NGOs and the focus on gender: Does it really have an impact?

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Women play critical role in various facets of nonprofit sector including giving, and nonprofit employment (Ostrander, 2004; Petzelka & Mannon, 2006). According to McCarthy (2001), internationally, majority of the volunteers and NGO workers are women in many of the countries. Further, research suggests that women are more likely than men to work in the nonprofit sector, even with lower wages compare to employment in government and for-profit sector (Conry & McDonald 1994, McCarthy 2001). Despite such compelling findings about women’s participation in the nonprofit sector, little research is done on the impact of nonprofit sector on lives of women who participate in the sector (Themudo, 2009). Research with focus on gender is scarce and studies with the international focus are even limited. The purpose of this panel is to address this gap in the literature by focusing on the two-fold question. What impact does nonprofit sector have on the lives of women (who participate in the nonprofit sector) at personal level and in the political sphere and how does participation of women has impacted the sector?

To answer this broad but vital question, the panel presents a platter of three papers that took interesting conceptual approaches to unravel this complex issue. In specific, the papers presented in the panel are a mix of multilevel analysis at the macro and micro level—public and personal. Additionally, panel presents the views from three countries; Afghanistan, India and Spain, with a very different political systems and distinct social and cultural environment. Furthermore, the panel is a blend of empirical papers, employing qualitative and case study method.

The paper by one author, focuses on civil society organizations (CSOs) in Afghanistan and explores the commonality between CSOs and women’s rights activists’ struggle for women as a political collective to be recognized and accounted for, while negotiating the complex terrain of donor interests within an increasingly militarized and marketed environment. The paper uses critical feminist lens to analyze the central question of impact of nonprofit sector on women’s lives and asserts that to gain gender equality and equal rights for women in Afghanistan, engaging with men and boys is an important step in addition to questioning historical and socio-political context of gender relations in the country.

Along the similar lines, the paper by another author focuses on India and argues that civil society is highly gendered and follows the patriarchal norms of the particular country or context. He notes that nongovernmental organizations (NGO) in India generally avoid challenging gender power relations, and the institutions of religion, caste and family that are highly patriarchal. By focusing at the macro level, he integrates the central theme of gender and NGOs, and notes that NGOs need to stop ignoring gender issues and start challenging existing patriarchic norms and beliefs in the society. This could be achieved by holding NGOs accountable for how they recognize gender in their engagement with the State, the market or other civil society actors.

While the first two papers take macro approach, the next paper employs micro level analysis by conducting case studies of six women in Spain. The paper addresses the central theme of impact of nonprofit sector on women’s lives by exploring the role that Microfinancial Institutions (MFI) play in women’s social interaction. The researchers make the point that along with the empowerment through financial self reliance, MFI impact women’s other aspect of life that is more personal in nature such as fostering social interactions for business related activities. The paper intend to present recommendations for MFI on how to foster the social interaction that is a key to women’s financial success.

As noted above, the panel argues that to have substantial and meaningful impact on lives of women, NGOs need to take a step forward in challenging existing norms and
structures, by including gender sensitive approaches in their programs. This panel is relevant for the international audience at the ISTR conference in several ways. First, it presents the views from three countries that have very diverse economic and political realities. Second, the panel is unique in its composition where findings from two countries involved in the same conflict (Afghanistan and Spain) will be presented in the same panel. This in itself is capturing the theme of the conference of “Facing Crises: Challenges and Opportunities Confronting the Third Sector and Civil Society” and assures the rich dialogue to take place for the impact of the civil society on the lives of women in the times of crisis.

References


"Democracy is a Club and Women are Not Invited": The Sexual Politics of Legitimacy, Civil Society and Women’s Collective Agency in Afghanistan

Abstract:

According to Kardam (2004), owing to the women’s movement, there is now a “global gender regime” with set international conventions, norms and frameworks as guidelines to achieve gender equality. However, whilst both states and civil society organisations (CSO) claim to promote common good (Atack, 1999) the question remains as to how effective have CSOs been to implement gender equality projects and initiatives at the ground level, especially when the legitimacy of women and CSOs’ political identity and collective agency have long been contested and marginalised (Goetz, 2006; Moghaddam, 2006).

In recent years, with the emerging global challenges such as climate change with the attending natural disasters, outbreaks of pandemics, the increase of civil and ethnic conflict as well as the rise of militant terrorist groups, these problems are no longer seen as only within the lens of aid and humanitarian assistance, but tied up with the discourse of human security (Jacoby and James, 2009). To be precise, the politicisation of humanitarian aid is not a new phenomenon, and CSOs – both international and local organisations – have had to make decisions on the level of engagement with donors. The challenge, however, is that through the process of militarisation of aid agencies, women’s issues and interests are either seconded or instrumentalised as resource-poor CSOs compete with each other as well as government agencies for funding from foreign donors (Moghaddam, 2006). While it is commonly perceived that feminists’ struggle for women’s human rights and issues can be best realised through civil society, CSOs themselves are not immune to prevailing socio-political norms and practices, including those which support gender inequality (Goetz, 1997).

Drawing on my field research in Afghanistan, this paper will explore the commonality between women’s rights activists’ struggle for women as a political collective to be recognised and accounted for, with CSOs’ challenge in meeting public expectations of “delivering” the common good, whilst negotiating the complex terrain of donor interests within an increasingly militarized and marketed environment. In addition, the tension between CSOs replicating gendered norms and values which run contrary to feminists’ promotion of equality will also be discussed, where some CSOs in Afghanistan have taken the “just add women and stir” approach, adding female workers and aid recipients to programs only to attract donor interests and funding. While there is tension, in comparing the shared interests and conflicts between the two groups, there are also opportunities for both sides to engage in dialogues and strategic alliances, one of these opportunity is to engage with men – often regarded as gatekeepers and retarding the progress of women in development context.

The issue of how CSOs affect local communities and recipients’ perception of gender relations – either fostering support for women’s greater participation or reactionary backlash – will be analysed from a critical feminist perspective on the construction of a specific masculine identity in post-conflict situations which is predicated upon the social control of women as way to restore male dominance (Hamber, 2007; Wyrod, 2008). The focus on men’s resistance or support to gender equality initiatives is thus crucial in relation to the alliance between women’s activists and CSOs, as well as effectiveness of CSOs’ effort to promote women’s human rights in the context of Afghanistan, since it is only by questioning historical and socio-political context of gender relations and engaging with men and boys as active supporters that both CSOs and feminists’ goal of achieving gender equality can be implemented in a meaningful and sustainable manner.

Reference:


Gender in Civil Society: a driver or an afterthought in the discourse – some reflections from India.

Abstract:

Gender is often the step child in the discourse of institutional theories: least mentioned and first to be forgotten, either because gender relations are not recognised at all as a significant feature of any social organisation, or that there are no gendered distinctions or practice within the discourse. The same can be said of the civil society discourse: while debates on civil society focus extensively on definitional issues of which institutions in society should be regarded as part of civil society, and whether it is strong or weak in particular context, the gender dimension of civil society is generally overlooked either from a practice stand point or a theoretical one (Howell 2007). While there has been some work on women’s organisations and their place in civil society (Howell and Mulligan 2004; Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies 2006), or women in politics as result of civil society work (Thomas 2002), there has been much less work on the difficult and contested nature of civil society itself and whether ‘civil society’ is to some extent, paradoxically, a term that reinforces normative patriarchal order rather than challenge it. This paper will interrogate the notion of civil society itself and the gendered nature of the key institutions, by using examples from India to assess whether civil society is itself a fundamentally flawed and patriarchal concept, and by its nature relegate gender to being an after-thought in the discourse.

A number of authors e.g. (Howell 2007; Mwambuli 2008) have made the point that feminist have tended not to engage in the civil society debate as they argue the distinction between public and private spheres inherent in the idea of civil society, is by its nature marginalising, with civil society being seen as more about state relations rather than private relations. This argument some extent misses the point, as institutions are gendered by nature and so civil society as an institutional form suffers the same fate, but this does not mean gender should be ignored in debates. In institutions such as civil society it is the role of identity that defines them and therefore the intersectionality of gender, class, ethnicity and in the case of India ‘caste’, is critical (McDuie 2009).

This paper will build on this existing work, and argue that civil society is highly gendered and follows the patriarchal norms of the particular country or context, and its institutional forms such as government, the private sector, family, and the like. In India the women’s movement, as part of civil society, lives on the periphery, with women’s NGOs being noted by their exceptionalism; and even these NGOs generally avoid challenging gender power relations, and the institutions of religion, caste and family that are highly patriarchal. This paper argues that by ignoring gender (and other forms of identity for that matter) the discourse on civil society cannot advance beyond reproducing existing social norms rather than challenging them. It is only by holding the civil society actors accountable to how they recognise gender in their practice, and whether it reproduces existing norms or challenge them, that civil society can be said to be representative in how it engages with the State the market or other Civil society actors.

References


Microcredit and women empowerment: an empirical case-study based in Catalonia

Abstract:

There is ample literature concerning women empowerment related to the provision of microcredit. Microfinance services are considered a key development tool, particularly for women who are the target of most microfinance programs (Guérin, 2006). Not only female borrowers do have better repayment records (Sharma and Zeller, 1997), but return to investments seem to better reach all household members, especially improving children health and schooling (Pitt and Khandker, 1998). However, further evaluations of the effects of microfinance programs on women’s empowerment generate mixed results. While some are supportive of microfinance’s ability to induce a process of economic, social and political empowerment, others are more skeptical and even point to a deterioration of women’s overall well-being (Holvoet, 2005). In particular, the details of the current practices used by the microfinance industry have been highlighted as to be especially significant by many researches (e.g. Mayou 2001 or Guérin 2006 for the African context; Mahmud 2003, Holvoet 2005 or Moodie 2008 in Asia; Velasco and Marconi 2004 in Latin America). Microcredit can indeed make a significant contribution to women’s empowerment, provided that such practices are well adapted to their economic and social entourage, and singularly to the diverse demands of women.

We shall take in this proposal a slightly different point of view, considering women and microfinance in developed countries. Our study is based in Spain, and specifically in Catalonia. Two main reasons must be mentioned regarding this choice. The first one concerns the Catalan rich tradition of nonprofit organizations of the most diverse scope. Between them, the pioneers Microfinancial Institutions (MFIs) were established in Catalonia in the early 1980’s. Indeed, some nonprofits have developed microcredit programs specifically designed to help people without collateral to start up self-employment business activities meant to earn their own living source of revenue. The second reason is related to the characteristics of the Catalan MFIs. Studies on the Catalan microcredit sector reveal that a little more of half the MFIs’ clients are women. The figure is clearly above the western European mean for the sector (39%, according to Guichandout, 2006).

For the purpose of our study, two different nonprofit organizations will be considered. Both are based in Barcelona, both running microcredit programs for more than ten years. One of them, named FIDEM (Fundació Internacional de la Dona Emprenedora), focuses women entrepreneurship, therefore taking a specific gender perspective in the management of its microcredit program. ASCA (Acció Solidària Contra l’Atur, or Solidarity group against Unemployment), the second nonprofit considered, addresses mainly long term unoccupied, paying no particular attention to gender. The by now well established microcredit programs of the two organizations have effectively contributed to alleviate poverty and to build a better future for their beneficiaries.

The proposal

The main objective of the paper is to study whether, and to which extend, the microcredit programs have other “side-effects” from the civil society point of view. That is, women beneficiaries of the microcredit programs, while managing their own micro-businesses, have also contributed to the formation of human or social capital in their own entourage?

The methodology proposed for the paper is a case study of six women, three of them beneficiaries from each of the two MFIs considered. Attention will be paid to consider women of diverse geographical origin, as well as operating in different economic sectors, thus taking into account the main profiles of women’s microcredit clients. Furthermore, selecting them in the same geographical area, Catalonia, allow for the neutralization of the effects of the territory on our analysis.

Semi-structured interviews are used to conduct the research. The main aspects to be analyzed can be divided in three groups. The first one is related to the pre-business activities, including motivating factors to enter the entrepreneurship path, institutional and informal supports asked for and obtained when designing the business plan, financial support, etc. The second one refers to the set-up of the business activity, and the difficulties
encountered meanwhile. The third one concerns their family and social relationships, especially regarding business life.

Since Microfinance Institutions do not operate in a vacuum (Zohir and Matin, 2004), their impact outstretch their ability to facilitate financial services to the excluded. Among others, their capacity to interact with other actors who are engaged in social mobilization for economic and non-economic reasons must be taken into account. The proposed research aims therefore to the identification of the most significant parameters of the interviewed women’s social interaction, and of the role taken by the MFI in that context. Its ultimate purpose is to suggest the MFIs relevant courses of action to further encourage not only the economic but also the social integration of their clients.

References


