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Conceptualising Policy Practices in Researching Pathways of Women's Empowerment

May 2008

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Pathways Working Paper 1

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Conceptualising Policy Practices in Researching Pathways of Women's Empowerment

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The Research Programme Consortium on Pathways of Women's Empowerment has an explicit commitment to influencing policy. Yet policy is a concept that carries many diverse and contested meanings. How feminists choose to conceptualise policy will influence their strategic choices in terms of what and how they seek to influence. This paper combines a general review of some of the current sociological and feminist literature concerning policy with a specific look at global policy processes in relation to gender equality. Drawing on complexity approaches, 'networks' are posited as the active change ingredient that dynamically engage with institutions, discourses and actors to seek policy change. Examples are provided from my own observations and experience as a policy practitioner working from within a development bureaucracy. Introducing a concept of power into the analysis, the paper identifies ten tactics for policy actors working in global spaces for women's empowerment.

1. Introduction[1]

The Research Programme Consortium (RPC) on Pathways of Women's Empowerment aims to involve policy actors and practitioners directly in our research to inspire a radical shift in policy.[2] Experientially, politically and conceptually we understand knowledge and power to be inextricably linked – hence our commitment to engaging with policy. But what do we mean by a shift in policy? And who is a policy actor? Can our research and communication activities change something, if that something is left undefined? It is these questions that I set out to explore when first I started writing this paper.

I soon realised that the span of the RPC's agenda is so vast and varied in terms of scale and locality, that any single paper could not encompass all the possible meanings of policy and policy actor of potential relevance to the Consortium. Thus I decided to restrict my scope to those aspects of policy with which I am most familiar. While I hope my arguments may engage the interest of other activist researchers busy in the battlefields of knowledge for social change, what follows is principally addressed to those studying, teaching and changing *global* official development policies in favour of women's empowerment. *It is written for policy activists.*

The moment seems ripe. While there is a strongly-felt anxiety that the momentum of global policy change in favour of women's empowerment has slowed down and is at risk of going into reverse, there is also a mood of cautious optimism that a new window of opportunity may be opening, one that feminist activists working in global spaces can seize, provided as was noted at a recent meeting of the OECD DAC Network on gender, they are "political, strategic, evidence-based and practical".[3] The present paper, is written in support of this aspiration.

The challenge

The global policy environment is highly challenging. Some elements are very durable and extremely difficult to shift. An apparent major transformation in global policy for gender equality and women's empowerment, culminating in the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference, subsequently very rapidly lost its momentum. More established ways of thinking about development and societal change regained centre stage; the incoming Poverty Reduction Strategies and the Millennium Development Goals ignored the role of power, culture and history in shaping individual and societal destinies. Simultaneously conservative forces, notably the unholy alliance of religious fundamentalists already active at Beijing when the Vatican and Iran jointly resisted efforts to advance women's sexual rights, have been strengthened during the last decade as a result of the rise of the evangelical religious right in the United States and elsewhere.

At the same time, it is a policy environment highly susceptible to wider trends in the global political economy. Policy actors' concerns about globalising markets or security threats from terrorists can distort ways of thinking and priorities in relation to other issues such as promoting women's empowerment.

At the time of the Beijing Women's Conference, 'gender mainstreaming' appeared to offer the potential for a transformative policy agenda. That it has since become drearily technocratic, is an opinion commonly held among many feminists; indeed it is the justification for this research programme's proposal concerning policy going on 'motorways to nowhere'.[4] Thus at a meeting of worried practitioners and academics in Oxford in late 2006, there was a shared "sense of unease about the continuing lip service paid to e.g. mainstreaming gender, but the lack of real evident commitment to women's rights or gender equity in current development discourse and practice."[5] The editors of a special issue of *Gender and Development* to

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mark the tenth anniversary of Beijing observe that there have been few instances of organised development interventions that have empowered women, and that instead gender mainstreaming has in many contexts been de-politicised (Porter and Sweetman 2005).

While one explanation for these disappointing developments may have been wider systemic political changes after the euphoria of the people-centred decade of the 1990s (Kardam 2004, Molyneux and Razavi 2005), the steady drip-drip of disempowerment of those in global organisations working for gender equality policies may also have had an effect. In two large meetings in 2005 with women in gender focal points from international and bilateral agencies, I was struck by the absence of imaginative and strategic thinking, combined with an apparent low self-esteem. At one of these meetings a participant commented: "It's not that gender mainstreaming has failed, but that we have failed to mainstream gender". At this same meeting, a government official from an aid-recipient country, who did not see himself as part of the gender equality effort, offered some advice that further depressed his audience: "You've got to make your case and make it well before we (the government) are able to respond".

Statements like this, all too commonly heard in global policy arenas, reinforce the listeners' sense of powerlessness. By accepting that we are inadequate policy actors – who have failed to make the case – and blaming ourselves for our failure, we are colluding in and contributing to sustaining a powerful myth of policy as a course of action based on rational decision making and credible evidence. Rather, if our goal is to make change happen in favour of women's empowerment, we need to ask ourselves what is really going on in global policy making. We must identify and use those explanatory or conceptual lenses that can usefully illuminate that complex reality. Otherwise, against our

better judgement we risk being brow beaten into accepting a view of the world that could lead to our obstructing the achievement of our own goals. In this current environment, what are the possibilities for feminists working in the international development policy arena to sustain a transformative agenda?

The approach

My approach to writing this paper owes much to my career as a policy practitioner and bureaucrat working in large international organisations, to my original training as a social anthropologist and to my childhood observations of the radical political practice of my parents. All these factors have led to a particular interest in policy actors, their day-to-day work and how the meanings and values they give to their action are shaped by wider societal, cultural and historical structures and processes. I am interested in policy-making and policy effects as social and political processes that can transform values and create new sets of relationships. And because I have worked for many years in large policy-making organisations, I am fascinated by how such organisations 'think' and 'learn' about what they are doing – or not, as the case may be.

In researching and writing this paper, I wanted to find out whether academic theory could help answer my long-standing questions about how policy change comes about and the significance or otherwise of individual action and collective action in that process. Reviewing the theory helped me understand discursively much of my tacit knowledge acquired from my political activist parents – knowledge of strategy, tactics, influence and pragmatic compromise that had proved to be very useful when working as a civil servant.

In looking at the historical evolution of the policy literature, I was struck how ideas and theories that an

academic reviewer might refer to as 'dated' or 'unsophisticated' are still flourishing in the discourses of policy practice. Academic ideas evolve more rapidly than the reality that they purport to model and describe. Thus, my paper at one and the same time seeks to draw on current theory to develop an action-oriented analytical framework *and* to bring to the reader's attention those longer-standing empirically observed beliefs that they will certainly discover in global policy spaces alive and often stoutly resistant to new ideas that challenge current structures and relations of power.

In international development practice, public administration or management science appears to be the dominant mode of thinking about policy. This can be attributed to the influence of the World Bank and other global non-representative institutions which claim to provide objective and robust advice, uncontaminated by political interest. Questions from this mode of thinking are of the kind "How does one make and implement good policy?" Questions such as "Have gender mainstreaming policies failed?" derive from a view of policy concerned with how policies should be as distinct from a descriptive view that is more interested in analysing what actually goes on in the real world (Minogue 1993) . In this paper I aim to combine both approaches. I provide a conceptual framework for understanding what is happening – including how policy actors interpret and explain what is happening – as well as to point to modes of intervention that could help make things happen in the way members of the RPC would like them to. I exemplify my arguments from past experience and current RPC research with policy practitioners pursuing a feminist agenda within international development institutions.

Today, based in a policy research institute, I hover on the threshold between the worlds of practice and the academy. From this insider–outsider perspective, I can

imagine that some of the theory I rehearse is likely to be interesting to the practitioner and tediously well-known to the academic, whereas some of my examples of tactics and strategy may be common sense to the practitioner but of real and surprising interest to the academic observer who does not have privileged access to the bureaucratic corridors of power. My hope, in the spirit of the Pathways Consortium's aspiration for sharing and learning between researchers and practitioners, is that some of what is taken-for-granted and obvious in either practice or theory appears in a new and useful light when looked at through the eyes of the other.

In brief, my approach is descriptive and analytical as well as prescriptive. It is also both a literature review and a presentation of experiential learning from practice. It draws on general theory about policy to be specific about the arena of international policy for women's empowerment; but in addition to being a research document it seeks to provide practical guidance for policy actors about keeping open or constructing new pathways of empowerment.

An encouraging case study concerning national policy making in Australia shows how awareness of the different approaches to conceptualising policy, combined with knowledge of feminist theory, can contribute to very effective strategising by feminist bureaucrats for gender equality policies (Marshall 2000). From this I find support for my view that it would be a worthwhile exercise to identify conceptual elements for thinking about policy as I do in part two of this paper, using a model of institutions, discourses and actors. Drawing on complexity approaches to change, I use 'networks' as the active change ingredient that dynamically links these three elements together.

In part three, I move to discussing how various understandings of policy have shaped the idea of gender mainstreaming and the influence of rationalist–

managerialist approaches that ignore the effects of power concepts which I explore in part four. The effectiveness of successful feminist policy actors and networks may be due to their recognising and addressing power in their discursive and organisational strategies, albeit very possibly in a discrete and subversive manner. Part five considers how they do this, offering a practical tool to be tested by researchers and practitioners working for policy change that will result in women's empowerment.

2. Thinking about policy

"It must be with valour for policy I hate"
– Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, III, 1.

Politics, order and values

Policy is a word used very frequently by both researchers and practitioners but rarely interrogated – except by those who engage in it as a field of study. At the inception workshop of RPC researchers, I asked everyone to write a definition of 'policy' on a card. The different emphases we placed on the term reflected our various disciplinary and linguistic roots. Some emphasised policy as "guiding principles" or "a statement of commitment to a particular line of action"; others focused more on policy as implementation – "A deliberately directed intervention ... aimed at achieving a specific outcome". Others stressed the idea of process – one wrote of it as "a negotiation exercise". There was also diversity in views as to which institutions could have policies. While some saw policy as being the domain of the public sector or the state, others were vaguer referring to both 'public and private authority to whom power has been delegated'. One person saw policy in all

institutional domains writing that "policy is norms set (or negotiated) by and within institutions (which range from family to church to organisation to government to UN)".

The linguistic roots of 'policy' are worth noting. Only when I was working as an international aid policy practitioner in Bolivia did I discover that unlike the modern English language (compared with Shakespeare's time) the distinction between 'policy' and *politics* does not exist in Spanish nor in other Romance languages such as French from which the English word derives. The English language, by creating this distinction, makes it easier to develop a mind set in which policy is seen as design-based-on-evidence that belongs to a world of academic researchers, consultants and civil servants, while power, contestation, contingency and compromise do not belong to policy but to the sphere of politics.

The political understanding of policy tends to draw on language and metaphors commonly associated with warfare: strategy, tactics, engagement, outflanking, alliances, adversaries.... For a long time I have struggled to describe my own understanding of political action without using such language but, to my own regret as a would-be pacifist, still find it the most illuminating way of describing my own experience. In my own defence, if we understand organised coercion or force as just one of many forms of power (Haugaard 2003) and war as ' the continuation of policy by other means' (Clausewitz 2007) then we might be able to claim that such words are helpful in describing policy processes, not seeing them as necessarily implying violence but rather as usefully describing aspects and facets of international development as a field of power.[6]

Conceptualising policy in terms of struggle and conflict comes naturally to me – possibly because of my Marxist upbringing. However, a 'contentious politics' approach to social change appears to sit uncomfortably with another way of viewing the world that has

significantly shaped the RPC research programme. I refer to the pursuit of social transformation through processes of deliberative democracy – communicative consensus based on the co-construction of knowledge – engaging with those with whom we are seeking to change the world through cultivating a shared understanding.

Police stems from the same etymological trunk as *politics* and illuminates policy as order, control and discipline (Wedel *et al.* 2005). Thus we could see politics as the process of deciding who will be in charge of the social order and policy as what you do when you are in charge. However, as discussed later, does this sequential thinking, enabled by the linguistic distinction, serve as a smokescreen? A smokescreen that obscures how ostensibly agreed and authorised statements of intent are actually to a large extent an outcome of temporary victories built on chance and compromise and as such are subject to challenge, obstruction, revision and downright rejection? The struggle over the last 12 years to maintain international policy on the status of women, as defined by the Beijing Platform for Action, is a case in point. It concerns the politics of who is in charge of the social order.

Policy is most often understood as something explicit – written down in a government document such as a White Paper, or enacted as legislation and supported by public statements of values and beliefs, by procedures and resource allocation. Yet, policy can also be understood to mean something tacit or implicit, only revealed through its consequences. Such policy is an expression of how those in charge believe society should be ordered. Thus, in post-Communist Poland policies for re-structuring the social services generated severe cuts in child care, making it much harder for women to go out to work (Fodor 2005). This is an outcome achieved 'accidentally-on-purpose' by policy makers who believed that women's place is in the home. Policy, in other words, can be seen not just as an instrument
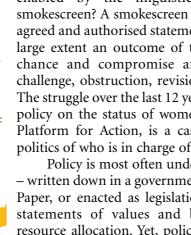
'The political understanding of policy tends to draw on language and metaphors commonly associated with warfare: strategy, tactics, engagement, outflanking, alliances, adversaries....'

for solving a publicly recognised problem but as a normative way of framing how the world should be.

Taking this latter approach to policy – what is sometimes called implicit policy and what Shore and Wright term 'making opaque structures visible' (1997: 17) – helps us understand how policy struggles are as much about meaning and values as about organisational arrangements and allocation of resources. At first glance, the recent lobbying by the international women's movements around the UN reform process, and the recommendations of the High Level Panel regarding an autonomous UN agency for women, appears to be about aid architecture and resources. Yet, when we hear what those involved are saying about this matter, we realise that the matter of organisational arrangements symbolises something much more significant. Thus, the official communiqué from the triennial meeting of the Commonwealth Ministers for Women's Affairs in Kampala (June 2007) included the Ministers' support of "the creation of a strong, unified independent and properly resourced UN entity for gender equality and women's empowerment". Underlying this statement was a passionately held view articulated in comments made at the conference that if those with the power to decide the final shape of UN operations were to ignore this recommendation of the High Level Panel they would once again be trivialising and disregarding women's rights and women's empowerment as a central development issue. An official from a government playing a leading role in the reform process and whose personal sympathies were with the Ministers told me in private that there was little likelihood of there being agreement to set up such a new entity when all the drivers for UN reform were about the presumed efficiencies secured from a single UN operational presence in developing countries. It is a neat example of the general point made by Shore and Wright that policy choices made to sustain the present (in this case, patriarchal) order

can be dressed up to be "mere instruments for promoting efficiency and effectiveness" (Shore and Wright 1997: 8).

Because the prospects for achieving the UN agency for women appeared to be unlikely, from a politically pragmatic perspective lobbying on this issue could be understood as a waste of time and energy – and this was my own personal view on the matter. However, in conversation with those passionate about it, I found that the prospects of success were not the principal factor in the choices they were making. In my personal notes of a meeting I attended in July 2007 of the Gender and Development Network in the UK I wrote:

> Interesting how some people see advocacy work as a matter of solidarity and of not letting others down, rather than analysing the chances of success ... Advocacy becomes an expression of sentiment rather than a response to the window of political opportunity?... I raised doubts concerning the chances of success in influencing the global decision making processes in train on the matter of the UN entity... I got the impression that people were a bit shocked by my commenting that just because something seemed a good idea it did not necessarily mean one should invest resources in working for it, if a successful outcome seemed pretty unlikely...

The next section begins with a short description of another case that illustrates the value of looking at such policy processes through a critical conceptual lens of the kind I have just applied, and in many respects typifies the dynamics described in the pages that follow it.

'Policy struggles are as much about meaning and values as about organisational arrangements and allocation of resources'
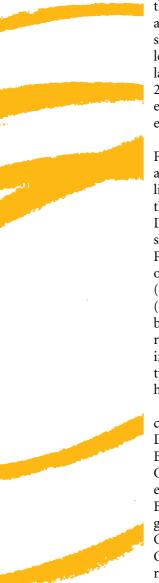
Conceptual lenses on policy processes

In September 2006, the World Bank launched its new 'gender action plan' (GAP). This plan may be treated as a document that can be downloaded from the Bank website, textually analysed and debated. It may also be understood, as I do in this paper as a dynamic process involving institutional arrangements, competing discourses and a changing set of actors, all of which are subject to the influence of overlapping networks of interest.

In 2005, the Bank appointed a new sector director for gender and development, who had previously worked for the Inter American Development Bank and before that had been one of the founders of the International Centre for Research on Women based, like the two international finance institutions, in Washington DC. This appointment occurred in the same year as that of World Bank President Paul Wolfowitz, whose lover had previously been working in the Bank as a regional senior gender coordinator. Possibly through this personal contact with a gender specialist, Wolfowitz made gender one of his policy interests during his two years at the Bank.

These two appointments happened when there was growing anxiety among international networks and actors that gender equality as a policy issue had become increasingly invisible in global spaces. Thus for some in the Bank and elsewhere, Wolfowitz's interest in gender matters was a stroke of good fortune. By early 2006, the issue had sufficient head of steam in the Bank for its gender and development unit to be able to organise a conference at which Wolfowitz gave the opening speech aimed at 'galvanising support for promoting gender equality and empowering women'.[7] On its website the Bank emphasised that it was undertaking this initiative "in partnerships with the Governments of Norway and the United Kingdom, the OECD–DAC Network on Gender Equality and the UN system". Norwegian and UK aid programmes were both at

that time reviewing their own gender equality strategies and forming an alliance with the Bank seemed a good strategy, particularly as there were such strong signs of leadership from the top. The Bank's new plan was officially launched by Wolfowitz during a visit to Norway in October 2006. The central message is that 'gender equality is smart economics' – investing in women and unleashing their economic potential is good for growth (World Bank 2006).

World Bank watchers such at the Bretton Woods Project criticised GAP for its failure to take a human rights approach and noted that the scope of the plan was very limited and did not include 'mainstreaming' gender into the Bank's policy lending operations.[8] Along with Norway, DFID decided to financially support the research, country studies and training activities that compose most of the Plan. The process of enrolling international aid organisations into financial partnership, either as donors (such as bilateral aid organisations) or as co-implementers (such as UNIFEM) was also a means by which the Bank's broader discourse of growth as the engine of poverty reduction could permeate into the more heterodox international policy spaces that gender and development typified tailor-made policy spaces were created to make this happen.

The Bank and the DAC Gender Network agreed to convene a special meeting in November 2006 and Norway, Denmark and the United Kingdom were enrolled in a Bank-led initiative for a high-level conference hosted by the German government in February 2007 on 'women's empowerment as smart economics'. In addition, in 2007 Bank staff had a very active and authoritative presence at global policy events such as the annual meeting of the DAC Gender Network and the triennial meeting of the Commonwealth Ministers for Women's Affairs where Bank representatives showed a film at the plenary opening session. They spoke in meetings, distributed documents

and had quiet one-to-ones with those individuals representing development agencies not yet fully on board with the Bank's discourse, either as financiers of GAP or in their own policy statements.[9]

Many of the gender specialists working for these agencies, even those working in agencies that publicly were most strong in their support for gender equality is smart economics, in private expressed some unhappiness with the Bank's single-minded instrumentalist approach. But the growth paradigm was now very much back on the global development policy agenda, strengthened by the Paris Declaration on aid effectiveness. Top management in these agencies liked working closely with the World Bank and if they were told that gender was something the Bank attached importance to, then they themselves might start taking it seriously. Gender specialists working for these agencies reasoned that they might do well to support – at least in public – the line that gender equality was smart economics because by making common cause with the Bank they might convince their own senior management that gender was a serious matter, whereas the human rights argument appeared to be losing ground in the post – 9/11 policy world. Gender equality as smart economics was better than gender equality disappearing entirely from the policy discourse. Thus an alliance with the Bank seemed a worthwhile endeavour.

While the Bank gender staff were using informal networks of interest and personal relations to promote their policy agenda, others, while signing up to the gender equality as smart economics, used their networks to keep alternative discourses alive, both at the same regular meetings just mentioned where the Bank was so active and also in promoting and contributing to tailor made official events, such as a conference on the Paris Declaration that brought together gender equality with human rights (OECD 2007). On occasions, the same high-level policy actors might appear

at these different venues to make statements with nuanced differences in emphasis which the strategic ambiguity of words such as 'empowerment' permits.

To understand the kind of process I have just described, I draw on conceptual lenses that have been used in recent years by colleagues in IDS concerned with studying policy as a contested and fluid process. (Keeley and Scoones 2003, McGee 2004). The actors/discourses/ spaces framework explains the policy process as a power struggle in which different actors, possibly employing a range of discourses (ways in which we interpret and act out reality), reproduce, establish, protect or seek to exclude others from those spaces where policy decisions are shaped. For example McGee uses actors- knowledge-spaces to look at the history of efforts to involve poor people and those who claim to represent them in influencing poverty reduction policy in Africa. This framework admits both organisations and individuals as actors. However, I prefer to define actors as individuals. Possibly, because of my experience as an individual actor operating within bureaucratic organisations that sustain the institutional arrangements of international development, I want to emphasise the heterogeneity and contestation that occurs within such organisations.

I therefore propose a modified framework consisting of institutional arrangements/ discourses /actors which I now describe. For each concept I consider the utility and disadvantages of this lens for policy activism.

Institutional arrangements

Institutional arrangements and associated bureaucratic organisations constitute the structure or building blocks of international development practice. These include artefacts such as conventions, treaties, white papers, conferences, reports, speeches, performance assessment frameworks, poverty reduction strategies as well as the organisations

that produce these – multilateral organisations such as the World Bank and UNDP, bilateral aid agencies such as DFID or Sida, Ministries of Finance in aid giving and aid receiving countries, as well as large international NGOs such as Oxfam or CARE. These organisations have certain traits which they share with the wider public sector and much of the voluntary and corporate sectors in terms of hierarchical management structures, ways of doing business through committees and consensual decision making, and new public management discourses of efficiency and effectiveness.

These organisations also have certain specific common and inter-linked characteristics which must be borne in mind when analysing international development as distinct from domestic policy processes. These include firstly, international development organisations being in a gift relationship (rather than entitlement or contract relationship) with the recipients of the resources they manage; secondly there is a larger spatial and social distance between them and the people for whom they are designing policies than would generally be the case between state institutions and citizens of the same country; thirdly, they are largely unaccountable to those for whom they exist, namely citizens in aid recipient countries; fourthly they are liable to have an idealised understanding of their own organisation and thus be particularly resistant to learning to change; and fifthly, there are specific problems of institutionalised racism that remain unrecognised and unaddressed.

Gifts are an expression of a social bond between giver and the receiver; this expression can be imbued with sentiments of power and even aggression. While both sides might want the relationship, of which the gift is the expression, in circumstances where one party – the donor – has more economic and symbolic resources than the other party, it is possible that the donor can pick and choose

amongst his recipients, withdrawing his favours from one and transferring to another, without the abandoned recipient having any right of redress. The receiver, having fewer resources than the donor, may find himself in a position of accepting a gift which he cannot refuse. Yet by accepting it, the recipient, however unwillingly, acknowledges and reconfirms the relationship and the values and discourses that accompany it.

That donors cannot be held to account by the recipient may be one of the attractions in providing aid. Foreign interventions in poor countries can buttress a government's prestige and political legitimacy back home without it having to be accountable for its actions to those on whom it is having an impact, as it would have to be when operating in the domestic arena. For example, when I was working for DFID it was observed by perceptive commentators from the South that the UK government was more enthusiastic about urging other governments to promote gender equality and women's empowerment than it was in taking action in this regard back home. Initiatives to promote gender equality become a gift that is self-evidently not valued by the donor while seemingly forced upon the recipient.

The distance between donor governments and the putative end-users of aid combined with the absence of any justiciable accountability mechanism makes it far easier to promote policy interventions detached from local realities than would be the case in a domestic context where citizens can use public protest, the media and eventually their vote to show policymakers that they are out of touch. Citizens in donor countries have no direct contact with the world of aid and cannot test what they are told against their own experience as they can regarding their own health or police services. There is no pressure on donor organisations to scrutinise their assumptions or to learn to think about the world differently. Thus, internal struggles over policy may

'Internal struggles over policy may be self-referential and disconnected from the experience and views of those that international aid exists to help'

be self-referential and disconnected from the experience and views of those that international aid exists to help. This detachment contributes to and is reinforced by a process of 'othering' which entails the invention of categories – 'the poor', 'Muslim women' etc. – and of ideas about what marks people as belonging to these categories. When those doing the othering are accorded or expect privileges and authority on the basis of their whiteness and are also vested with the power of the gift, we would expect many tensions in their relations with those they engage with from aid recipient countries, tensions that may be expressed in diverse and sometimes subliminal forms.

An institutional approach to enabling aid organisations to support social transformation might be to seek to change one or more of the generic characteristics mentioned above, for example by implementing diversity policies to tackle racism, by decentralising decision-making to respond better to local realities, or by making themselves more accountable, for example, the World Bank could establish more globally representative decision-making processes. The proposal for an autonomous UN entity for women, mentioned earlier, is an example of such an institutional approach to social transformation.

None of these organisations are monolithic. In seeking changes, the policy activist could take advantage of cracks or contradictions in organisational identity. DFID for example is both a Whitehall department of state and an international development agency with different institutional drivers that derive from these two identities. Goetz notes how the two identities of the World Bank – on the one hand, a bank and on the other, like DFID, an international development agency – creates space for pockets of resistance in which alternative policy models can be developed to challenge the dominant neo-liberal paradigm (2000). Of course, the heterogeneity of an organisation may not always be an advantage for a feminist

policy activist. She may secure the support of the Minister or head of the organization but encounter "Yes Minister" type of bureaucratic resistance that stops her favoured policy approaches from being implemented.

Discourses

A discursive approach to policy privileges an understanding of the inseparability of power and knowledge working through discourses that frame what is thinkable, visible and doable. Discourses are not only the way that things are said or written – for example the way that policy documents are produced (Apthorpe 1997). They are also procedures and activities that shape or 'frame' our view of reality. The basic units in the language of policy analysis – for example 'gender' – are not objectively real but socially constructed; through the power of discourse they become 'natural'. Keeley and Scoones refer to the discursive creation of the 'environment' sector (2003). In meetings of international development policy practitioners concerning what to do about 'cross-cutting issues' in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, I have heard 'environment' classified, along with 'gender' and 'human rights' as a 'soft' sector with all the associations of cuddliness on the one hand and flaccidity on the other.

'In seeking changes, the policy activist could take advantage of cracks or contradictions in organisational identity'

The discourse of ' acceptable evidence', based on the positivist framing of knowledge, limits the possibilities for seeing the world differently and therefore for seeking and finding relevant research done by those who have a different vision of how the world should be ordered (Boas and McNeill 2004). An example of the discursive power of what is 'evidence' comes from my recent experience in synthesising the findings from field research on citizenship. Research methods based on the co-construction of knowledge, activist involvement and stories of change provided exactly the kind of 'evidence' that a pragmatic policy activist employed by an international development

agency felt she could not sell to colleagues. It was a case of the 'wrong data'.

In its guidance notes on communication strategies for RPCs, DFID draws on the ODI RAPID work that makes a strong and at first glance sensible case for packaging information to suit organisations' cultural proclivities. Researchers are advised by RAPID to produce evidence that is 'credible and convincing', providing 'practical solutions to pressing policy problems' (Court and Young 2006: 89). In issuing such advice, however, they ignore the discursive processes by which power chooses what is 'practical' or 'pressing' or a 'problem'. They will give only the kind of advice that will get listened to by target organisations and policy actors. By default, they may find themselves supporting the very *status quo* that they may have originally set out to change. They are contributing to policy that confirms rather than changes social relationships. This is the dilemma that confronts gender specialists in official development agencies in relation to gender equality as smart economics.

A discursive approach to transformative policy change is discourse analysis. This looks for 'devices of framing, naming and numbering, the sense-making codes of composition, and the ways in which analysis and policy are driven as well as served by them' (Apthorpe 1996: 16). The first step to changing power relations is deconstructing a discourse to reveal it for what it is. It entails closely examining the concepts, practices, statements and beliefs associated with the discourse so that the effects of power can be made visible. Cornwall suggests that 'constructive deconstruction' can reclaim from development discourse 'corrupted' words like empowerment. "Dislocating naturalised meanings, dislodging embedded associations, and de-familiarising the language that surrounds us becomes, then, a means of loosening the hegemonic grip – in Gramsci's (1971) sense of the word 'hegemony', as

unquestioned acceptance – that certain ideas have come to exert in development policy and practice" (2007: 481–82). As such, constructive deconstruction can contribute to building new discourses that offer alternative futures or 'interpretative horizons' (Haugaard 1997).

A characteristic of discourse in complex multi-stakeholder public sector institutional arrangements, such as the international development sector, is its tendency to ambiguity as expressed in organisational artefacts such as conferences or speeches. This may be the unplanned outcome of political battles, temporarily resolved through discursive compromise as a way of 'muddling through' (Lindblom 1990). Alternatively, it may be intentional on the part of certain actors who deliberately use its ambiguity in a complex and changing environment as a strategy for keeping open different options and therefore opportunities for change (Davenport & Leitch 2005). Thus, discourse analysis alone without a complementary investigation of the practices and relationships of policy actors can lead to an over-emphasis on the constraining power of discourse.

Actors

In this paper I take actors to be those with whom the RPC seeks to engage – the politicians, bureaucrats, consultants, grassroots as well as national and international activists, journalists and academics concerned with the practice of international development. These include the people who work for or who otherwise have the power to influence the organisations discussed earlier including selecting from, challenging and changing discourses. In their classic work, Clay and Schaffer insist there is always 'room for manoeuvre' (1984).

An actor-oriented approach emphasises the discretionary power of individuals in the policy process. It can take a number of different theoretical perspectives. In anthropology, there has been a recent revival of interest in

the discretion of social actors who do not simply speak the script given to them by structure or discursive power. They are able to choose from a range of available discourses in managing relations between cultural and organisational interfaces (Long 2001). In the world of aid, policy actors translate and transform discourse to suit their own values, interests and ambitions; power is understood as the capacity to enrol others into the scripts they have written (Mosse 2005, Mosse and Lewis 2006).

A 'street level' bureaucrat (Lipsky 1980) approach would explore how officials working at the policy front line, for example in aid agency country offices or embassies, continuously exercise their discretion in what they choose to do and not do in their relations with other donors and with recipient organisations, thus shaping policy outcomes. Although no systematic research has been conducted on the significance of individual discretion in terms of promoting a women's empowerment agenda in international policy spaces, lobbyists and others are well aware of its effects from what they observe when individual officials move from jobs.[10]

Rational choice theory uses the concept of principal-agent to explore how policy intentions as determined by the legislature or Ministers can be subverted by public sector officials' pursuit of their individual interests which they perceive as distinct from those of their organisation. To align actors' interests with those of the organisation, positive and negative incentives are introduced to encourage individuals to contribute to what have been deemed as desired policy outcomes. This idea of behavioural change through incentive structures has become so 'naturalised' that it is almost a hegemonic discourse in the world of international aid policy. DFID's new Gender Equality Action Plan refers to 'incentives' required for staff to implement the plan; one of the 'guiding principles' of the World Bank's action plan, Gender is Smart Economics is

that the plan is based on 'incentives rather than mandates and obligations' (World Bank 2006: 3).

This view of bureaucrats as self-interested individuals, controlled through incentives of promotion prospects and performance-related pay is not held by all. Some view bureaucrats as playing a vital role in maintaining the public good as people with a moral commitment to impartiality and ensuring that the state delivers on its responsibilities, (Du Gay 2000). Skocpol provides historical examples from around the world of state officials as autonomous actors pursuing ideological goals and transformative strategies even in the face of indifference or resistance from their own political masters or the wider society (Skocpol 1997).

The concept of 'policy elite' as employed by Grindle and Thomas is an actor-oriented approach that focuses on decision makers and managers in government. It posits that their room for manoeuvre is shaped by the environmental context on the one hand, including by their own individual characteristics, socially constituted by the objective circumstances and the policy elite's perception of these; and on the other hand by the character of the policy issue itself. They argue that "systematic thinking about the inter-relationships and consequences of context, circumstance and policy characteristics therefore provides both an analytic tool ... and a first cut at developing strategies ... for change" (Grindle and Thomas 1991: 187).

This is a helpful framework for activist researchers who are seeking to change policy through an influencing strategy. It focuses on asking what room for manoeuvre is available to the policy actors and how we can help them identify the options. In contrast to the incentives approach related to theories of individual self interest, the idea of 'self awareness in policy practice' was stressed by Clay and Schaffer in terms of "All is to be questioned. Nothing is to be taken for granted. Nothing is innocuous" (1984: 192). Reflective practice is premised on the idea of the morally

committed bureaucrat. Based on theories of transformative learning it requires the individual to enquire into her assumptions concerning why and how she understands the world in a certain way. Discursive deconstruction is one means of doing this. Other means are through experiential learning such as role play, or by staying for some days with a family that is living in poverty.

On the other hand we might not want to commit ourselves to the potential discomforts of greater discursive consciousness and the accompanying ontological insecurity. Klouda (2004) looks at why this is, both in relation to how development practitioners may fail to persuade others to change even when they are in a desperate situation, and also in relation to how we experience similar difficulties when encouraging change in our own organisations. He suggests that it is extremely difficult for people to criticise their social environments because their identity is constructed within these environments. It is for this reason, he argues, that efforts of external change agents usually only have partial success. If we look at ourselves, we realise that most of us do not have the freedom to act upon a fundamentally changed view of the way we understand the world because it would threaten our sense of identity, our job, our family ties.... If we cannot, without extreme discomfort, take action despite a new consciousness, then it may be more comfortable not to change the way we think about the world and our place in it. How then can organisations and individuals change their society?
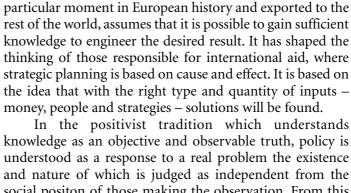
Networks and change

The rational–managerial perspective favoured in the world of international development policy assumes that planned intervention can change society in the way the planners wish. Most governments and development agencies operate

on this assumption, theorising change as progressive and achievable. This paradigm of change, developed at a particular moment in European history and exported to the rest of the world, assumes that it is possible to gain sufficient knowledge to engineer the desired result. It has shaped the thinking of those responsible for international aid, where strategic planning is based on cause and effect. It is based on the idea that with the right type and quantity of inputs – money, people and strategies – solutions will be found.

In the positivist tradition which understands knowledge as an objective and observable truth, policy is understood as a response to a real problem the existence and nature of which is judged as independent from the social positon of those making the observation. From this positivist point of view policies will emerge and be developed as decision-makers learn from best practices, as well as from past mistakes, and adjust policy accordingly (Utting 2006). A policy is understood as a kind of testable hypothesis in relation to a publicly recognised problem – if X, then Y. If, for example, we can find out why girls drop out from school then we can use that evidence to hypothesise that by getting rid of the cause (for example old-fashioned parental values and beliefs) through a policy instrument (e.g. providing incentives such as scholarships to demonstrate the value of girls' education), the desired effect of keeping girls in school will be achieved.

The conviction that such progressive change could be engineered triggered responses from subsequent generations of policy practitioners pointing out the frequent unintended and often unwelcome consequences of planned interventions (e.g. Ormerod 2005). It was suggested that "the impossibility of anyone's ever achieving a full grasp of the relevant complexities of society compels action in ignorance" (Lindblom 1990: 219) and that governments should cultivate relations of mutual respect between citizens, experts, officials and others to allow them

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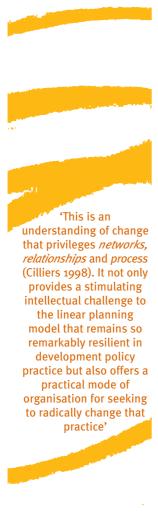
to learn together the results of such ignorant actions and to deliberate on what they want to do next.

Ideas of contingency and unpredictability are not new to students of policy; it is for example fully discussed by Clausewitz at the beginning of the 19th Century.[11] But Europe's subsequent preoccupation in that century with planned progress meant that these ideas disappeared from view and it is only relatively recently that incorporation of theoretical developments from biology (complex adaptive systems theory) and physics (quantum mechanics) into the social sciences have reinforced post-structuralist challenges to the primacy of instrumental rationality. These developments have supported the realisation that knowledge is partial and change is unpredictable, thus requiring a policy response of informed improvisation rather than mechanistic planning (Chapman 2002).

International development organisations, however, still strongly favour a rational–managerial perspective even at a time when, for example in British domestic policy arenas, complexity approaches are becoming almost conventional on issues such as health policy. The resistance to new ways of thinking about policy in international development practice may be attributed to development's organisational origins in European colonial expansion including the 'otherness' of the 'objects' of development planning and the racist origins and dynamics of colonial institutions out of which most development bureaucracies have evolved. The origins of 'development discourse' also coincided with and are bound up with discourses from Newtonian science, liberal economics, large-scale planning and modern bureaucracy (Geyer 2003).

The interesting thing about complexity theory is its non-linearity and openness to searching for the connections that may result in changes taking place in unexpected ways and through unlikely actors in quirky spaces. Those whom we might see as the global enemies of

women's empowerment – the Bush administration, religious conservatives – may unknowingly be making certain decisions or promulgating ideas and values that may have an effect quite different from what they might have intended.

Meanwhile, as a metaphor – which is how I intend to use it – complexity theory posits that change commonly occurs through self-organisation of the elements in a system that are in communication with each other. This is an understanding of change that privileges *networks, relationships* and *process* (Cilliers 1998). It not only provides a stimulating intellectual challenge to the linear planning model that remains so remarkably resilient in development policy practice but also offers a practical mode of organisation for seeking to radically change that practice (Urry 2005).

Complexity theory contributes the idea that it is fluid networks, such as the anti-globalisation movement, that change global society, rather than formal organisations and historically established institutions that act to preserve order and the *status quo* (Escobar 2004, Chesters and Welsh 2005). De Landa proposes a general theory of historical change in which over time networks lose their fluidity with the process of solidification into hierarchically organised structures. This in turn triggers new networks that then break down these structures and form new ones (De Landa 1997).

An understanding of networks as agents of change has influenced these policy studies which view policy as a contested activity of interest groups, in which nothing is ever permanent but always open to re-negotiation (Carlsson 2000, Mikkelsen 2006, Sabatier 1997). These studies replace bureaucracies – hierarchical, rules based organisations – as the main architects of policy with horizontal trans-organisational and flexible networks – 'discourse coalitions' associated around common interests in which different forms of knowledge engage and debate

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with each other (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003, Courpasson and Read 2004). These networks, described as 'epistemic communities' construct policy agendas through identifying problems and generating usable knowledge for mobilising political action (Haas 2004). Climate change is an example.

Keeley and Scoones suggest that a focus on policy networks has the advantage 'of moving debates beyond the oppositions of state and society that characterised earlier discussions about what drives policy change' (2003: 33). Bearing this in mind, it would be unhelpful to conceptualise a network as necessarily seeking to change the *status quo*. Networks may serve as defensive mechanisms responding to perceived challenges to current discursive and institutional arrangements. Most policy works to confirm existing relationships – like the *Red Queen in Alice Through the Looking Glass*, conservative policy actors are running to stay in the same place. Yet, because partial knowledge leads to unintended consequences, actions to preserve the *status quo* will result in some kind of change.

A particular kind of network of interest to the RPC is the trans-national advocacy network. Trans-national advocacy networks are seen as proliferating in international development and politics, working simultaneously within and across national and regional boundaries. With a values-based agenda, they are aiming for discursive and organisational change, framing issues to make them comprehensible to the broader audiences they are seeking to mobilise. In their study of trans-national advocacy networks, Keck and Sikkink (1998) suggest that the tactics of these networks include:

(a)   Quickly and credibly generating usable information and moving it to where it will have most impact – the AWID study on international financing of women's rights is an excellent example of such a tactic;[12]

(b)   Using symbols, actions or stories that make sense of a situation for distant audiences; the current UN-based campaign on sexual violence in conflict recently organised a meeting for member state delegations where a famous dramatist gave a personal report on what she had learnt about when visiting the eastern Congo;[13]

(c)   Seeking to hold powerful actors to account for their previously stated policies ; the UK House of Commons Select Committee on International Development provides parliamentary scrutiny of DFID's performance and the network of gender specialists working in British development NGOs recently organised themselves to send co-ordinated comments to the committee concerning DFID's failure to implement its new gender equality action plan;[14]

(d)   Affecting a situation through a 'boomerang effect' in which policy actors call on the political resources of the wider network to exert pressure on their own domestic scene; this partly explains the rationale for bilateral agencies supporting the World Bank's gender action plan in the hope that in due course the Bank in its global policy leadership role will, when (and if) it becomes enthusiastic about policies for gender equality, exert pressure back on the bilaterals.

Keck and Sikkink conceptualise trans-national activists as originating primarily from non-hierarchical research and advocacy organisations and local social movements – although they include the possibility of partcipants from international inter-governmental organisations, parliaments and government (1998: 9). The extent to which trans-national feminist networks understand policy activism as a

concept that cuts across constructs of state and society is discussed in a later section of this paper.

Trans-national advocacy networks can be understood as part of wider social movements or groupings of organisations brought together by a shared ambition to change existing patterns of power relations. As social movements, they possess at least some shared values and specific goals and make deliberate attempts to ally themselves with each other through joint action and coalitions (Scott: 132–136).

Scholars sometimes imagine a virtuous spiral of protest and policy change which may in fact not exist. A useful distinction can be made between the effectiveness of mobilisation in terms of creating a popular space to put an issue on the agenda and the actual impact such mobilisation may have on changing policy (Dery 2000). Meyer comments that "only by separating the opportunities for policy reform from those for political mobilisation can we begin to make sense of the relationship between activism and public policy" (Meyer 2004: 138). He suggests it is worthwhile to distinguish between those activists who plug away at an issue irrespective of whether or not the political climate is favourable, and those (described in the literature as 'policy entrepreneurs') who take advantage of some specific moment or window to seek a change. But as McGee comments, are they necessarily two distinct types of policy actor? Or one and the same who, so as to maximise his/her effectiveness, sometimes adopts one strategy and sometimes the other, depending on circumstances?[15]

Conclusion to part two: networks as integrating dynamics

From a linear planning policy perspective, women's empowerment is often treated by international agencies as something that can be designed as a blue print, rolled out

'Policy contributes to changing societal relations but it is debateable how much historical change, including transformations in gender relations can be judged as an outcome of successful purposeful effort'

and scaled up. However, in her website introduction to the Pathways programme, Cornwall suggests that empowerment is not always planned and may occur in sometimes surprising or unexpected ways. She proposes that we consider empowerment "as a journey along meandering pathways that may circle back on themselves, lead unexpectedly into deserts or verdant forests, and sometimes reach dead ends."

Cornwall's metaphor encourages a consideration of how change happens. It challenges the idea of one-way linear progress from a vision of what is desirable, moving onto a policy or plan being made, thereafter resourced and implemented; leading finally to a measurable difference of the kind those with the vision had intended. She removes governments and international agencies from their commanding position as shapers of change in women's lives and places women themselves centre stage. I support the proposition that this is how change happens.

Policy actions are shaped by relations of power operating through historically acquired values, ideas and forms of knowledge about society, namely discourses. These discourses change over time within a complex never-ending interaction between those who initiate a purposeful policy effort, and others who contest or passively resist it. The dynamics of this interaction in turn trigger real world unanticipated effects often resulting in yet further efforts to manage these consequences. Policy contributes to changing societal relations but it is debateable how much historical change, including transformations in gender relations can be judged as an outcome of successful purposeful effort.

This is not suggesting that purposeful and bureaucratically organised interventions have little impact – simply that we should not assume that they always do have impact. In some times and some places, little or nothing may change. In other times and places, those same interventions may make a big difference in the way

intended; and yet again in another time and place, they may have consequences different from those imagined. Keeping in mind this concept of how history happens I suggest a conceptually informed but practical programme of action by policy networks, working within and across formal organisations. It is an actor-oriented approach concerned with operational effectiveness in an indifferent or even hostile policy environment.

I have proposed three elements that can be useful in our understanding of policy; these are institutions, discourses and actors. No one of these elements can be understood by themselves – each is part of a greater conceptual whole. It is helpful to identify which particular element is the focus of effort for common tactics for policy change of the kind I have mentioned, such as changing incentive structures. Looking at specific tactics in this way still does not help us understand how the three elements connect with each other. *Who* exactly is attempting to change institutions, actors or discourses? Drawing on complexity approaches to change, I propose 'networks' as the active change agent that dynamically links the elements together. My argument is that relatively fluid and purposively non-institutionalised social actor networks are the drivers that make change happen – or stop it happening.[16]

Without the incorporation of networks as the integrating dynamo, the institutional element would be as very narrow in scope, excluding for example political parties, institutions of wider civil society such as churches or the multinational corporate sector. All these additional institutions can be taken into account through a policy network lens, allowing us to understand how they are implicated in influencing and shaping development discourses, actors and institutions.

Looked through the policy network lens, the case of the World Bank's gender action plan, discussed at the start

of this part of the paper, can be understood as a process by which networked actors working both as individuals and through organisational connections appropriate or contest (and sometimes stay ambivalent about) gender equality discourses. During the writing of this paper, officials within a certain bilateral agency debated whether it should use its resources to fund the Bank's plan, as other agencies have been doing. An initial agreement in favour was stopped in its tracks by some rapid networking, through emails and telephone calls by those in civil society, including academia, whose voice could be brought to bear to resist the discourse of equality is smart economics. A moment of self-congratulation by these resisters rapidly disappeared when following a formal submission by those in favour, the Minister decided to support the Bank because of the desire to be seen as signing up to something that the Minister's counterparts in other agencies had already approved.

'Relatively fluid and purposively non-institutionalised social actor networks are the drivers that make change happen – or stop it happening'

The policy process is always full of such twists and turns. While accepting the likelihood of unintended consequences arising from the complexity of relational interactions, I do also believe that purposeful value-driven collective action can contribute to societal transformation. I consider social movements as significant agents of policy change while at the same time appreciating state power and institutions as potentially autonomous actors with their internal struggles and contradictions – contradictions that include networks and individuals working across state–society divisions in pursuit of their own ideological agendas – conservative as well as emancipatory. Thus, any examination of policy processes requires looking at what happens within and between coalitions for change and resistance at the state–society interface, as well as within social movements, political parties and state institutions.

3. International policy on women's empowerment

In this part of the paper I discuss why the gender mainstreaming policy approach may have been over-influenced by more conventional ideas of policy than those I have just been discussing.
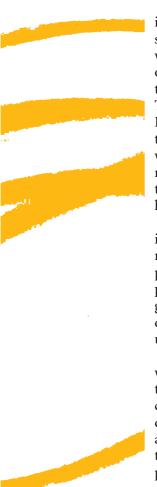
The gender mainstreaming debates

The run up to Beijing Plus Ten provoked a moment of significant reflection among international development researchers and practitioners. The overall conclusion was that the transformational promise of Beijing had failed to materialise in terms of a policy shift in favour of women's empowerment. One of the principal foci for interrogation was 'gender mainstreaming' which since the early 1990s has been current thinking in development practice concerning the means to women's empowerment. In what follows I use the term in the following sense:

> Gender mainstreaming has been defined as 'a strategy which aims to bring about gender equality and advance women's rights by infusing gender analysis, gender-sensitive research, women's perspectives and gender equality goals into mainstream policies, projects and institutions' (Association for Women's Rights in Development 2004, cited in Porter and Sweetman 2005: 2).

Much of the debate concerning the effectiveness of mainstreaming is about whether it is understood as working within or changing existing paradigms. Is it possible to secure the desired policy action 'infusing' gender

into existing ways of doing and organising things – and by so doing to incrementally secure real gains for women? Or will transformative policies for women's empowerment only be achieved through discursive and organisational transformation? (Rao *et al.* 1999, Rao and Kelleher 2003, True 2003, Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2002; Walby 2005, Daly 2005) One recent conclusion from these debates is that gender mainstreaming, understood as integrating women's issues into existing ways of working, has only made modest gains, while the more radical approach of transforming the paradigm and thus the policy agenda has had even less success (Porter and Sweetman 2005).

An explicit conceptualisation of policy is not always included in these debates. Differences in point of view may reflect implicit understandings, for example understanding policy as a top down state-initiated intervention or as a process of never ending negotiation between interest groups, or yet again as about how power and context shape discourse and action. However, there have also been some useful discussions which I now turn my attention to.

Most work on conceptualising policy in relation to women's empowerment has been undertaken in relation to the domestic context of the nation state. Thus Goetz critiques the liberal emphasis on the power of voice that does not consider the broader societal and institutional arrangements that shape the possibility of voice and that at the same time emphasises bureaucratic arrangements for putting in place gender equality policies while ignoring the role of organised politics. She argues rather that successful policy change for women's empowerment depends upon three inter-related factors, namely (i) the nature of civil society and the status and capacity of gender equality advocacy within it; (ii) the nature of the political system and political parties; and (iii) the nature and power of the state, including the bureaucratic machinery (2003).

Even in countries with the least constrained

environments in the world in terms of the nature of the state, civil society and the political system, activists need to be sensitive and alert to the possibilities for action, as Kabeer (2008) argues in her comparative study of Norway and Sweden where she uses a 'policy window of opportunity' approach to understanding the process. She points to the significance of the discursive strategies that feminists in these countries deployed in order to articulate their claims, their ability to mobilise women's organisations in support of their claims and their success in increasing their presence in policy and political structures.
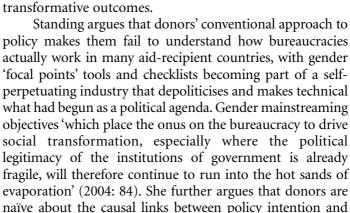
Kabeer's discussion of the Swedish case is particularly interesting because it is a rare example of change being led from within the state more than as a result of external pressure on state institutions. As she notes, the feminist activists working inside the state operated with the same pragmatism and careful lack of passion as those working nowadays inside international aid bureaucracies. In both cases it may be that, as du Gay would argue, the overall state machinery is sufficiently committed to the overall public good and the practice of rational decision-making for these to be real opportunities for shaping policy in favour of women's empowerment.

On the other hand, there has been a strong feminist tradition of questioning whether the bureaucratic form of organisation is by its very nature oppressive to women, as the institutional arm of male dominance (Calas and Smircich 1999, Ashcraft 2006). Even if we do not conceptualise bureaucracies as 'engendered organisations', we might see them as instruments of discipline that work to maintain the *status quo* sometimes despite the best intentions of those within working for change . Here as elsewhere, the debate concerns the "dilemma of autonomy (with on-going marginalisation) versus integration (with the risk of co-optation)" (Waylen 1994: 339–40, cited in Goetz and Hassim 2003). Thus, feminists face the dilemma

of engaging with the state's machinery so as to change it while running the risk of devoting all their time and effort to performing the tasks that the bureaucracy requires of them: fulfilling disciplinary procedural requirements, after which the machinery fails to deliver the hoped-for transformative outcomes.

Standing argues that donors' conventional approach to policy makes them fail to understand how bureaucracies actually work in many aid-recipient countries, with gender 'focal points' tools and checklists becoming part of a self-perpetuating industry that depoliticises and makes technical what had begun as a political agenda. Gender mainstreaming objectives 'which place the onus on the bureaucracy to drive social transformation, especially where the political legitimacy of the institutions of government is already fragile, will therefore continue to run into the hot sands of evaporation' (2004: 84). She further argues that donors are naïve about the causal links between policy intention and policy outcome, and unrealistically confident that gender and development planning can identify women's interests and devise pathways to advance them.

A concept of top-down linear policy implementation can seriously constrain an imaginative search for more appropriate understandings of the context and possible responses to that context. In a gender audit of DFID's work in Malawi, Moser *et al.* (2005) refer to 'evaporation and invisibilisation' of DFID's policy intentions as they were carried through in the programmes it partners with the Malawi Government. The authors consider the lack of internal capacity in DFID to be a factor that shapes this outcome and note the need for staff training as well as additional tools and methods. This technical response to the problem is one that is likely to be most acceptable to senior management – even if they do not implement the recommendations – particularly in the absence of any political commitment from Ministers[17] and of any strong external constituency for change.

'Feminists face the dilemma of engaging with the state's machinery so as to change it while running the risk of devoting all their time and effort to performing the tasks that the bureaucracy requires of them'

Without that political commitment and strong civil society mobilisation, it is very easy for gender equality work to slide down the slippery slope from an incremental approach to changing the paradigm, to becoming entirely instrumentalist and losing all interest in a transformative agenda. This is what appears to have happened in recent years in the international development policy arena. The language of rights and empowerment has disappeared from many official aid agencies' gender equality strategies and those with gender briefs inside international agencies conclude that the only pragmatic way to work in what they feel is an increasingly constrained environment is to fall back on the old efficiency arguments: "The Paris Agenda is about increased aid that donors want countries to have economic growth as a result of that aid and therefore if we want gender on the agenda we have to show how gender equality is important for growth".[18]

Gender mainstreaming is thus at risk of shifting towards an instrumental intent, based on the assumption that organisations will fail to deliver their other policy objectives, such as economic growth or girls' education unless arrangements are made to ensure that gender issues are addressed in every aspect of their work. The mainstreaming strategy being adopted *de facto* is to change procedures and introduce incentives rather than to change discourse, values and power relations.

One reason why the idea of gender mainstreaming has not delivered on its expectations may be because of how feminist activists were over-influenced by the idea of policy as a package that could be transferred to another context without turning into something different. In conditions where token compliance is required, for example to gain accession to the EU,[19] the transfer of policy understood as a bureaucratic notion, may appear to have taken place, but in terms of understanding policy as a site for resistance and contestation, we might find the effects to be quite different.

In this respect, Kabeer's recent study of the evolution of gender equality policies in Nordic countries (2008), referred to earlier is very relevant. She concludes that it is implausible to transfer specific gender equality policies from one part of the world to another. However, her study of the Nordic experience through a gender and development lens has confirmed that there are relevant lessons to be drawn from the processes which led to the adoption of these policies. Hence for researchers interested in influencing real world outcomes, the issue is not to identify transferable policies but to discern the pathways that led to certain policy processes achieving a transformation in gender relations while others failed.

To conclude this section, gender mainstreaming can be understood as a concept, a policy and a practical way of working. Much of the debate about gender mainstreaming focused on the last of these and concerns its failure as an instrument of transformation due to having to work from within existing paradigms and organisational forms. On the other hand, according to Porter and Sweetman (2005) neither has there been much evidence to date that a more radical approach to gender mainstreaming – with an explicit transformative agenda – has been successful. For some feminists 'the failure' of mainstreaming in global development institutions has led to the conclusion that it is a waste of time and energy to engage any further directly with them. True, among others, robustly disagrees:

> "The question is ... not *how* feminist scholars and activists can avoid cooptation by powerful institutions, but whether we can afford *not to* engage with such institutions, when the application of gender analysis in their policymaking is clearly having political effects beyond academic and feminist communities" (True 2003: 368).

'The mainstreaming strategy being adopted *de facto* is to change procedures and introduce incentives rather than to change discourse, values and power relations'

I take this to mean that while feminists need not necessarily support the discourse and practices of international development organisations, they should most definitely stay alert to identifying opportunities for changing such organisations. Rejecting gender mainstreaming as it is currently practised need not imply ignoring the potential of these organisations as a pathway of empowerment.

In the next part of this paper I enquire as to whether that potential would become more visible were we to substitute our concern with gender mainstreaming with one that addresses how power works in policy processes. As a proposition to be explored, we may discover that the effectiveness of successful feminist policy actors and networks is due to their recognising and addressing power in their discursive and organisational strategies, albeit very possibly in a discrete and subversive manner.

4. Bringing power into the analysis

A recent meeting of 'gender specialists' from international development agencies was listening to a presentation by a public finance management expert about how to make government budgets 'gender responsive'. They were told that as such budgets are increasingly being structured on performance outcomes (rather than inputs) it is vital to include gender sensitive indicators for measuring performance. One listener protested. She pointed out that indicators required a statistical basis. She mentioned the case of one aid recipient country where increases in women's literacy had been included as an indicator in the Performance Assistance Framework (PAF) negotiated between government and donors. Within a year this

indicator was removed because there was no statistical data base that could be used for monitoring progress. She pointed out even if such a data base existed (and for the last thirty years people had been campaigning for 'gender-disaggregated statistics') it would probably have been judged as invalid. "Every time we do manage to collect data, we are told it is the wrong data and that we need to collect more data..."

Later, at that same event, a senior international aid official representing the organisation hosting the event, and possibly at his first meeting of 'gender experts', asked those present "What is the barrier between evidence and decision-making?" It seemed as if this were the first time he had ever asked such a question. There was a moment's stunned silence. "A five lettered word beginning with "P", whispered one participant sotto voce at the other end of the table. The woman chairing the meeting smiled. "You tell us", she said to the senior official. But he said no more and the discussion moved on to other topics.

How I experienced this incident was to *think* as a researcher, one with privileged access to a closed meeting and to *feel* like I who used to be one of the international agency representatives around the table who stayed silent when this question was asked. I felt power as structure that kept us silent. Silent, not because our interlocutor would not have politely listened to the account of how we have the wrong data. Rather because I felt any explanation about power and knowledge would not have made sense to him, and therefore would have been a waste of time. More importantly, by proffering such a senseless explanation one would put at risk the credibility of the meeting itself. One could imagine him reporting to his boss about those 'silly women, talking a lot of philosophical rubbish'. On the other hand, someone in the meeting, possibly the chairperson, could have politely replied to his question with some comment such as "Yes that is a very good question to which

we are trying to find an answer." But we were not prepared to reinforce his own credibility by engaging with his question. Thus, I interpreted our silence to signal that he and we had different 'interpretative horizons' and that in the world of international development, it was *his* horizon that dominates policy practice. And that was the chairperson's response. *We* understood what she meant. I doubt that he did. It was a case of a senior official having come to believe in evidence based policy, ignoring how power operates to determine desirable policies with what is deemed as acceptable evidence used in support of these. It was a stand-off. Nothing changed.

'Interpretative horizons' are the way we make sense of the world and relate to what Haugaard describes as "the social consciousness which sustains structural practices" (2003: 97). Social consciousness – what Haugaard calls 'power created by systems of thought' (2003: 109) prevented any one at the meeting from referring back to the story of the 'wrong data'. Power stopped anyone remarking that "all things are subject to interpretation; whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth". On the other hand, this same remark – that would have been 'infelicitous' in the context of the international meeting – becomes a 'felicitous' statement by Nietzsche placed by Cornwall at the beginning of her article on the deconstruction of development discourse (2007).

"What gives an utterance the status of a statement is that it meets with felicity within a regime of truth production" (Haugaard 1997: 169). Unless, we are willing to appear insane or possibly worse, simply silly and irrelevant, we generally choose to make utterances which we believe will be confirmed by others as felicitous statements. Power operates through how we choose to act based on prior experience of others having confirmed or rejected our words and deeds. Drawing on Foucault, Haugaard describes "a regime of truth production" as the

structural constraints that constitute a local context of felicity and infelicity (1997: 169). That an utterance that would have been infelicitous at the international meeting just described, became a felicitous statement when published in *Development in Practice* indicates there is more than one truth regime extant in the world of international development. We are in a policy world of multiple interpretative horizons, engaged in 'a battlefield of knowledge' where women's empowerment and gender equality is one of the most contested sites.

Circuits and forms of power

In his work on power and organisational change, Clegg proposes three inter-locking levels or circuits of power (1989) . The most visible of these levels is 'episodic power' in which one person exercises power over another, for example, when a senior manager in DFID requires that research findings be communicated in the form of statistics as the only acceptable form of evidence. Such an interaction is defined and shaped by the rules, relations, resources and discourses that constitute the episodic power visible in the relation between the senior manager and the researcher. Each time the senior manager gets the researcher to do what the manager wants, the researcher is helping maintain the overall 'truth regime' and the systemic arrangements that have produced this regime. Power thus operates to maintain the *status quo*.

Using a chess analogy, Clegg invites us to think about the dispositional arrangements that give queens more moves than pawns and to consider the extent to which deeper systemic properties may allow the most powerful piece on the board, the queen, to reinterpret the rules so she can move not only as a queen but also as a knight. What chance does a pawn have in such circumstances? How can individual agency affect these fundamental systemic forces

'We are in a policy world of multiple interpretative horizons, engaged in "a battlefield of knowledge" where women's empowerment and gender equality is one of the most contested sites'

in which the rules of the game are established to sustain the *status quo*?

Despite everything however, Clegg argues, changes in power relations can and do take place. They occur by episodic collective agency, such as social movements, 'outflanking' through networks and alliances that mobilise resources and effectively communicate with each other to take advantage of crisis and instability in the dispositional and systemic circuits of power.[20] 'Outflanking manoeuvres' are, however, also practised by those actors seeking to conserve the system even, when some of the rules of the game may be altered because of the mobilising power of those demanding power. It is in these circumstances we may note that, for example, the introduction of legislation in support of women's empowerment may fail to change the underlying societal values that sustain oppression as expressed in every day practice. Changing the rules of the game may be insufficient without outflanking manoeuvres to tackle the discursive and systemic practices. The reverse may be equally the case. Efforts by networks at changing discourse are likely to be insufficient without also engaging with the actors and the institutional arrangements that structure their practice. Different elements of a network would each need to play to their strengths in 'outflanking' the different circuits of power. *As I shall go on to discuss, an effective network is a net that works simultaneously and opportunistically with all three elements of policy, namely actors, discourses and institutions.*

However to understand how that net can work in terms of outflanking manoeuvres we need to take into account some other ways that power is created. In his reflections on ways of creating power, Haugaard listed seven: (i) power created by social order, (ii) by system bias, (iii) by systems of thought, (iv) by tacit knowledge, (v) by reification, (vi) by discipline and lastly (vii) by coercion, which (unlike Arendt) he sees not as a form of power but as

a substitute for the creation of social power (2003: 109). With reference to tacit knowledge he discusses how actors that are not discursively conscious, not reflecting or critically evaluating the implications of their actions, may be helping reproduce the power structures that disadvantage them. Radical feminists, he suggests, make "actors aware of their aspects of their practical consciousness knowledge which they have never previously encountered in a discursive fashion" (Haugaard 2003: 101). This is often what is understood as empowerment – the 'power from within', an essential first step to the collective agency of 'power with' (Rowlands 1995). It relates also to the idea of the reflective practitioner discussed in section 2 in relation to common tactics for changing how actors understand the world.

Can additional ways of thinking about power help us in looking at the tactics for changing the development institutions mentioned in section 2? Haugaard's fifth and sixth ways of creating power are reification and discipline. Reification means a socialising process of naturalising what we are and what we do so we could not possibly imagine any other way of conceiving something. It is about something becoming 'essentialised' – for example, the idea of a 'fact'. Organisational structures, procedures, and the artefacts mentioned in my discussion of development institutions in section 2, are reified; we see them as natural. Routine becomes internalised. Discipline is the process by which that routine is established and sustained, "ensuring that actors have stable and appropriate practical knowledge to secure the reproduction of structures for existing power relations (Haugaard 2003: 108). Disciplinary power as 'governmentality' has become associated with post-modernist critiques of the practices of international aid such as rational planning exercises that transform political issues into technical questions of efficiency and effectiveness. This is typified for these critics by

institutional artefacts such as logical framework analysis (Ferguson 1994, Gasper 2000).

For those who believe that international development practice has a totalising capacity to objectify and control the South, efforts to change it, as distinct from seeking to abolish it, would seem pointless. The RPC, funded by international development organisations has however made a commitment to engaging with rather than walking away from the world of international development. Our commitment to radically shifting its policies means that we believe change is not only desirable but achievable. Such a belief must be premised on recognising that 'governmentality' or disciplinary power is not all-pervasive but rather that there are "contingent networks of practice [and a] diversity of actors, brokers, perspectives and interests behind universal policy models" (Mosse 2005: 14).

Having thus introduced power into the analysis, in part 5 that follows, I use my conceptual framework – in which networks are conceived as the dynamic link between institutions, discourses and actors – as a basis for specifically exploring how researcher activists could engage with and support other policy actors in efforts to radically shift policy. In doing so, I propose ten items of tactic and strategy, not mutually exclusive and often complementary.

5. A net that works: Strategies and tactics for influencing policy processes

In a discussion of the quest for gender equality, Gita Sen asks whether social activism is the key to effective translation of research-based knowledge into policy and if so what combinations of research and activism are required

in different circumstances. For Sen, research relates to struggles over discourse – truth regimes – whereas activism is about struggles for institutional change so that policy change is achieved when discourse becomes implemented. She notes that attempts to combine research with activism – the aim of the RPC – tend to be regarded askance, possibly because the disappearance of a neat division of labour places the actors in a position of competing for resources and recognition. She concludes that where social transformation is sought, both researchers and activist are essential but that the relationship between them can be complex because in "the terrain of power in which social change movements have to operate ... opponents can be obdurate or wily [and] ... alliances can shift like quick sand" (2006: 143).

In international feminist circles, Sen's understanding of 'activist' is the common one. Ackerly (2007), in her discussion of how trans-national feminist networks may exclude less well-connected and 'un-networked women', distinguishes between 'activists', 'academics' and 'policy-makers'. Selflabelling as "activist" by those working for transformative policy change within large bureaucracies – international NGOs, government and multilateral organisations – can be contentious with those whose activism is at the grassroots. Certainly, when I was in the former position, I saw myself as an activist, part of the women's movement, forming and working through trans-national networks and employing very similar tactics as those described by Keck and Sikkink (1998), including the boomerang effect. This particular controversy may concern a distinction between on the one hand those who understand the political strength of networks to be their potential to cut across formal organisational state–society boundaries, and on the other hand, those who, while prepared to recognise bureaucratic actors as possible allies or donors, nevertheless perceive them as on the other side of

an unbridgeable divide. Having been a bureaucrat who saw herself as an activist, I place myself firmly in the first camp.

The politics of making nets work for radical shifts in policy for women's empowerment require not only the reflexivity, patience and stamina to which Sen refers but also consideration of which role and identity any one of us can most usefully assume in a particular context. This brings me to the subject of strategy and tactics.

While strategy is generally understood to be associated with the long term and the big picture, tactics are understood as small, short term interventions. De Certeau (1988) sees those with a strategy as having a clear idea of the future and the power to achieve their desired goals. He compares it to tactics which are the small acts through which people without power can claw back some control and recuperate some sense of their own agency in situations that are contingent, constantly changing, and forever uncertain. De Certeau's views on strategy are therefore similar to those of modern 'evidence-based' planning of the kind currently deployed in international development, where the knowledge required to successfully implement the strategy is assumed to be available, provided the necessary resources are devoted to generating it. However, according to Clausewitz, the successful implementation of a strategy is much more challenging, beset exactly by the same problems of contingency and uncertainty that confront de Certeau's tacticians. It is in strategy that "intellectual complications and extreme diversity of factors and relationships occur" (2007: 134). In a tactical situation one is reasonably familiar with the current context of action, whereas "everything in strategy has to be guessed at and presumed".

In choosing and constantly reviewing her options, the policy activist will need to analyse the specific context of the institutional arrangements, discourses and actors involved, explore and develop her networks and undertake a power

analysis. For those with experience, all this is a matter of thinking in action, of craft and practical knowledge that shapes the policy process and real world outcomes (Schon 1991). A research network has more chance of influencing these outcomes if it learns this craft. With this understanding of strategy, a network has at its disposal a range of potential interventions which I now briefly itemise. This list derives from a critical reflection on my own experience, supported by empirical observation and relevant policy literature that illuminated intuitive practice.

Using strategic ambiguity

Discursive ambiguity has long been deliberately practised as a means to create and sustain a broad-based policy constituency and to manage conflicts within that constituency (Rydin 2005). More interestingly, as touched on earlier, someone in a position of authority in a complex and dynamic environment might consciously choose discursive ambiguity to strengthen support for a vaguely defined common goal such as gender justice or women's empowerment. In such circumstances, the strategic actor facilitates the space for others, each from their own vantage point, to make their own assessment of their situation and to choose and act upon the meanings *they* associate with this discursive goal. Such a strategy can generate creative responses of the kind the strategic actor is seeking although she would not have been able to say in advance what she would have liked these to be.

Strategic ambiguity presents a rather different face and runs other risks in conditions of recognisable discursive differences. Here it "provides a mode of exerting influence over stakeholders to stimulate desired behaviours necessary for the implementation of strategy" (Davenport and Leitch 2005: 1619). With the implicit support of their politicians who always like ambiguity so as to maintain a

'In choosing and constantly reviewing her options, the policy activist will need to analyse the specific context of the institutional arrangements, discourses and actors involved, explore and develop her networks and undertake a power analysis'

broad-based constituency, some feminist bureaucrats in international development agencies have deliberately remained vague on what is gender equality and how to achieve it in the hope that other actors such as economists in the World Bank may make the kind of investment in 'women's economic empowerment' – in accordance with the Bank's Gender Action Plan – that eventually might lead, whether they intend it or not, to rights-based outcomes.

For such a strategy to work, it is essential to avoid clarity, including for example new guidance or principles that are too specific as to why gender equality is important. The risks are associated with the capacity of another set of actors to impose *their* meaning in the absence of a countervailing narrative. Thus the policy activist must feel reasonably confident in her institutional power analysis that ambiguity is the optimal means to safeguard room for manoeuvre in circumstances where there is little chance of securing collective agreement to her desired meanings.
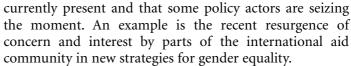
Taking advantage of an unstable discursive environment

Social movement theory tells us of the importance of deconstructing terms and ideas that have become taken for granted so as to reveal that what was understood as 'natural' is no more than a social construct and thus amenable to change. In this way, an issue can be reframed so as to expand the imaginative horizon of what is possible to change. Issues that may not previously have been visible can then be put onto the policy agenda[21] Opportunities to achieve this kind of outcome are enhanced if the wider discursive environment has become unstable, for example in times of religious or political upheaval when many ways of doing and believing are put in question.

A number of contradictory trends in the global policy environment indicate that such a moment of instability is

currently present and that some policy actors are seizing the moment. An example is the recent resurgence of concern and interest by parts of the international aid community in new strategies for gender equality.

Another such trend, arising from the 2003 invasion of Iraq and other incidents, is the growing scepticism of 'evidence based policy', which provides an opportunity to introduce other ways of knowing and acting for transformative change . Still another trend that appears to contradict the former is the current emphasis, as manifested in the Paris Declaration, on technical managing for results in which outcomes must be pre-determined, 'concrete and measurable'.[22] A further contradictory trend is the ever- increasing global policy interest in citizens' voice and participation – an interest that would appear to provide an environment for accepting a diversity of ways of knowing in which inclusive and deliberative dialogues are the basis for responsive and appropriate policy in a dynamic and often unpredictable political world.

These contradictions are signs of an unstable discursive environment that reduces the potential for policy to sustain the *status quo* and opens up possibilities for reinforcing efforts to change the discourse. The *implications for practice are that each episodic moment must be handled* with full consciousness on the one hand of the risk of reinforcing the *status quo* each time no resistance is offered to the dominant discourse and on the other hand of the risk to credibility, job or research grant of manifesting open resistance. The strategic solution is to use what Clegg describes as 'outflanking manoeuvres' to reinforce discursive change and to further unsettle those working to protect the *status quo*.
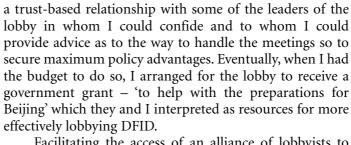
Outflanking manoeuvres

The strength of this concept is its focus on political activity rather than on organisational change, the latter being the current trend in gender mainstreaming. For outflanking manoeuvres it is networks and alliances across and between organisations that are seen as the instruments for changing power as distinct from formal organisations that tend to be preservers of the *status quo* and perhaps dependent on conservative networks for their survival.

Feminists working inside an international organisation will mobilise human and financial resources through alliance-building, being aware of and making use of networks within and beyond their own organisation to support their agenda. Alliances with civil society networks help the latter gain access to financial resources which can then be used to exert external pressure on the organisation concerned.

In 1985 an informal network of feminists lobbying the UK Government on women in development matters formalised itself into a development section within the Women's Organisations Interest Group (WOIG) of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations. In a path-breaking decision in 1986 the newly appointed Minister for Overseas Development, Chris Patten instructed his officials to hold regular meetings with the WOIG and these meetings with the gender lobby continued during the whole period up to the Beijing Conference in 1995. During that time the WOIG transformed itself into the National Association of Women's Organisations (NAWO). Later still the currently functioning Gender and Development Network was established, in which gender specialists from the major British development NGOs participate. Many of the civil servants who were persuaded by me to meet the lobby at our regular meetings, saw it as an adversarial relationship, as indeed did some of the members of the lobby. Nevertheless, when working for DFID, I established

a trust-based relationship with some of the leaders of the lobby in whom I could confide and to whom I could provide advice as to the way to handle the meetings so to secure maximum policy advantages. Eventually, when I had the budget to do so, I arranged for the lobby to receive a government grant – 'to help with the preparations for Beijing' which they and I interpreted as resources for more effectively lobbying DFID.

Facilitating the access of an alliance of lobbyists to policy spaces is strategic, provided that there is a shared transformative agenda and that both the insider activist and the alliance leaders do not let the logic of the bureaucracy co-opt the alliance to its own agenda of conserving the *status quo*.

Networking has of course long been a staple of feminist global action (Tickner 2001, Moghadem 2005). It reflects a tradition of working through trust-based alliances in opposition to the dominant discourses and formal structures that the networks are seeking to change. Successful networking requires from those involved an intensive investment in relationships with an evident need to balance this with time required for the many activities which practitioners and researchers are required to undertake as part of their formal organisational professional obligations. The high cost of this commitment is reflected in a recent email from a practitioner working inside an international organisation concerning not being able " to draw a line between my paid job and what I do outside work. It's been a life choice not an approach to work".[23]

Finally, outflanking manoeuvring may not only be about deliberate alliance-building. Policy activists working from inside mainstream organisations or networks may keep their distance from external radical actors while using them as a 'threat' as an incentive for organisational change and new policy responses. When working in DFID, I frequently made the women's lobby to be more of a menace

than I knew it to be – "we risk getting some really difficult parliamentary questions unless we change our position on this".

Selective use of episodic resistance

Individual agency matters. Yet interestingly this is rarely recorded in the world of development policy where change is attributed to the system not to individuals (Mosse forthcoming, 2008). In my earlier discussion of episodic power, I noted that with each episode in which an actor submits to the *status quo*, power is reinforced. Yet, resistance to the *status quo* may not always lead to the loss of a job or a research grant but may rather shift the discursive or institutional arrangements. When is it a good moment for Clegg's pawn to refuse to play the game? An occasion that comes to mind is when the Permanent Secretary of DFID, my ultimate boss, offered me a ride in his official car to take the opportunity to tell me in private to back off from proposing to the Minister that the Department have a separate policy document on rights based approaches rather than, as he wished, that human rights be integrated into a forthcoming policy paper on good governance. Various non-specific suggestions were made as to the unfortunate consequences that might arise from my not accepting his suggestion. Although I did not express any objections at the time to what he wanted, I continued to pursue the drafting and submission to the Minister of a separate paper. In the event, the Minister accepted the proposal to issue a separate paper on human rights.

At a workshop on rights and power organised at the Institute of Development Studies for senior staff from international aid agencies there was a lengthy discussion concerning the challenge of experiencing pressure towards uniformity. One participant said:

In our organisation there is a term for stepping out of "group think"; if you have a thought that is not along the railroad of thoughts, you must voice and use it carefully. Otherwise you might be carrying out a "career limiting move", more commonly referred to as a CLM. (Hughes *et al.* 2005: 66)

If this workshop could have taken the discussion further, we might have usefully identified examples of episodic resistance which did not result in a 'career limiting move' – or at least, not in the short term. In the case of resisting the Permanent Secretary, I was aware that what one might call the tide of history was at that moment on my side in terms of several other aid agencies having already signed up to rights based approaches. Furthermore there was a politically influential network of human rights and development activists that had strong connections within the new Labour government and were strong supporters of giving a high profile to rights within UK development policy. Finally there was a difference in view between the Permanent Secretary and the Minister on this issue. Thus, by so crudely showing me his hand, the Permanent Secretary revealed the weakness of his position.

Many famous examples of successful resistance reveal themselves to be the final public act of a network's long and careful preparation. During the preparation, the resisting individual actor had already learnt her script even though the actual moment of resistance was unplanned and triggered by a specific event (Lovell 2003). Identifying such stories is one of the objectives of the Pathways research on feminist activists in global policy spaces.

'When working in DFID, I frequently made the women's lobby to be more of a menace than I knew it to be'

Introducing new meanings into dominant rules of the game

The history of social institutions such as marriage, and political institutions such as parliamentary democracy, are evident examples of the formalities being conserved while the content continues to change. The detailed examination of any such institutional change would reveal a combination of purposeful (policy) action and unanticipated evolution. The effective policy activist identifies the opportunities for introducing discursive shifts within dominant rules of the game.

An example is the well-documented and well-analysed global campaign against violence to women. As part of that campaign, the 1993 World Development Report was used to demonstrate that violence against women brought health and economic costs. At first glance, such an instrumentalist approach appears repugnant – and that was my reaction at the time. However, within mainstream organisations such as DFID, for the first time it made violence against women a permissible subject of discussion, providing an entry point for subsequent recognition that this was a human rights issue.

In the policy environment of international aid, the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, with its emphasis on bureaucratic efficiency, has been seen as a setback by those who hope that aid can be an instrument of social transformation. Yet the discourse associated with the Declaration provides opportunities for feminist policy actors to create discursive shifts in the rules of the game while at the same time appearing to demonstrate full commitment to the Paris agenda. The discourse is sufficiently ambiguous to provide the opportunity for imaginative networks to turn Paris on its head. For example, the emphasis on results, broad-based ownership and accountability could be a chance to probe 'results for whom' and 'accountability to whom'.

Using established institutional arrangements for conspiratorial purposes

The safest spaces for learning, sharing and plotting are those that are established for other more conservative purposes which the feminist policy actor then subverts. In the 1980's, the DAC Gender Net was such a safe space, albeit with the appearance of being a formal coordination body within the OECD structure.

In addition to the conspiracy being less obvious because it is taking place within the existing organisational arrangements, it is likely that such spaces can be financed from existing budgets. As in Judo, the conspirators are making use of their opponents' resources to act against them. The activist's time is covered as part of her routine duties and she will write a conventional back to office report that omits the subversive component of the meeting.

Nevertheless, the management of such a space requires constant attention to avoid it being captured to perform only its ostensible purpose. This may happen if gender specialists who are conservative instrumentalists rather than feminists come into the space, not just as passive observers but as active protagonists seeking to use the space for their own conservative discursive cends. The recent example of conservative women's networks engaging in UN institutional spaces to seek to roll back global policy norms on reproductive rights is a case in point (Mullings 2006). This brings me to the importance of recognising and neutralising the opposition.

'Many famous examples of successful resistance reveal themselves to be the final public act of a network's long and careful preparation'

Neutralising the opposition

"Any one who proposes a change will have only the lukewarm and diffuse support of those who will benefit by the change, but the vigorous and concentrated opposition of those who will be damaged by it" – Disraeli

In a situation of discursive instability, those working to sustain the *status quo* may be as imaginatively active as those working for change. They also are likely to use many of these same tactics of outflanking through networks, exploiting contradictions and creating safe spaces for conspiracy. They may co-opt transformative discourse, using terms such as 'empowerment' to reinforce a conservative position (Cornwall and Brock 2005). They may even manage to persuade feminists that they share the same goals and extract from them scarce financial and human resources for research and use them to get access to other policy spaces which they can then subvert – all in the guise of representing organisations or networks that share a transformative agenda although using instrumentalist language as a cover. Indeed, in some cases, policy activists may find themselves supporting the *status quo* while still believing they are changing things. Feminist engagement with the World Bank is a case in point (True 2003).

Of course, things are rarely so black and white. Actors' ideas change over time and they may become more or less radical depending on whom they associate with and the effectiveness of communication efforts by the networks mobilising for change. Collaborative research of the kind shaping the work of the Pathways consortium is a means for developing discursive consciousness and an awareness that strategic change opportunities are available even in an apparently hostile environment.

Nevertheless, subversive steps may need to be taken to keep open the space for such developments to take place. A well-positioned policy activist responsible for developing the agenda and for inviting the participants to an international meeting may feel institutionally compelled to invite the opposition – but will then suggest that the meeting could benefit from the presence of a 'critical friend' to be invited to reflect at an appropriate time during the meeting on the key emerging issues. With luck, those at

the meeting who might have been convinced by the opposition may be won over by the critical friend. Another tactic is to draft the speech of the important personality invited to open the meeting. Unaware of the issues being debated at the meeting he or she will unknowingly provide discursive ammunition to neutralise in advance the presentations and documentation of the opposition.

The opposition will of course be using its own tactics, discursive or otherwise. The policy activist needs to be alert to the possibility of dirty tricks. Once, when I was leading a group of government bureaucrats who were policy activists in a visit to lobby for change in a certain global organisation, I was told by someone from that organisation, hostile to the purpose of the visit, that he had just received a call from the director general's office that our scheduled meeting with the director general – the high point of our visit – had been postponed for half an hour. When we therefore duly arrived thirty minutes later than our original appointment, we discovered that no such message had ever been sent and that we had lost the chance of meeting the director general who eventually, much annoyed, gave us a few minutes of his time.

'The policy activist needs to be alert to the possibility of dirty tricks'

Working with paradox and contradictions within international development practice

In her comprehensive review of gender mainstreaming (2003) Walby argues that unless organisations work through the contradictions between a desire to use instrumental reasons for promoting gender and a desire to promote gender equality in its own right, gender mainstreaming will tend to support the *status quo*. However, if, as I suggested earlier, large organisations tend to be heterogeneous 'battlefields of knowledge', full of contradictions and struggles, a policy activist would seek to manage and exploit these contradictions rather than resolve them.

These contradictions between the instrumentalist and transformative agendas can be managed by using the instrumentalist agenda to make the *status quo* case for mainstreaming while working towards more transformational goals, concerning which the activist stays silent except with co-conspirators.

If we look at the history of international aid I suspect we would see a cyclical pattern of decades when aid institutions sign up to a socially transformative agenda (and those working for women's rights take advantage of this) and decades when development is understood as growth. When transformation is mainstream talk – as was the case in the 1960's and 1990's – senior management in aid organisations are more likely to be prepared to sign up to institutional change.

Rao and Kelleher (2005) discuss how to generate power to change organisations through organisational politics; institutional culture; organisational process; and programmatic interventions. The challenge is to start thinking in this way in a context that does not seem favourable to a transformative rather than a growth agenda (although a policy environment is always complex and contradictory and issues like climate change and security may offer interesting opportunities for bringing transformation centre stage again).

Planned improvisation

> Change can only happen as a result of surprise, otherwise it would not occur at all, for it would be suppressed by the forces that are in favour of the *status quo*" – Albert Hirschman, quoted in Dery: 38

When joining DFID in the late 1980's, I discovered that the principal lobbying issue for the civil society gender network (at that time led by someone from the British Council) was

a quota to be set to increase the number of women to benefit from a large scholarship programme for students from developing countries. Accordingly, I made the lobby's case at a meeting with senior management to discuss how DFID could demonstrate that it was not entirely indifferent to what were then referred to as women in development issues. My seniors wanted to be nice to me, a newcomer burdened with a difficult task. Nevertheless, a quota was out of the question as being contrary to the way the British Civil Service does things. Perceiving that they wanted to throw me a placatory bone, on the spur of the moment, inspiration led me to request that we draw up an organisation-wide action plan and present this to the lobby to show our good faith. I took them by surprise and without sufficient reflection, presumably unaware of such a plan's potential for holding themselves accountable to an external audience (provided the lobby stayed robust), management agreed to a policy measure far more radical than what I had originally requested.

Earlier, I discussed how the application of complexity theory to social transformation would favour an explanation of change through the action of networks, relationships and process, rather than that of formal organisational structures. Such a theory also assumes that linear planning based on predictable outcomes is impossible; taken to its extreme this would imply the non-ideological 'muddling through' approach to policy advocated by Lindblom (1990) and others. However, a commitment to emancipatory change requires rather more shaping of the agenda even while recognising the uncertainty of outcomes.

As already suggested in the previous section, we should think about policy and social change in a manner that embraces rather than ignores the contradictions of which there are many in global policy processes. Staying 'open to paradox' suggests that outflanking manoeuvres

must be guided by improvisation. As in jazz, the players have a shared idea of what they might play, but the interaction of the instruments as they perform is different each time. The score becomes a living reality rather than something determined in advance (Clegg *et al.* 2002). We might call this 'planned improvisation' that responds to the dynamics of the political environment.

Because there is a shared vision while plans have to constantly change, trust between members of the band is a fundamental ingredient of good jazz; whom you choose to play with shapes the outcome. For feminist policy actors this requires an intensive investment in long term relationships that often become supportive friendships. Thus, in the story just told, the development of an action plan and advising the lobby as to how to monitor its implementation, did, for some time at least, help to change DFID's performance.

Recognising and addressing the consequences of power

Power in global policy spaces is not absent from the relations between feminist policy actors. Researchers and practitioners from North and South may not enjoy smooth relationships in promoting common policy objectives (Sen 2006) For example, a challenge to the Pathways programme will be to encourage feminists working in global spaces to see themselves as much worthwhile subjects of research, as are women living in poverty. Debates during the RPC's inception phase concerning what is women's empowerment were largely non-reflexive and people tended to look 'out there' rather than at themselves as global actors. At a scoping workshop, for example, participants were divided into small groups and asked to reflect on personal experiences of empowerment. The purpose of the exercise had been to encourage participants to draw on their experience to consider how change

happens and discuss these ideas further and reflect on how we could think of them with relation to the RPC's research. But some felt this to be an irrelevant exercise on the assumption that experiences as elite professionals had nothing to do with the women 'out there'.

In their desire to focus on the grassroots and dismiss as irrelevant what happens in global spaces – including their own participation therein – there was a note in some of the participants' comments at the workshop that implied a dichotomy between "us" and "them" – in other words, 'us' who are in the room, the experts, 'us' the powerful, us who have been there and know the problems and how to solve them, and on the other hand, 'them', the powerless who are legitimate subjects of study. Encouraging greater reflexivity as a means of recognising rather than rejecting one's own positionality as academic expert or senior bureaucrat can offer the possibility of practising what has been described as 'a knowing humility' (Lennie *et al.* 2003).

Feminist researchers have developed collaborative and participatory approaches to framing problems and using democratic deliberative practice to identify the research required for promoting socially transformative policies (Fonow and Cook 2005). Such collaborative approaches, developed to reduce the academic's 'power over' her research subjects, face difficulties when researchers' collaborative and egalitarian approaches are rejected by their research subjects who also hold the purse strings. What do we do when told by our donors we have the 'wrong data'? Choosing when to be contentious and when deliberative is likely to be an important challenge for the RPC.

'We should think about policy and social change in a manner that embraces rather than ignores the contradictions of which there are many in global policy processes'

6. Conclusion: Implications for the RPC

This paper has been about policy-making and policy effects as a social and political process that can transform values and create new sets of relationships. The approach has been to combine a review of some of the current social anthropological, sociological and feminist literature concerning policy processes in general as well as gender equality in particular, along with illustrations and cases from my observations and experience as a policy activist.

The RPC is interested in all the different pathways by which gender relations may be transformed, of which policy, the subject of this paper, is but one. To help my readers become more effective policy actors for women's empowerment, whether they be researchers, civil society activists or feminist bureaucrats, I have sought to explore what policy means and how it works in general in relation to maintaining or changing power relations. I have proposed a conceptual framework of institutions/ discourses/actors. Drawing on complexity approaches to change, I propose to use 'networks' as the active change ingredient that dynamically links these three elements together. I suggest that an effective policy network is one that works simultaneously and opportunistically with all three elements. I have introduced power into this conceptual framework, suggesting certain approaches for identifying strategies for policy change. More systematic work would be required to take this forward. In the present paper I have done no more than sketch out some approaches largely learnt from my own observations and practice; these approaches remain to be integrated more consistently into understandings of power relevant to the RPC. A first step would be to develop further

understandings of power into some of the current projects within the RPC's global hub.

This paper is work in progress. Its purpose has been to identify how to link our research and communications with policy change. Women's empowerment is often treated by international agencies as something that can be designed as a policy blue print, rolled out and scaled up. While I discovered that this is not how members of the RPC understand policy, it also became apparent that what we understand it to be may be quite different, depending both on the context in which we are undertaking our research and on the nature of our experiences of policy activism.

At the start of this paper I questioned how the RPC could fulfil its stated objective of inspiring a radical shift in policy by engaging from the start with policy actors, if we had no clear or shared understanding of policy. Already, in the introduction, I recognised that our diverse locations and policy contexts would make it impossible, as well as unadvisable, to secure consensus within the RPC on this matter. Thus I have confined my scope to exploring ways of thinking about and acting upon policy with reference to international development organisations, discourses and actors. While such a field of enquiry is of variable significance to our research, it has some relevance for all, bearing in mind the potential reach of and response to global policy processes in all the countries from which consortium members originate.

Awareness of the different approaches to conceptualising policy combined with strategies for policy engagement can contribute to change. One of the challenges facing those activist networks seeking to promote a transformative empowerment agenda in global spaces is making time for reflection and discussion concerning how to make policy change happen.

The conceptual framework proposed in this paper is just one possibility to start such a process of reflection. The

network approach to policy change best explains my own experience as a policy practitioner. While accepting the likelihood of unintended consequences arising from the complexity of relational interactions, purposeful value-driven collective action can also deliver hoped for effects. I thus consider social movements as significant agents of policy change, while at the same time appreciating state power and institutions as potentially autonomous actors with their internal struggles and contradictions – contradictions that include networks and individuals working across state–society divisions in pursuit of their own ideological agendas – conservative as well as emancipatory.

Earlier, I raised questions concerning tactics and strategy and whether it is helpful to make a distinction between the two. The kinds of activities and ploys I have been describing in part five may well be considered as tactical, in that they may effect change in a locality but have no impact on the bigger picture. Some of what I have suggested is subversive – weapons of the weak through which people without power can claw back some control and recuperate some sense of their own agency in situations that they perceive as contingent, constantly changing, forever uncertain (Scott 1985, De Certeau 1988). However, drawing from ideas of complexity discussed earlier in this paper, I have followed Clausewitz in suggesting that the good strategist is equally aware that her assessment of the political situation is very partial and limited and is therefore full of surprises. Perhaps the difference between the tactician and the strategist is that while in situations of uncertainty they employ similar methods, the strategist has a positive big picture vision of how society should change. With such a vision, she may give more thought to the choice of tactic in any particular context. Experientially, she may be more alert to tactics' potential for more than just non-transformative resistance

to the possibility of significant effects in unstable discursive environments. For the RPC, this approach has implications for our research projects, our communication and for capacity development activities in engaging with and supporting networks for policy change in favour of women's empowerment.

In particular, further analytical and conceptual work is required to explore how this conceptualisation of policy can practically inform the consortium's communications strategies. How do we take advantage of existing institutional arrangements, which actors do we reach and how do we learn about the networks to which they belong, which discourses do we deliberately seek to change and which do we help leave ambiguous?

Finally, at the moment the RPC is using a logical framework as its method for assessing its impact and a first step would be to identify whether 'the net that works' approach could be turned into a practical and complementary tool for looking for impacts of a kind that the indicators in the logical framework might not reveal. More work is required during the coming year to identify how the framework proposed in this paper could be used for making judgements as to our success concerning inspiring a radical shift in policy.
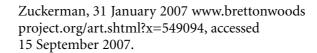
Notes

1 I am immensely grateful to Andrea Cornwall for her constructive criticism and encouraging support without which this paper would never have been finalised, as well as to Rosemary McGee for a most thoughtful and helpful review of the draft paper, and to Angela Little for her useful feedback.

2 See statement on the home page of www.pathwaysofempowerment.org

3 A phrase noted from a meeting of the OECD DAC Network on Gender Equality, 29 November 2006.

4 Our funding proposal to DFID for this research programme consortium observed "there is a mismatch between public policy practice and the challenge of securing and sustaining tangible improvements in women's lives. Governments and international agencies have been largely travelling motorways to nowhere in changing power relations in favour of women living in poverty" October 2005.

5 From a note written by Tina Wallace reporting a meeting she organised at Queen Elisabeth House, Oxford, 5 October 2006.

6 Here, I am using 'field' in the sense given by Bourdieu as "a social arena within which struggles or manoeuvres take place" (Jenkins 1992: 84).

7 http://web.worldbank. org/WBSITE/EXTERNA/ NEWS/0,,contentMDK: 20823692~pagePK: 64257043~piPK: 437376~theSitePK: 4607,00.html, accessed 15 September 2007.

8 'Huge Gaps in the World Bank's Gender Action Plan', Elaine Zuckerman, Gender Action. Comment, Elaine

Zuckerman, 31 January 2007 www.brettonwoods project.org/art.shtml?x=549094, accessed 15 September 2007.

9 See Robin Broad's fascinating article concerning the Banks 'external projection' activities (2006).

10 Although there is a considerable literature of course on actors' discretionary behaviour in relation to women's empowerment policies in other contexts, for example fieldworkers in NGOs.

11 I am grateful to Leonard Van Djin for referring me to Clausewitz's perspective.

12 The campaign by the Association for Women's Rights in Development 'Where is the money for women's rights?' www.awid.org

13 Personal communication from Anne Marie Goetz

14 See www.publications. parliament.uk/pa/ cm200708/ cmselect/ cmintdev/64/6403.htm

15 Personal communication.

16 I stress social actor to distinguish my concept of network from Actor Network Theory which is based on the idea of 'actants' that include other living organisms as well as artefacts in chains of translation.

17 The new DFID White Paper (2006) demonstrates the lack of such commitment.

18 Remark made at the June 2006 meeting of the DAC Gender Net.

19 See for example the interesting article by Krizsan and Zantai (2006).

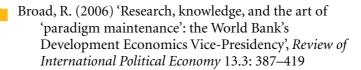20 To extend Clegg's analogy and to further illustrate the point, we can imagine that the pawn could form an

alliance with some of the other players and refuse to play the game (the episodic circuit), suggest the rules of the game be changed (dispositional circuit) or simply stop playing chess and start a game of draughts in which all the pieces are equal (systemic circuit).

21 www.frameworks institute.org is an example of a US organisation that provides guidance on how to do this.

22 See World Bank 2006 'Gender Equality as Smart Economics'.

23 Email to author 8 January 2007.

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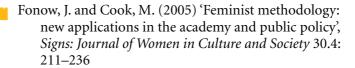
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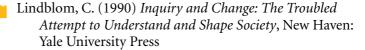
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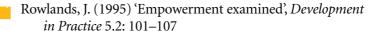
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Pathways of Women's Empowerment is an international research consortium funded by the UK government's Department for International Development (DFID). Co-ordinated by the Institute of Development Studies in Brighton, UK, the consortium is collectively run by six partners: BRAC University, Bangladesh; the Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy (CEGENSA), Ghana; Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK; the Nucleus for Interdisciplinary Women's Studies (NEIM) at the Federal University of Bahia, Brazil; the Social Research Centre (SRC) at the American University in Cairo; and UNIFEM. Our research seeks to ground emerging understandings of empowerment in women's everyday lives, trace the trajectories of policies affecting women's empowerment and explore promising stories of change to find out what works and why to advance gender justice and equality for all.

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