



Against the Feminization of Policy

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In recent times, there has been avid policy interest in paradigms of enablement. From declarations that the poor are “heroic entrepreneurs” (de Soto 2000) to recommendations on how to capitalize on the social capital of poverty, there is a loud call to help the poor help themselves. I want to focus on a key characteristic of the enablement framework: the attention to women.

The policy investment in poor women now spans a range of institutional actors – a kinder and gentler World Bank, the UN shelter debates, and the NGOs that crowd the stage of development. Microcredit programs targeting women, mothers’ clubs in squatter settlements, female farming cooperatives have become standard fare. One could say that women have become the currency of this latest round of development, the “instrument,” as Jackson (1999) puts it, of enablement. Drawing upon a rich corpus of feminist research, I want to critically examine the implications of this feminization of policy.

1. The feminization of policy as the feminization of collective consumption:

The latest policy debates regarding informal settlements celebrate self-help and community action. Often touted as a stellar example of self-management is Villa El Salvador, Peru. At first glance, this regularized settlement is a model of soup kitchens, social networks, and

volunteerism. And yet, a closer look reveals how, in the context of structural adjustment, self-help has become a euphemism for the burden of coping that the poor have to bear. A poignant documentary, *City in the Sand*, focuses on one of the settlement’s residents, Emerita. As the camera follows her around, in a single day, she volunteers in the government’s health clinic, supervises seven community kitchens run through the volunteer work of women, makes house visits, organizes mother’s knitting groups, all in addition to her wage-earning work as crochet seamstress.

Such practices of self-help then are only made possible through the unpaid “third shift” (Molyneux 1985) of community work, women’s work. It is this that I am terming the feminization of collective consumption. My use of the term “feminization” signals not simply the involvement of women but rather a broader process of devaluation that operates via the coding of certain domains and issues as women’s concerns. In this case, the collective consumption features of the state (Castells 1983) have been transformed into privatized and decommodified practices. The neo-liberal agenda, particularly state withdrawal from social programs, is thus reinforced. Indeed, neo-liberalism is engendered through this new trope of the Third World poor woman, this icon of unfatigued efficiency. For to her can be safely assigned the world’s problems: from managing the size of the population to the ecofeminist goal of saving the natural habitat.



2. The feminization of policy and the persistence of feminized poverty

Perhaps the most enduring emblem of enablement is the Grameen Bank. The Bank's micro-credit program with its phenomenal loan repayment rates has made it safe, even fashionable, to lend to the poor, and particularly to poor women. The Bank has become policy legend, rapidly transplanted to other regions, and provoking a mythical belief in the magical powers of poor women.

But recent research on the Grameen Bank has been sharply critical, arguing that such programs leave both gender and poverty untouched. As Jackson points out, gender and poverty are two

increasingly trapped in desperately vulnerable informal livelihoods, such as domestic service and street vending, and how many of these are being feminized and thereby downgraded (Roy 2002). Articulating serious policy responses to the feminization of work and poverty therefore requires moving well beyond the feminization of policy.

3. The feminization of policy and the terms of participation

The sheer presence of women, poor women, in any policy project is seen as a sign of great hope. My concern is not with the fact of participation but rather with the terms of participation. The research on community mobilization in squatter settlements shows that women participate, but too often as mothers and wives rather than as workers or citizens (Radcliffe 1993). Such domesticated forms of participation inevitably shape the public agenda, often coding a set of safe and sanctified issues as women's concerns. There is of course a long history of women's activism, including the creative deployment of traditional identities like motherhood to challenge structures of power. I do not mean to trivialize these practices. But the feminization of policy as a paradigm cannot anticipate such forms of negotiation and resistance. It is instead concerned with the participation of women. My concern is with *how* women participate. In Calcutta, a hotbed of political action, I found that women in squatter settlements participated in large numbers, but within a context of masculinized politics. Here, the political agenda was dominated by a masculinist idiom that recognized the legitimacy of women's involvement only in relation to their household roles. Pressing issues, such as wage-earning work, were thus bypassed for they were seen as irrelevant to mothers and wives.

Although the feminization of policy can get women actors to the decision-making table, it cannot challenge the inherently patriarchal and unequal rules of the game through which equity decisions are made.

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distinct forms of disadvantage. Tackling one does not necessarily mean tackling the other. In the case of feminized microcredit programs, gender hierarchies are rarely unsettled. In fact, critics of the Grameen Bank argue that its success rests on its patriarchal apparatus of discipline and control (Rahman 1999). And it is also clear that such forms of enablement have little potential to drastically alter poverty, particularly feminized poverty. In the case of the Grameen Bank, the majority of loan recipients continue to engage in traditional informal sector work – low-paying and insecure (Goetz and Sengupta 1996).

Indeed, despite the heady talk of informal entrepreneurship, at the current moment of global restructuring, it is hard to find trajectories of successful self-employment. Instead, the evidence overwhelmingly points to the rise of vulnerable and disposable occupations, what many have called the feminization of work (Standing 1999). For example, my recent research in Calcutta reveals how the rural-urban poor are



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