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## **GENDER, DEVELOPMENT, INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

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There has been a recent trend towards academic research and writing from a multi and interdisciplinary perspective. The trend has been celebrated by some of the leading academic universities of the world where cross appointments have become increasingly popular. This paper will first focus on the importance of interdisciplinary research and the role it has played in creating the field of gender and development. It argues that taking into account unequal international relations is vital to this field of research. An attempt to overcome unequal international relations will bring immense benefit to the field of gender and development; a field which can be enriched by local indigenous knowledge and may even overcome some of the existing assumptions and stereotypes about the situation of women in third world countries.

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## DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE

The discourse of development originates from mainstream economics and dates back to the founder of the field, Adam Smith, author of *Wealth of the Nations* in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century. However, it was after the Second World War when development started to become a field of research and was inspired by the work of a leading sociologist Talcott Parsons, the founder of structural functionalism. In its initial stage, the discourse was heavily influenced by modernization theory and relied on the work of academics such as Lewis (1955) and Rostow (1956)— the latter was also a policy advisor on development initiatives. This discourse heavily emphasized GNP as an indicator of development and primarily focused on economic growth. In the path to achieve development, the discourse became preoccupied with the idea of transferring third world countries from agricultural and rural to industrial, commercial and urban societies. In order to achieve this, international development agencies such as the World Bank and the United Nations emphasized mainstream economic development and modernization package. It should be mentioned that while the World Bank focused on economic growth, the United Nations defined development in a broader sense and included issues such as providing basic needs for all and human development. Mainstream development theory went beyond economic transformation and included cultural changes as a necessary component of the path to development/modernization. It was believed that the South could only develop (economically) if it adopted cultural securities of the North, therefore, modernization and Westernization came hand in hand. Modernization and Westernization came as a package, and in the context of many countries, such as those within the Muslim world, this was coupled with secularization. For many countries, this was translated into secularization.

For this reason, development's prescriptions for the newly independent countries in the context of a postcolonial world was to follow the same stages of development paralleling the West. However, considering both the

history of colonialism and the fact that the South was subject to unequal terms of international trade and politics has been largely absent from mainstream analysis. Moreover, the United States has become the leading country to determine the future path of third world countries. Prescribing development/modernization along with secularization was not just part of Pax Americana; it was also pursued first by the Soviet Union and then China. As a result, in ex-Soviet countries, religion was suppressed and intensive industrialization and urbanization were pursued.

However, by the early 1970s, it was evident that development initiatives in many parts of the world have been far from successful. In the Soviet bloc, signs of economic decline began to appear. However, the most notable example of the failure of development has been Africa's Sub-Sahara. Africa's development had delivered nothing but poverty, income disparity, and massive migration to cities where migrants became inhabitants of shanty towns. Development has not only failed in many parts of the world due to its questionable economics, but also because it has been part of the Pax Americana which has reinforced the United State political domination of the world.

After the early 1970s, the modernization theory was overtaken by neoliberal economic policies throughout the 1980s and 1990s. While it is true that technological advancement has been unprecedented and there has been a great deal of overall prosperity, this has not led to improvement of human lives for all. On the contrary, the number of the poor worldwide has in fact increased on a scale unprecedented in human history. This realization became a major concern for some and in the 1990s, at the start of the new millennium, a promise was made to the victims of global poverty in the form of the Millennium Declaration, a solemn pledge "to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty." This pledge represented a commitment to human rights and social justice, setting as its target achievement year 2015. The latest Human Development Report, however, published by the United Nations in

2005, indicated the extent to which efforts to address poverty and income inequality have failed (Human Development Report)<sup>1</sup>. The report indicated that the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) that had targeted to reduce poverty by half had not only failed to deliver its promise, but also that there are now 380 million more people in developing countries living on less than a dollar a day.

Clearly, development has failed many in the third world and part of this failure can be traced to two factors. First, mainstream academic research and policy which has been primarily preoccupied with economics and economic orthodoxy has pushed other subjects such as history, sociology, cultural studies, political science and anthropology on the margin. Second, the flow of knowledge and academic research has remained captive of unequal international relations. Instead of a free exchange of knowledge, the West/North has come to dominate development discourse. This has been a major source of handicap and a point of challenge by academics whom are advocates of women's rights and whom have become the founders of a multi-disciplinary field of research and policy making- women/gender and development.

## **GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT**

The origin of the field of women/gender and development can be traced to documentation of the impact of development on women from the South. Research and documentation of women's work in third world countries from the early 1970s showed that, contrary to what has been assumed, the impact of industrialization and urbanization has been negative on women. It contradicted a commonly-held assumption in the West that once industrialization takes place and economic growth is achieved, the position of women in the society will automatically improve not only economically

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1. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/mediacentre/news/title,15493,en.html> last visited December 2008

but also socially and politically. With the publication of E. Boserup's (1970) book on women and development, the myth was dispelled. For the first time, she documented in her work that the trend towards industrialization not only had not alleviated poverty among women but on the contrary it had in fact marginalized women from the production process and in some cases deprived them of social and political sources of power. She found that with mechanization of agriculture for example, women were no longer working in the field and their traditional access to means of production had been undermined. Other works, particularly by anthropologists, whose work was focused on different parts of the South showed similar results. Documentation of the impact of development through the process of industrialization and urbanization illustrated that while women had lost their traditional sources of power, new ways of dealing with such a loss was not formed.

Research by anthropologists and other disciplines focusing on documentation and data gathering from the South which showed the negative side of development on women, along with the concern over human rights, was behind the United Nations declaration of 1975-1985 as the international decade for women. It was during this decade that a separate field of study found its way into the academia as part of women studies-gender and development. As poverty and income disparity continued to increase disproportionately among women, the field gained more credibility within academia and is slowly becoming part of courses taught in departments such as sociology, anthropology, economics, political science as well as women studies.

Although many decades have passed since the United Nations declared a decade of women and development, the bulk of those who are disadvantaged in areas such as education, health and housing continue to be women. Women are deprived from the means of production. It is estimated that in Africa as an example, women who are responsible for the bulk of agricultural production, earning is minimal and limited to only 10% of the

revenue and their ownership of land is only 1% ( Bahramitash 2005). With regards to education, 2/3 of those illiterate are women and the majority of them are in the Third World countries. Moreover, indicators related to health show that the majority of 800 million malnourished people are girls under the age of five and pregnant women. Women constitute two-thirds of the world's manual workers, but earn only 10% of world revenue while they own 1% of the world's capital. Compared to men's, women's salaries are between 50% to 80% of those earned for equal work. (Martinez Andrea 2008).

### **CRITIQUE OF GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT AND UNEQUAL INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: FROM DISCOURSE TO PRACTICE**

Although the field of women and development benefited from interdisciplinary research, its mainstream has remained a captive of unequal international relations. Before the issue can be analyzed in greater detail, it is timely to mention *Orientalism*. Edward Said, a Columbia University professor of comparative literature, in the 1970s published his pioneer work *Orientalism*. (*Orientalism*, 1979). Although his field of work was literature, this work has become a landmark for academics from different disciplines within the social sciences whose research concentrates on the Muslim world. In this work, for the first time, he wrote about the way a dichotomy is set between the East and the West. The West, is the “Self”— the rational, scientific, civilized and advanced. The East (or the Muslim world) is the “Other”— irrational, superstitious, uncivilized and backward. Based on his work, many academics whose specialities concern women, such as Parvin Paidar (1995), add that while the West is regarded as the plethora of freedom for women, the East is characterized by the oppression of women.

Some of the mainstream literature on gender and development falls into Orientalist discourse which dominates a great deal of research on the Muslim

world. There is now a body of academic research (Paidar 1995, Chatterjee 1996, Abu-Lough 1998, Deeb 2007) critical of the mainstream literature on women in the Muslim world which tends to reiterate the same assumptions that Muslim women are victims of Islam and the way to free them from oppression is secularization. This adds to the body of modernization/Westernization literature which was mentioned earlier and feeds some of the policies imposed by mainstream national and international development agencies.

In addition, there seems to be a lack of historical perspective. It is almost absent from mainstream gender and development literature that within the context of the colonial world, the situation of women was an indication of backwardness of colonized countries such as India, Egypt and Algeria. The British in India and Egypt and the French in Algeria legitimized for instance their colonial presence as part of their civilizing mission to free women. Allola refers to Gaytrak Spivak's famous critique of European colonial power to "free brown women from brown men" (1986). If history and particularly history of colonialism are brought into analysis, it is clear that the colonial era has much to offer in post colonial context. The French for instance deprived Algerians the right to vote because in their worldview, Arabs/Muslims oppressed their women. Thus they were viewed as backward and should not be given the right to vote. Ironically, the same French and English men in charge of the colonial rule fought very hard against women's rights advocates in France and Britain of the time. Some of that history is relevant today. For instance in the postcolonial world, the United States criticizes many Muslim countries because of the treatment of their women and has entered into war with Afghanistan because of the way women are treated. Similarly, the US has forced Iraq to sign CEDAW (Convention to Eliminate all Discriminations Against Women). While lamenting the status of women's rights, the United States itself has refused to sign CEDAW. In fact, the United States, along with Saudi Arabia, is among the few industrialized nations to have not signed the convention. This is illustrative

of how unequal international relations can play a role in defining what needs to be changed where women's rights should or should not be defended. This is not to say that the situation of women in the South is not critical or that there should not be any critique of the situation of women in these countries. It does however remain pertinent that one pay attention to unequal international relations and its consequences. One should be critical of how problems are defined and solutions sought, especially when a country or set of countries determine policies for other countries.

Indeed, it is highly critical to be vigilant of the type of policy prescriptions for the South that are formulated in the West/the North. As someone who has not only been an academic but has also worked with international development agencies such as CIDA, the Canadian International Development Agency, I have come across several occasions where the lack of anthropological, sociological and historical data has not been fully utilized for policy formulation in the North. Several years ago, during the final years of completing my PhD dissertation, I was working on a CIDA-funded project on Islamization and women in Indonesia through McGill University. I came across very interesting results. During my fieldwork traveling across the country I realized that many different non governmental organizations were working on women's rights. Since my research topic was Indonesian society, I had almost covered everything accessible through one of the world's best universities in North America, yet, once in the country and once in touch with the society itself, I realized the gap between what is found through academia and development agencies and the realities on the ground. It was increasingly evident to me that there was a lack of data from a multidisciplinary perspective. CIDA had a mandate to modernize Islamic Studies in Indonesia and as part of that mission, women studies program were encouraged. While it was indeed important to establish and strengthen such programs and use the type of knowledge and expertise in the West but it was disheartening to witness that much of what had been taught was unrelated to the realities of everyday lives of women in

Indonesia.<sup>1</sup>

During one of my trips in the Island of Java, I came across a non governmental organization whose mandate was to fight violence against women. The issue is highly critical, and it is a global problem with a huge magnitude. In the United States for instance, the majority of homicide cases are women who are killed by men related to them as a spouse or a boyfriend. In Western countries, many shelters are set up for battered women. During interviews with those involved in the women studies programs in Jakarta, the same solution was thought to be the answer. However, as I traveled throughout Java, I came across an array of different practices, in one case a local NGO had set up shelters for men arguing that when a man batters his wife, it is he who should be sent to a shelter and go through psychotherapy. Violence against women was taught as a male problem, and women were encouraged to stay at home while men stayed in this shelter for rehabilitation by other men who taught them not to use violence. There were other examples, such as a huge number of associations, charities, foundations designed to provide the poor with means to improve their basic needs, yet I was witness to the fact that there a) little data exists on the nature of these indigenous institutions which had been in operation for many years, b) there is this implicit assumption that CIDA knows best and is the owner of the most efficient policies to deal with local problems. It was indeed frustrating to realize that not only there is no documentation of existing sources and resources but also that there was an assumption that the country had little or no means through which social assistance could be delivered. Every initiative had to start from scratch and using methods that are formulated in Canada.

My experience is neither unique nor isolated; in fact, development initiatives have been unsuccessful precisely because of this type of lack of interdisciplinary research and the assumption that the “West knows best.” The problem with Sub-Saharan Africa is one which has been well

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1. Field work in Indonesia, 1999-2000.

documented by others. International development agencies delivered aid in the 1960s and 1970s based on their assumptions that a) the African family structure is identical to that of the West and followed the role structure of the male breadwinner, female home maker and b) the use of Western technology would be advantageous for the local population. Both of these assumptions turned to be somewhat misleading. The African family structure was not on the same basis as that of the West. In Africa, women are providers for the family; land cultivation is primarily if not exclusively done by women. Therefore, it was and still is a women's work. However, international aid agencies were unable to see that and used their own insight and gave men the best land and crops. Since men neither had the expertise to use these highly fertile land or crops nor were culturally inclined to provide for their families, the best lands became wasted. Women were forced into using marginal lands and unable to use their skills to produce. While millions of dollars was spent on aid for Africa, it not only did not bring prosperity for much of the inhabitants but it also undermined the role of women and cut their access to means of production (Bryceson 1995). Had there been more use of anthropology in development initiatives at the time or had there been an understanding of the importance of unequal international relations which means what is believed in the West needs to be tested and challenged by local and indigenous knowledge the disaster which led to several decades of poverty and famine may have been prevented.

In the case of Iran, during the Shah, there was a great deal of efforts to reduce family size and decrease the national fertility rate. However, much of that was wasted and unfruitful; part of that was related to the fact that it was pursued as part of modernization/Westernization package and was brought to Iran by international organizations as a Western package and through ways and means unaccustomed to cultural context of the country. Iran's more recent family planning efforts, which started after the revolution, have dealt a population boom in the post revolution and war years and so far has been very successful. This is to some extent due to the fact that it was utilized in

ways which was culturally compatible to the masses of people. Much of the success is due to the mobilization of women as volunteers, and the religious authorities support of state initiatives in poor urban and rural areas. The model had in fact started during the Shah in rural Shiraz in the late 1970s and was initiated by the Canadian International Development Research Center (IDRC). It was then interrupted during the revolution and later picked up by the Ministry of Health but implemented in ways compatible with indigenous cultural values. It has subsequently been promoted by the United Nations as a world success story (Bahramitash 2007).

I found similar stories in Indonesia where women from *Nehzatol Olama*, the largest nationwide Islamist organization with huge support from poor rural areas and who are active in the community. Women of *Nehzatol Olama* were successful in family planning, and they earned a winning prize from the Ford Foundation.<sup>1</sup> It is not hard to comprehend why a sensitive issue such as contraceptive use in two Muslim countries is more successful when it is done by Islamist organizations. When such organization appropriates development initiatives such as family planning, it becomes indigenized and tailored to target society, but once it is parachuted by some Western donor organizations, and in some cases insensitive to cultural specificity and local and indigenous circumstances, it is viewed with suspicion and elicits resistance rather than celebration given the past colonial record of Western presence in the South.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has tackled two interrelated points which could explain why today we are facing a huge poverty problem. Just under a decade after the Millennium Development Goal, which was set out to address the problem of poverty and income disparity in the world, we are witness to a huge increase

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1. Field work, Indonesia 1999-2000.

in absolute and relative poverty. With the recent meltdown of financial institutions and the worsening economic crisis, there is no doubt that there will be an increase in the price of basic goods, particularly food, and the level of unemployment throughout the world will increase. As the United States, the most powerful country in the world, experiences one of its worst economic recessions in recent decades, the ripple effects will devastate many countries globally. It will indeed ravage the lives of those at the bottom of social strata. There is no time better than now to be concerned with the fate of the poor and the disadvantaged among whom women and children are disproportionately over-represented. This makes the field of gender and development an important area of academic and scholarly research.

This paper illustrated that the field itself came into being through research conducted by those academics critical of mainstream economic policies and challenged economic orthodoxy by including the disciplines of anthropology, history, sociology, and women's studies. However, interdisciplinary research can further be enhanced by taking into account international relations and the way historical relations have been characteristically unequal. Development initiatives could be strengthened and energized by multi and interdisciplinary research which takes into account unequal international relations in a postcolonial context. Such understanding will emphasize the importance of local and indigenous knowledge and challenge Western assumptions about the South and thereby enrich policies and improve conditions for the poor in general and women in particular. ❖

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