

# Technical/Professional and Political Approaches to Gender Equality, Equity and Women's Empowerment:

## WID/WAD/GAD and Women's Movements

By

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### INTRODUCTION

This time next week in NY hundreds of women from around the world will convene to mark the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Fourth World Conference of Women held in Beijing. But for many it also marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the launch of the UN Decade for Women (1975-85), the Decade that changed the world for millions of people, because of the leadership that was forged in that process – leadership not just in terms of technical and professional approaches to gender equality, equity and women's empowerment, but also in terms of political action on behalf of these goals. I am making the distinction between WID/WAD/GAD approaches (which I term technical and professional) and women's movements.

People have made this distinction in different ways – e.g. **Maxine Molyneux** (later adapted by **Caroline Moser**) distinguished between women's practical and strategic gender interests.

**Eudine** makes the distinction between the 'material' and 'ideological' bases of gender.

They are all getting at the distinction between technical/professional approaches and political (and I would add 'cultural' approaches to achieving the goals of gender equality, equity and women's empowerment.

In this presentation I will try to look more closely at these approaches, highlighting where they converge and where they diverge.

**First, women's movements.** The issue of women's equality and their participation in development was **put on the agenda by feminists** who were part of a political movement – whether they were within the academy, in policy making circles and or in feminist movements. Esther Boserups book that highlighted women's economic role provided an impetus for feminist policy makers, but it was feminist activists (whether as policy makers, researchers or activists within women's organizations/movements) that place the issue on the international agenda. They got the UN to designate 1975 as International Women's Year, and then to announce a UN Decade for Women (1975-85). This has evolved into an on-going movement for gender equality, equity and women's empowerment.

In my book on the Global Women's Movement

I try to **define** this women's movement;

I consider the **origins** of a movement formed out of many movements shaped in local struggles and brought together in the context of global opportunities and challenges.

I reflect on the **trajectory** of the emerging movement **as women discover commonalities and come to a better understanding of how the social relations of gender are implicated in the systemic crises** that have contributed to persistent poverty, social exclusion and alienation, environmental deterioration and the spread of violence that threatens the well-being and security of the majority of the world's people and the planet itself.

## Definition

A definition of what I mean by a women's movement is crucial. The movement is not contained within women's organizations and NGOs although they may be an important part of it. How can we understand such a movement? How can it be defined, and what are its characteristics?

For me, women's movement are **different from other social movements** and can be defined by

- diversity,**
- its **feminist politics and perspectives,**
- its **global reach,** and
- its **methods of organizing.**

Women's movements can be defined as comprising **“a range of struggles by women against gender inequality”**.(Amrita Basu)

It does not conform to conventional definitions of a social movement, **lacking as it does common objectives, continuity, unity and coordination**. Yet this should not surprise us, nor should it be taken as a sign of deficiency. Women's movements are **different from all other social movement in that they are crosscutting, ask different questions, and often seek goals that challenge conventional definitions of where we want to go**. Only a few activists take the view that the **objectives** of the women's movement are similar to those of labor, human rights and student groups, which **seek justice for their members**.

Many see the **objectives of women's movements as broader, seeking changes in relationships that are more varied and complex**. At the same time it is sometimes **difficult to identify clear objectives**; worse, **the objectives articulated by some groups seem to contradict those of others**. Here are two definitions to illustrate my point:

"The ... women's movement is an unarmed movement. **It is non-confrontational. It is a movement for the progressive upliftment of women for motherhood, nationhood and development.**"

"When... women demand equality, we are only asking for our rights not to be tampered with, and the removal of laws that oppress and dehumanize women. We are not asking for equality with our husbands. **We accept them as the bosses and heads of the family.**"

*(I've suppressed the name of the country and the authors)*

One way of **clarifying these apparent contradictions** is to recognize **two mutually reinforcing tendencies within women's movements – one focused on gender identity** (identity politics) and the **other concerned with a larger project for social transformation**.

**There are two entry points to concerns about a larger social project**. One is **recognition of the centrality of the care and nurture of humans to the larger social project** and that to address this, given the primacy of women's gendered role in this area, requires addressing gender relations in all the complex interplay of their economic, social, political, cultural and personal dimensions (Gita Sen). It also involves locating gender inequality within other forms of inequality that shape and often exacerbate it.

Another entry point is recognition that women cannot be separated from the larger context of their lived experience and that this includes considerations of class, race/ethnicity and geographic location among other factors. **This means that the struggle for women's agency must include engagement in struggles against sources of women's oppression that extend beyond gender. The larger social project** would therefore include transforming social institutions, practices and beliefs so that they address gender relations along with other oppressive relationships, **not simply seeking a better place within existing institutions and structures**. For this reason, women's movements in countries where the majority of women are marginalized by class, race or ethnicity must be concerned with the larger social project. **This is often a point of tension between women's movements in the context of North-South relations**, as well as in the context of **struggles against oppression on the basis of class, race and ethnicity**.

As I said before, confusion about definitions of women's movements is also caused by failure to make distinctions between women's organisations as part of a wide spectrum of NGOs or civil society organisations (CSOs), and those that might be better understood as part of a politically-oriented social movement.

An important segment of women's movements are the **associations that work to incorporate a feminist perspective** into their theoretical, analytical, professional and political work. Within these disciplines – whether women are organized into feminist associations or not - women in the academies are doing important theoretical and empirical work that deepens our understanding of women's realities and produces the analyses and insights that strengthen the work of activists.

In the **professions there are also women's associations** that are challenging patriarchal patterns and relationships, raising new questions, changing the practices and methods by which their professions operate.

Many **women's organisations**, even those that focus on traditional concerns of home and family, are nevertheless important participants in women's movements. Among these are grassroots women's organisations of various kinds, **Women's Institutes, Federations of Women, the YWCA, BPWC, Soroptimists** and many worldwide organisations **identified with strong advocacy on behalf of women's rights although they may not describe themselves as feminist.**

Finally, a definition of a women's movement must include those **individual women who would never join an organization, nor define themselves as feminists**, but whose lives and actions nevertheless serve to advance the liberation of women in their community and beyond.

The following summarize my own views on women's movement:

1. A women's movement is a political movement – part of the broad array of social movements concerned with changing social conditions, rather than part of a network of women's organizations, although many women's organizations may be part of a women's movement.
2. A woman's movement is grounded in an understanding of women's relations to social conditions – an understanding of gender as an important relationship within the broad structure of social relationships of class, race and ethnicity, age and location.
3. A women's movement is a process, discontinuous, flexible, responding to specific conditions of perceived gender inequality or gender-related injustice. It's focal points

may be in women's organizations, but it embraces individual women in various locations who identify with the goals of feminism at a particular point in time.

4. Awareness and rejection of patriarchal privilege and control is central to the politics of women's movements.
  
5. In most instances, the 'movement' is born at the moments in which individual women become aware of their separateness *as women*, their alienation, marginalization, isolation or even abandonment within a broader movement for social justice/social change. In other words, women's struggle for agency within the broader struggle is the catalyst for women's movements.

bell hooks describes this process of *conscientization* thus

**“Our search leads us back to where it all began, to that moment when an individual woman ... who may have thought she was all alone, began a feminist uprising, began to name her practice, indeed began to formulate theory from lived experience.”** (hooks, 1994:75).

The Relationship between Women/Gender and Development (WWG) Programmes and the Global Women's Movement

I turn now to WWG and the Decade for Women in which they emerged in policy discourse and debates. **Irene Tinker** identifies 3 streams that converged to establish the field of Women in/and Development: Researchers, Practitioners and Advocates. One of the **significant outcomes** of the UN Decade for Women was the **linking of the political work of activists/advocates to the professional/technical work of practitioners and policy-makers in the field of socioeconomic development**. Cross-cutting these two spaces – the world of practitioners and that of the activist/ advocate, is the work of the researcher/academic, women who often worked in both spaces, contributing to both.

While this link between bureaucratic/policy concerns about women and women's movements (activists/advocates) has drawn criticism from feminist activists there is no doubt that, despite setbacks and limitations, the state's focus on the contribution of and benefits to women in the process of socioeconomic development led to some significant gains for women. Indeed, the **relationship** between practitioners/ policy makers in the field of WWG and women's movements' activists/advocates and researchers has been mutually beneficial.

The **practitioners owe the movement** the research and advocacy that has clarified and made their work more effective;

the **movement owes the practitioners/policy-makers** the spaces and resources that have supported their work.

Specifically, practitioners in the field of WWG owe to the women's movement an understanding of the political nature of development and of the theoretical underpinnings and implications of their work, e.g. following the first intellectual efforts to make women's work visible came the questioning of the dominant paradigm of development, the ways in which it ignored or marginalized the contribution of women to socioeconomic development. **Later work showed that far from being marginal to socioeconomic development, the neo-classical model of development actually depended on the exploitation of women's time, labour and sexuality.**

At a **theoretical level**, feminists' focus on the study of gender as a way of understanding the social relations and perceived differences between the sexes gave practitioners the analytical tools to make their projects and programmes more effective.

The **political work** of the movement is different from the technical/professional work of practitioners, and just as important (as far as I'm concerned, **more important**) to the achievement of the goals of gender equality, equity and women's empowerment.

In my view, a clearer recognition of the **differences between the political women's movement and the bureaucratic field of WWG** would allow for **an appreciation** of the strengths and weaknesses, the opportunities and limitations of the two spaces and facilitate the development of strategic working relationships and more rewarding synergies between the two that would contribute to the achievement of common aims.

### **The Role of Feminist Politics**

In speaking of the 'political' women's movement I want to be clear that I mean the **feminist-led women's movement**. Indeed, I believe that **it is feminism that creates the link between the practitioners/policy-makers, the researchers and the activist/advocates.**

Feminism also makes a **fundamental contributions to the field of social change** (of which socio-economic development is one aspect):

1. It enables one to **see the world differently**. By identifying, as a woman, with the structured marginalisation, powerlessness and alienation of other marginalized groups – feminism provides a window for **experiential learning**.

2. **By asking different questions**, feminism enables one to **make connections between gender subordination and many of the problems facing the world – violence, poverty, social exclusion;**
3. Feminist politics **provides a basis for organising for change** toward a vision of the world that is equitable, democratic, safe and sustainable.

**The field of WWG also owes to feminist politics many of its successes.** Feminist politics, facilitated by the processes of the UN Decade and other UN conferences, **linked the work of WWG to a social movement for the transformation of social relations. Feminist leadership within the ranks of UN personnel, government delegations as well as in the women's organizations** that participated in these events **was central in building a global women's movement that incorporated and supported the work of WID practitioners, scholars and advocates as well.**

### **The role of the UN and the Decade**

By bringing together practitioners in the field of WID, policy makers, researchers, representatives of women's and feminist organizations, and women who considered themselves part of a women's movement, the UN Decade for Women, more than any other process contributed to the building of a global women's movement of the greatest diversity imaginable. Within these processes, women who might not have easily met and worked together in their own countries came to understand each other, and to discover that what they had in common was more important than what divided them.

The UN also provided the movement with the space for the formulation of programmes of action that reflected the women's demands – practical and strategic – and the international standards and instruments for achieving these.

Most importantly, UN conferences provided a space where women's movement could interact with and challenge governments to sign on to pledges, declarations and resolutions that would change the condition and position of women.

It is possible to work within a women's movement without engagement with the institutions that determine the laws and policies that allocate resources that affect the quality of our lives as women. However, the implementation of the agendas of women's movements relies on the generation of political will and bureaucratic responses. For this to happen significant sections of the women's movement must engage with mainstream political realities.

Of course, there are risks. Many writers have referred to the bureaucratization of the movement. In a sense the movement itself became a victim of its successful advocacy. With the implementation of recommendations and resolutions many activists are drawn into working relationships with women and men within the institutions and bureaucracies and in this process have often faced accusations of being co-opted or selling-out the movement. Those in the movement who feel this way need to consider the alternatives: neglecting the opportunities for the achievement of some of the critical goals of the movement. The women's movement too

must therefore come to terms with their relationship to the field of development, building strategic alliances with women on the inside of mainstream politics and bureaucracies. Here again, feminism can be a touchstone to trust.

However this is debated, there can be little doubt that WID practitioners and policy makers from the Third World helped ground the mainstream (Eurocentric) women's movement in the realities of the lives of women from different countries and cultures and in the process broaden the movement's agenda from a narrow definition of women's issues to women's perspectives on a range of human issues.

## **8. Conclusion**

The quantity and quality of the activities and commitment generated by the UN Decade for Women was unlike that of in any other UN Decade. This was because, more than any other similar event, the opportunities and resources provided within the framework of the Decade for Women nurtured a social movement which was to address every aspect of life – from the personal to the political, from the domestic to the public, from the levels of deepest levels of women's consciousness to the most outward expressions of women's agency. The feminist assertion that the personal is political reflected a position that was to challenge dichotomies in many spheres and at many levels.

In a wider sense, however, it was the achievement of many of the short-term goals of the Decade that revealed their limitation: for despite changing laws, the establishment of policies and programmes, special mechanisms, and projects for ensuring the increased participation of women in development activities, the situation of women continued to deteriorate in terms of a widening gap between rich and poor within and between countries, and in terms of the incidence of violence against women.

By the end of the Decade the themes of Equality, Development and Peace had merged and the women who had been involved in the activities within this framework – research and advocacy, project implementation and policy formulation, institution building and legislative change – had moved beyond a narrow definition of women's issues to advance women's perspectives on a range of global issues – Macroeconomic Policy, Environment, Human Rights, Population, Poverty, Employment, Habitats, Food, Trade – within the global conference of the 1990s.