activism from the women's movement.

Collective action in livelihoods programming is an important theme in this issue. In situations in which women are desperate to put food on the table, any kind of activity which does not solve this immediate practical issue may be impossible. Creating opportunities for women to come together and simultaneously provide for themselves and their dependents while in each other's company is an important act of supporting the growth of feminist solidarity. If it is feasible to find an economic activity which is possible for women to do together as a group, and where the profits of larger-scale production and joint marketing yield better returns than income-generating as individuals, an opportunity is created to work together. The possibility arises that this will lead to collective actions to further women's strategic interests as a marginalised economic and social group.

In her article in this issue, Sally Baden discusses Oxfam's experience of consciously fostering opportunities for women to engage in collective action in African agricultural markets. As she highlights, collective ways of working can create a comparative advantage for a group of women producing and marketing their products together. Women may use collective action to redress market imperfections, for example to

provide common marketing for small-scale producers. But beyond economic benefits, membership of a producer group can create bonds between women which previously did not exist, and generate social cohesion and security. Often, women's groups formed around livelihoods may become politicised and become 'claims groups' (Heyer et al 2002). This is particularly important for women whose lives are characterised by extreme poverty and the lack of time which accompanies the struggle to make a living and care for dependents. In such a situation, finding an economic rationale for collective association may make it possible for women to build feminist solidarity with each other.

Diversity among women: diversity among feminists

Recently, there has been growing attention from gender and development researchers and practitioners to the power dynamics which lead some women to exert power over others, and lead some women to appear to support gender inequality, rather than challenge it, by supporting particular political or religious groups. The scholar and activist Chandra Mohanty (2003) pointed out: 'cross-cultural feminist work must be attentive to the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as to the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes'. She visualised solidarity between women based on a 'vision of equality attentive to power differences within and among the various communities of women'. What is needed is a formula for solidarity and shared action which sees difference not as a challenge, but as an integral part – and further, a strength - of women working as a movement.

In their article, Kristy Ward and Vichhra Mouyly discuss the experience of women involved in an NGO-funded women's empowerment project in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Women involved in the project encounter ideas about community development and urban poverty reduction – in particular, outsider-imposed notions of self-help group formation, women's empowerment and community solidarity. They suggest that more attention needs to be paid to unequal power and diversity among women which can can derail ideas of solidarity and shared interests in women's self-help groups. Women will differ in the extent to which they prioritise furthering their shared 'gender' interests in asserting women's rights; in some contexts, other aspects of identity feel more salient to them and seem to have more impact on their lives. Thus, willingness and ability to pursue feminist action cannot be assumed.

Feminist solidarity is often strongest and most courageous in places where struggles for women's equal rights take place under a different name, by informal groups of women working in tightly-constrained or even dangerous conditions, as part of other liberation efforts or organising around other concerns. Sometimes feminist solidarity is covert among a few individuals facing extreme poverty or violence, supporting someone facing crisis who needs sisterhood and acceptance when it matters most. Whether it takes place in a slum, in an office or on the internet using

social media, feminist solidarity is defined by individuals (most often women, but sometimes men) founded in a shared commitment to taking collective action to promote women's rights and gender justice. They share a determination to understand the gender politics behind the economic, political and social marginalisation and abuse of women in different contexts, analyse how difference between women plays out also to make the picture more complex and nuanced; and ultimately to dismantle the discrimination and marginalisation which constrain the lives of women and girls.

Another area which was focused on in depth in a recent issue of *Gender & Development* is the role of men in feminist activism[4]. In this issue, Kate Bojin focuses on qualitative research into men's experience of working in feminist solidarity with women's movements.

Conclusion

Feminist solidarity has a long history and a complex present. Millions of women in both the global South and North use the word 'feminist' comfortably and often; other women see it as an alien term, but nevertheless have a strong instinctive analysis of gender-based inequality, expressing this in different terms.

It is feminist solidarity that is responsible for progress made in development and humanitarian organisations in analysing and addressing the causes of poverty and suffering through a gendered lens. During the 1960s and 1970s, feminists working in development organisations and in academic research institutions worked to raise the awareness of their colleagues of gender inequality in the global South, and the impact of gender-blind development programming which all too often resulted in women living in poverty facing new challenges borne out of their marginalisation from the key institutions which shaped the development process and its impact on women and men in their context. Feminist anthropologists and historians documented women's resistance to gender inequality in developing countries, while feminist economists emphasised the fact that global development rested on the largely unpaid and low status work on women in caring roles but also subsistence production.

This selection of articles is published at an interesting time for feminism. Many commentators and feminist activists are pointing to a resurgence of interest among new generations of young women in avowedly feminist activity and movement-building, in many countries throughout the world. Political activism is being undertaken by young women in places where feminism has had a bad name, or is seen as no longer relevant. Feminism has had its time in the doldrums in the past twenty years, with the hard-won gains of first- and second-wave feminists becoming simply part of the landscape inhabited by younger generations who take equal pay, the right to own property in their own right, and the right to participate in political processes for granted.

Feminist action has continued without such a break in other countries and regions where these foundation stones of gender equality are still not won, and responding to new challenges to the progress made thus far. Women's movements operating in line with principles of sisterhood and solidarity are fighting to preserve and extend freedoms and rights. Feminist activism places its faith in sisterhood and collective agency among women – that is, on 'power-with' as a means of building on and amplifying the agency of individuals – their 'power-to'. Transformative gender and development work needs to support these aims wholeheartedly, wherever and whenever possible.

Notes

1 See *Gender & Development* 20(3) Special issue on Beyond Gender Mainstreaming . . .
2 See *Gender & Development* 21(1) Special issue on Working with Men on Gender Equality.
3 See *Gender & Development* 19(3) Special issue on Citizenship.
4 See *Gender & Development* 21(1) Special issue on Working with Men on Gender Equality.

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