

# Feminism and Development

## Building the Discipline or Politicising It?

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**ABSTRACT:** Although initial contributions of Women's Studies to the field of Development Studies were to question existing concepts and assumptions and to offer new models and inclusive approaches, it appears that contemporary scholarship has shifted entirely (and even unapologetically) into political advocacy with little further in the way of social science or fresh critique and modelling. In Development Studies, Applied Anthropology and possibly in other subfields where gender concerns are presented in 'single-variable' or 'interest-group' perspectives, it may now be time to return to earlier goals through a depoliticisation of 'Feminist' and 'Women's' Studies, appropriately integrating 'Gender Studies' and concerns into subfields in ways that promote holistic advance of those fields. The essay uses two recent books with alternative examinations of feminism in developing societies – one on the area of 'development' and one on relations of two 'developed' countries, the U.S. and Russia – as springboards for a discussion of what has gone wrong and what can be changed in the sub-field of gender and Development Studies.

**KEYWORDS:** development, development studies, feminism, gender, social science

### Introduction

The rise of the Women's Movement and the entrance of Women's Studies into the university offered great potential for re-humanising the concept of 'development' for the promotion of the full human potential and spectrum of human diversity. Indeed, early proponents in this intellectual movement linked gender equality and women's perspectives with de-militarisation, de-colonialisation, challenge to hierarchies of all kinds, promotion of tolerance and nurturing, and freeing of creativity (Sturgeon 1997).

Now, decades later, with established courses on 'Women in Development', the rise of development agencies like UN Women and projects specifically geared to 'women' (rather than gender), and with major academic publishers offering full lines of books in this category, it is a good time to assess where this sub-field and all of the related kaleidoscope sub-fields studying 'women' and 'feminism' are headed and

what contributions they offer as part of a collective movement in academia. Indeed, while claiming to offer a challenge to Development Studies and other fields like Development Anthropology, Women's Studies (or 'Feminist Studies' and related permutations) can now be considered to be an institutionalised part of that system. That means it can also be held accountable for its successes and failures in promoting those earlier promised goals that seem to have almost entirely disappeared from Development Studies, including the field of Women's Studies.

Like other interest-group movements entering the university in a challenge to society to promote representation and offering the promise of transformation, Women's Studies presented opportunities for advances along with risks. Along with the entrance of studies of specific pan-continental immigrant groups and emergence of 'nationality' studies and 'identity studies' (that have also entered into the field of Development Studies as sub-fields), these approaches



presented opportunities for affirming individual identities and tolerance in ways consistent with human development objectives while promoting the full human potential for scientific inquiry and discovery along with creative expression. At the same time, they also threatened to transform disciplinary approaches into studies of single variables, detached from the whole, while promoting narcissism and self-interest; opening up already politicised institutions to new forms of politicisation rather than correcting the underlying problems.

### Where We Are Today: What Books on Women and Development Tell Us

If two recent books – Bhavnani et al.'s *On the Edges of Development* (2009) and Williams' *Imagining Russia* (2012) – are representative of the current state of Feminist Studies/Women's Studies/Gender Studies, this subfield may now have become almost the very thing it originally criticised: exclusive, political, closed and reinforcing of the ideologies of globalisation and environmental damage rather than promotion of diversity. Rather than renovating Development Studies, the addition of Women and Development may be accelerating the decline of Development Studies as a sub-field.

For the purpose of this essay, I have chosen these two books as representative samples. The Bhavnani book includes several authors and specifically addresses the topic of 'development' from a women's perspective. Williams' book is a recent award winner in feminist studies and is rare in that it focuses on a 'second world' country, Russia, and its 'development' relations with the U.S. Together, the two books represent a number of authors in the field, review and support by the field, and two areas of 'development' – that of both the 'Third World' and the 'Second World'. This short essay does not provide detailed reviews of those books, but they are available directly from the author in a longer review essay from which this piece is drawn.

What has gone wrong in these books and apparently throughout the field is not the politics of promoting feminism itself. As political essays, these works are welcome, particularly in their critiques of militarism and globalisation. The problem with the works is that despite being offered by academic presses and authored by academics as scholarly works, they are not scholarly. They do not advance social science or even do social science; and may in fact reject it. They partly offer the cultural critique or

thought experiment that is part of humanities scholarship, but the critiques are nothing new, just applications of previous critiques to new cases, which again places them in the category of essay and not scholarship. And outside of the issues of gender, they are in fact intellectually limited and possibly even ignorant, by design, of key concepts in development and rights or of existing skills and approaches in the field, including even the most basic understanding of sustainable development and culture. If Feminist Studies/Women's Studies/Gender Studies is to be engaged with other fields and able to renovate and broaden other disciplines, the authors need to show they understand even the basics of sustainable development and sustainability of cultures and environments, social change, development practice, 'deep structure' interpretation of cultures, and social science modelling. They do not. That is a serious problem for an academic sub-discipline.

*On the Edges of Development*, Bhavnani's co-edited volume of fifteen chapters (and twenty authors) starts out with the claim that it is an 'innovative volume that would look at development through fresh lenses' (Bhavnani et al. 2009: xiii) in an approach that is an alternative to 'top-down, elite-devised "modernisation" strategies' that do nothing more than link the "'civilising mission" of colonisation and the modernisation project of development' (2) and that offers a 'non-economistic development' that is not just the 'contested needs for resources' (1). All of this is welcome. But rather than offer the fresh lenses, the authors immediately admit that the 'volume does not offer prescriptions or "how to" formulae'. It only offers a way to 're-envision development ... building on the Women, Culture Development (WCD) paradigm' (5).

The authors of this book and others in the field suggest that they are offering 'interventions' and 'ideologies of resistance' (e.g. Ong 1987) to the hegemony and spiritual bankruptcy of globalisation and contemporary 'development'. In fact, their stories of female spirits or 'resistance rituals' – like the Queshaba of Jamaica (Chapter 2), the Urduja Filipino mythical warrior princess (Chapter 13) and the female icons like Mama Benz of West Africa (Chapter 11) – are not about resistance but simply about coping mechanisms of conquered communities.

Without the prescriptions and with just a paradigm that is, in fact, not fresh at all, the book is fourteen chapters of slogans, newly created jargon ('Westernity', 67; 'capitalics', 96), 'cultures of opposition' (143) that in fact have little to do with actual protection of sustainable cultures. It is as if the authors have no idea of how practically to confront development, lack any

training in the skills or tools of social or institutional change, and understand little more than a few theories of gender symbols. What is left here is either punditry or storytelling, by authors who really have no ability other than manipulating symbols and citing books.

Perhaps most shocking here is that in suggesting that it is offering alternatives and critiquing globalisation, this book actually justifies globalisation in the way that it denies cultural diversity and sustainability. In an ignorance of threats to indigenous peoples and to environments as well as to existing languages and communities, one of the authors here grossly redefines 'culture' as something 'formed through relationships' and a 'way to produce knowledge ... for making struggles' (62). Here, in a nutshell is the failure of Women's Studies/Feminism in Development. In defining itself simply as promoting benefits for women and 'gender equality', it has implicitly agreed to the agenda of globalisation that destroys cultural diversity and sustainability in favour of interest groups or 'identity politics' and of the idea of identities being malleable rather than deriving from culture, socialisation and genetics (236). What eco-feminists and female anthropologists and development professionals clearly understood but that the Women in Development approach presented in this book denies, is that gender roles need to be understood in environmental and cultural context in ways that create balance, or feminism itself has become a tool of globalisation and genocide.

*Imagining Russia*, Williams' book, is more direct in demonstrating how the politicisation of her agenda worked. She notes very clearly that her task is 'to make feminist sense of how and why [U.S. policy towards Russia after 1991] unfolded in the way it did [using] feminist/post-colonial development and international relations theorists' (Williams 2012: 40). Rather than start with facts and test a hypothesis or develop a theory, she has started with a political agenda and a task of forcing facts into a model to promote that agenda. In place of scholarship she offers newly created jargon ('imaginaries', 'mythscape') and heavy footnoting of secondary sources, the media and elites (46 pages of footnotes compared to 193 pages of text).

I praise the authors for the bold political statements they do make. It is refreshing to see feminism returning to its lost roots: critique of male aggression and destruction that continues to bring us to the edge of disappearance of our species and ruin of our planet. As political essays, I would love to read much of the insightful commentary found in these works and wish there were more journals open to such critiques (or that scholars would promote them and label them as

such). But these works do not meet the basic tests of scholarship. Footnotes and references to other scholars and the use of jargon do not make them scholarly. Neither of these books offers new theories or hypotheses that can be tested, or develops new explanatory models or offers new measurement tools.

### What Went Wrong: Reconnecting with Lost 'Gender and Development' Scholarship

Although initial contributions of Women's Studies to the field of Development Studies were to question existing concepts and assumptions and to offer new models and inclusive approaches to supplement and/or transform existing disciplines, it appears that contemporary scholarship has shifted into political advocacy with little further in the way of social science or fresh critique and modelling. More than three decades ago, even leading anthropologists who were keen on bringing issues of political and social equality into the discipline, in theory and applied areas (including Development), were warning the field that such an approach to introducing political perspectives could destroy the field by promoting a kind of anti-disciplinary 'obscurantism' (Harris 1979). Yet, today, it seems that not only is the lesson forgotten but there is almost a pride in doing so, as if destroying the idea of discipline and retreating into narrow almost narcissistic study, with ignorance of other fields, were the real goals.

### The Foundations of the Field

If there is a core of 'classic' works on Gender and Development Studies that was once, and should be again, at the basis of teaching and discussion of the topic, it would include works like Boserup's *Women's Role in Economic Development* (1970), Rogers', *The Domestication of Women* (1980) and some of the classic works on ecology (Carson 1962) and demographics (Handwerker 1990 by women authors. These works raised the fundamental questions of how human adaptation and technological change interacted with gender variables and opened up discussion on what alternatives for human cultures were possible. They generate inclusive models of society in which gender, demographics and biology are considered as different variables. Some case studies also began to raise issues of how gender could be manipulated by empires to achieve colonial 'development' objectives, such as

Massell's study of Soviet Russia in the 1920s in *The Surrogate Proletariat*; a good parallel to how 'women's rights' are being used today in globalisation (Massell 1974). While promoting the study of 'women', these authors did not call for the destruction of or replacement of discipline through politicisation or for ignorance of other fields for purposes of short-term self-interest.

In setting a basis for examining issues of gender and development (really, the 'human potential'), social science works that supplemented the basic studies of economics, environment, history and gender were those that looked at gender roles among primates and primate cultures (Van der Waal 1982) and in different societies (e.g. Leacock 1978; Mead 1928; Raphael 1975) to examine the breadth of what is possible.

## What Happened

A recent article by a self-described male feminist in *Anthropology in Action* went so far as to suggest that in becoming institutionalised in both the development profession and in the university, contemporary feminists had in fact agreed to sign on to the agenda of globalisation and neo-colonialism (and cultural genocide) in return for the placement of their own advancement high on the agenda (Duncan 2013). The piece argued that without demanding any changes at all in the structures of globalisation, including the university, and without confronting the male hierarchy that had promoted it, contemporary feminists were simply seeking to fill the same institutional positions with women and to promote their own interests. In the field of development and human rights, the author suggested that individual rights for women, imposing a top-down model from the first world, had usurped the agenda of cultural rights and sustainable development; diverting attention from genocide, ecocide, rise of corporate power, military power and State powers and replacing it simply with opportunity for women. He further argued that this agenda was being used not only to disrupt cultures but to exploit the labour of girls and elderly women for the global marketplace, to promote exploitation of women's labour in export processing zones and to use this purposefully to destroy family and community structures in ways that promoted the very development problems that Women's groups originally claimed that they, uniquely, could and would address.

At the same time, the author argued that the very introduction of 'feminism' (the name of a political viewpoint that he shared) into the university and the

development profession worked to legitimise not only the politicisation of scholarship but a process of undermining all forms of rule of law, standards and basis of discipline and objectivity that had been unleashed by globalisation. If any legal standards survived, it would simply be those protecting gender rights.

What is visible in these books are gender theories and quoting of other scholars as the means and ends. The works are top-down and apparently ignorant of how empires work, how cultures work and what a diverse, sustainable future might look like. They seem to be falling into the trap of seeking to recreate the world in their own image of urban identities in a world where women have positions but where processes of globalisation continue with little real challenge.

## Where Are We Today?

In writing this essay, the very difficulty of picking the right word for a sub-field highlights the problem. Are we studying the variable of gender in the context of Development or considering doctrine in the form of 'Feminist Development' or interest-group or single-variable studies in the form of 'Women and Development'?

The community of scholars writing in this area has continued to discuss how they would choose to be named, but it seems that the discussion is focused on political influence and even of distributing the spoils of this newly created turf into sub-fields (!), rather than on intellectual legitimacy and the future of discipline(s), social science and practice. That confirms the problem.

Williams' book is published by a university press and is the winner of a dissertation prize in 'Women's and Gender Studies' and its title describes it as 'Making Feminist Sense'. Feminism is a political label and political labels are antithetical to the very idea of scholarship. We do not (at least openly, though possibly de facto) have 'Corporatist Studies', 'Elitist Studies', 'Monarchist Studies', 'Fascist Studies' or 'Militarist Studies' because such politicisation would undermine the university and if anything we want to challenge ideologies not to promote them. Nor do we have 'Feminist Chemistry' or 'Women and Physics' because it destroys the very basis of academic discipline. But such clear politicisation is sanctioned here. It is one thing to offer a course to study a religion or an ideology (such as Marxism or Anarchism or the meaning of Feminism and its history and impact as a movement) but another to create it as a subfield with

specific applications to disciplines. 'Women's Studies' is also exclusive and makes sense as a topic of study, but it also implies its opposite, 'Male Studies', which is problematic in that it extends the idea of narcissism in place of academic discipline to the point of absurdity. With the emergence of 'Masculinity Studies' we may already be there. Indeed, for Women's Studies to justify itself, it may have to be co-dependent on the continuation of patriarchy, which also undermines its credibility. If gender is to be a variable like 'age' we need to recognise it as a variable as sociologists do and represent the field as 'Gender Studies' and not 'Men's and Gender Studies' or 'Women's and Gender Studies'. We should not want 'Anglo and Ethnic Studies'. In the field of Development Studies, it is appropriate to study 'Gender and Development' or 'Lifecycle and Development' or 'Cultural Integrity and Ethnic Identity and Development'. With 'Women and Development' we really do risk the disintegration of subfields and the politicisation into the proverbial 'Women and Elephants' list of potential subjects. Study of disciplinary fields needs to elicit the variables rather than be driven by a political agenda.

### **Re-opening Development Studies by Focusing on Its Key Questions, on 'Development', 'Progress' and Humanity: Starting with the Social Sciences**

In Development Studies and possibly in other subfields where gender concerns are presented in 'single-variable' or 'interest-group' perspectives, the time is long overdue to return to earlier goals through a de-politicisation of 'Feminist' and 'Women's' Studies and similar single-interest sub-fields. If academia is to have any relevance at all in the future beyond simply taking a front seat to the collapse of civilisation, scholars will need to integrate 'Gender Studies' and its concerns appropriately into subfields in ways that promote holistic advance of those fields.

Feminists are not the only ones who have taken holistic social sciences and fragmented them into single variables or interest-group approaches. Indeed, Economics has become 'production engineering' and theology while Political Science has become the technology of manufacturing consent. Area studies have become little more than the accumulation of facts about a segmented geographic space. Development Studies, itself, has lost its focus on humanistic questions of the human potential. In gaining recognition and in increasing their numbers in a number of disciplines, feminists have not caused the problem of

disintegration of disciplines, but neither have they sought to solve it.

The very definition of a 'discipline' or field is that it establishes a set of questions and builds theories by testing hypotheses. Authors who opened up the sub-field of Gender and Development began that process but contemporary academics have erased it. In neither of the two books that are reviewed here as representative of this field are any of the basic authors or questions of the discipline mentioned. That is why what is left is simply storytelling, popular-culture essay and punditry.

In Development Studies, overall, even the very definition of that field has long been co-opted and needed to be challenged (and one could argue that it had been co-opted by a 'male' agenda of ecological destruction and aggression for the sake of productivity, uniformity and power). Restoring that definition and rebuilding the field in terms of promoting all attributes of human creativity and expression as well as cultural potential, traits of caring and of love and their promotion in society was part of the original gender equality agenda (Lempert 2014). Gender Studies could certainly redirect its attention here.

The questions Gender Studies raises can certainly invigorate disciplines if they can prove (or disprove) how gender plays a role in key human behaviours and if they can offer strategies for change. There is certainly much more to be modelled in the areas of aggression and conflict resolution in its various manifestations, in the deep structure of politics, and in the economic model of the 'irrational/violent man' rather than the 'rational economic man'. These issues are at the heart of Development Studies and anthropology in action.

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