

Mainstreaming Gender as Strategy:

A Critique from a Reluctant Gender Advocate

By Susanna George

My encounters with gender mainstreaming have been from different vantage points, but I want to reflect on my encounters and insights into the experience of being a gender advocate within the context of the UN. I consider myself a reluctant advocate, the way I was a reluctant christian in my young adulthood.

By the time I arrived on the scene in the Malaysian women's movement as my personal activism, and in the arena of development as my paid work, gender mainstreaming was a project well underway. WID [Women in Development] and WAD [Women and Development] had already changed to GAD [Gender and Development] by the late 1980s. Working with the Gender and Development Programme of the Asia Pacific Development Centre as a lowly publications assistant, and having only some nascent feminist instinct in me, I came to be an "observer" of the GAD programme's strategy of gender mainstreaming through the policy dialogues on a variety of issues, from migration, poverty alleviation, environment and so forth, with policy makers and government representatives.

By the time I arrived in Isis, I was well versed in doing advocacy on women's concerns with the government, had passed through the UN, and watched the ways in which gender analysis was being approached within one field office of the UNDP in Kuala Lumpur.

Nothing prepared me, though, for the social simulation and the high theatrics that one encounters in the context of the United Nations. I do not want to minimise what that space represents because as a site of global governance, the UN has great symbolic value and meaning. I also realise that women have struggled hard to establish the visibility of women's con-

cerns in a highly contested terrain. I do believe, however, that we need to grapple with what gender advocacy has come to mean—with sensitivity, but without sentimentality.

I would just like to reflect on the most recent encounter in gender advocacy at the UN that Isis has undertaken, and share insights from that experience. Think about the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) as a theatrical stage of sorts. We have a set of actors that have been referred to as "stakeholders" enacting their roles. There are many pieces that we can consider if we look at this UN process as a theatrical play of sorts.

- First, we need to ask who wrote the script, and what inspiration led to the writing of that script?
- Second, what were the roles assigned to each of the actors? Who were the real actors who occupied centre stage? And who were the bit players at the wings? Whose show was it?
- Third, what was the planned outcome of this play? Who knew from the start how the last act would unfold?

For Isis, we came to several very disconcerting realisations when we tried to respond to our own questions:

1. The script was indeed pre-written. In a world where neo-liberalist globalisation is closing ranks on all economies, and where new information and communications technologies are at the forefront of this reinvented imperial project, the script of the WSIS was written by governments and multinationals (that play a strong role within the International Telecommunications Union, the conference organiser) that want to have some definitive global policy guidelines that will order and systematise social responses to development based on these technologies.

2. The multi-stakeholder platform that was institutionalised as a negotiation format, and where NGOs were supposed to enact their "progressive" advocacy, was



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intrinsically flawed, with the unquestioned presence of the private sector, the multinational corporations, at the negotiating table. Yet, we were seen as being uncooperative when we said that the multi-stakeholder platform was an uneven playing field. Ultimately, civil society as an entity preferred to hold its peace in favour of the "collective" process, which produced a pro-market, pro-neoliberal policy Declaration.

3. As activist women doing gender advocacy, we tried working with an multi-stakeholder entity known as the WSIS Gender Caucus for a while, until we decided that we simply could not put forward some of the critical arguments of NGOs in the South with other so-called gender advocates from multinationals and Northern GAD consultants. Doing gender advocacy in that space was very much a case of settling for the lowest common denominator—one that the CEO of Hewlett Packard and an NGO worker from the South could agree to. In the end we had to content ourselves with the one or two paragraphs that mentioned gender equality.

What has happened to the project of Gender Advocacy work in the UN which, I would argue, was one of the key strategies of the global women's movement in mainstreaming gender and an important strategy

to getting policies enacted at the national level?

1. Firstly, the space of advocacy that feminists fought so hard for within the UN is now occupied largely by liberal, institutionalised feminists, or by gender advocates who do not identify with the larger project of ending patriarchy.

2. We have been so fixated on "not losing ground," on keeping our feminist foot in the great Patriarch's door, by asserting gender as a lens, as a framework, as a tool for women's empowerment, that we have all but forgotten what exactly we are trying to integrate women into.

3. Phraseology such as sustainable development, women's empowerment, gender equality, women's human rights has more or less been appropriated by the World Bank and the entire gamut of development actors, to accessorise and make "nice" documents that are essentially treatises to the neo-liberal, market-based globalisation agenda of the world's elite.

4. In a terrain of diminishing returns that the UN has increasingly turned into, are we simply giving legitimacy to states and systems that perpetuate patriarchy at every opportunity, that are in fact violent aggressors within national boundaries, no matter how impoverished they may be in terms of GNP?

5. In some senses, we have turned into well trained show dogs (or dolphins), pirouetting and jumping through loops, and only when we are asked to, and only in ways that are deemed acceptable, diplomatic and socially palatable. Gone is that fire in the belly that fuelled feminists of a different era. An example of this might help us understand how much we have shifted in the past two decades of advocacy at the UN. This example is a protest against a then impending U.S. war on Iraq that took place while the UN Commission on the Status of Women was at its 44th session. Even though that year's matter for deliberation was Violence against Women, that was not a squeak from us inside the hallowed halls of the UN, and only a handful of women joined the protest being held just across the street. ☺

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