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Reflections on gender and participatory development

by NAZNEEN KANJI

Introduction

Feminists and advocates of women's rights, mainly women, have tried to promote gender equality in development while a different set of academics and practitioners, mainly from backgrounds in rural development policy and practice, have worked to promote participatory development. While there have been overlaps in the methods used (Moser, 1993; Levy, 1996), gender advocates have sometimes ignored the importance of participation. Similarly, critiques of early work promoting participatory methods highlighted shortcomings in terms of gender. More recently, there have been important discussions of how to combine approaches and promote both gender equality and participation in policy and planning processes, as well as in development programmes and projects (Guijt and Kaul Shah, 1998; Cornwall, 2000).

Participatory Learning and Action includes examples of participatory development initiatives which take a gender perspective and seek to empower both women and men. It also includes critiques of participation which exclude women. The themes where gender has been a central focus, dating back to 1991, include:
- Integrating gender analysis in the use of participatory methods and tools – these include both positive examples and critiques pointing to the exclusion of women or the misleading aggregation of results;
- Sexual and reproductive health including HIV/AIDS. The Stepping Stones approach stands out as a particular innovation;
- Literacy and adult learning with experiences in the use of the Reflect methodology;
- Agriculture, forestry, livestock and fisheries – again there are positive examples as well as constructive critiques of projects from a gender perspective;
- Water and sanitation projects;
- Community needs assessments and planning.

These papers provide a wealth of experience of practitioners and researchers grappling with difficult and sensitive issues on the ground. This short article does not attempt to provide a comprehensive assessment of achievements and challenges which have been faced in different sectors and different parts of the world. That would be impossible. Instead, it provides a more general reflection on participatory development from a gender perspective and looks to future challenges.

This article begins by laying out the case for a focus on gender issues, and then discusses the tensions between gender perspectives and participation. It highlights, from a personal perspective, some achievements and lessons and discusses the common challenges ahead in the current global context, for both advocates of participatory development and of gender equality.

**Women processing
wheat, Tajikstan**

Why focus on gender issues in participatory development?

Feminist research in the 1970s and gender and development work in the 1980s identified the family or household as a primary site of inequality in the division of labour and intra-household distribution of resources. Extensive conceptual and empirical work has been done to show that the household should not be treated as an undifferentiated unit and that inequalities in power and welfare among household members cannot be ignored. Feminist economists have argued that economics focuses on the monetarised commodity or productive economy, but fails to analyse the non-monetarised reproductive economy. Productive activity involves the production of goods and services that enter the market at a price. Reproductive activities are usually undertaken at the level of the household, and involve domestic work (water and fuel collection (especially developing countries), food preparation, cooking, cleaning), care of children, the elderly and sick, and (importantly for developing countries) household production that is for direct subsistence and not the market. Economic analysis prioritises the former, largely ignoring the latter. From a gender perspective, neither the productive nor the reproductive sphere is 'gender neutral'. They are both socially constructed on the basis of a gender division of labour, which assigns primacy to men in productive and women in reproductive activities.

More recently, gender analysts have examined how the strategic behaviour of individuals within households is linked to wider social processes, institutions and power structures. Community organisations, public services and markets are not neutral but operate according to rules and norms, which afford different access to women and men. As Goetz (1997) points out, men have occupied public office and dominated decision-making and decision-enforcing for a long time and their views and interests are embedded in these institutions. This means that women's participation and direct access to a range of resources outside the household may be limited, with negative implications for their own and household wellbeing.

**Men processing
wheat, Tajikstan**

Photo: Nazneen Kanji

The use of the term 'gender issues' or 'gender perspec-
tive' to refer primarily to women as a homogenous group,
or to women and men as single interest groups, seriously
oversimplifies complex realities. As Cornwall (2000a) points
out, women and men can too easily be thought of as single
categories, in stereotyped ways: women as sharing and
caring and men as selfish and individualistic. Men are seen
as the powerful and oppositional figures. Yet, to take just
one example, in many African contexts, young men have
less power in relation to older men, and sometimes in rela-
tion to older women.

Gender is not always the difference or identity which
affects people's choices and options and there are numerous
examples of how women have prioritised their common iden-
tity or interests with men, for example, in anti-colonial and
anti-racist struggles. Gender-based inequalities are affected
by class, race, ethnicity, age, location and other particularities
in a given context. We can all think of examples where
women have participated in decision-making forums as a
result of their relationship with men (chief's wives on local

committees, women political leaders by virtue of their sons or
husbands). In addition, over people's life cycles, the constraints
and opportunities of being a man or a woman vary.

Gender analysis, in practice, has often not extended to
analysing men's views, reactions and problems as men.
There is now more attention to historical and contextually
specific assumptions about men and masculinities – and
awareness of the danger of applying them to other
contexts in which they are less relevant. However, there is
little doubt that gender analysis in most contexts, disag-
gregated by class, ethnicity and age, tends to show that
women's interests are subordinated in social relations and
institutions. Understanding the differences between
women should therefore not mask gross inequities that the
majority of women face in development-related interven-
tions and access to key resources such as credit, land, infor-
mation and extension services. If development is
understood as promoting the rights and well-being of the
majority of people, then addressing gender inequalities is
of fundamental importance.

"Women and men can too easily be thought of as single categories, in stereotyped ways: women as sharing and caring and men as selfish and individualistic. Men are seen as the powerful and oppositional figures. Yet, to take just one example, in many African contexts, young men have less power in relation to older men, and sometimes in relation to older women"

What are the tensions between gender and participation perspectives?

The myth of community
The broad aim of participatory development is to increase the involvement of socially, economically and often politically marginalized people in decision-making about their own lives. However, questions have been raised about the extent to which participatory development initiatives have actually addressed differences and inequalities based on age, wealth, religion, caste, race, ethnicity and gender. As early as 1992, an article in *PLA Notes* 16 documented well-being ranking exercises with different groups in a village in Sierra Leone (Welbourn, 1992). The results of the exercises showed how talking to better-off men, the practice of most development project staff, was entirely inadequate as a way of gauging the complexity of a community's needs. Another example comes from community forestry management in India, where Sarin (1998) shows how better-off village men tend to define the priorities and make the decisions, while the women who depend much more on forests are pressurised to follow men's rules. Too often, assumptions of community cohesion and harmony still underpin participatory development initiatives.

A landmark publication which summarises the critique from a gender perspective is Guijt and Shah's (1998) edited book *The Myth of Community: Gender issues in participatory development*. It is worth quoting from the editors' eloquent overview:

Looking back, it is apparent that 'community' has often been viewed naively, or in practice dealt with, as an harmonious and internally equitable collective. Too often there has been an inadequate understanding of the internal dynamics

and differences that are so crucial to positive outcomes. The mythical notion of community cohesion continues to permeate much participatory work, hiding a bias that favours the opinions and priorities of those with more power and the ability to voice their views publicly. In particular, there is a minimal consideration of gender issues and inadequate involvement of women. While a handful of women may sometimes be consulted, rarely does a thorough understanding of the complexity of gender relations help structure the process, the analysis and any resulting community plans. Some view a gender-neutral participatory approach, at times with pride, as non-intrusive and culturally sensitive. However …the language and practice of 'participation' often obscures women's worlds, needs and contributions to development, making equitable participatory development an elusive goal.

Even when there is a recognition of different interests in communities, there is a tendency to underestimate the complexities of conflict and negotiation at this level. Participatory development can mean the equal inclusion of all sections of a typical, stratified community: women, men, older, younger, better-off and worse-off. Yet equal inclusion is difficult to define and understanding how specific contexts affect different people's motivations to be involved in externally initiated participatory development processes has not been given enough attention. Words like participation and community often provide a smokescreen for professionals to avoid intra-community struggles, notably the micro-politics of gender relations (Guijt and Kaul Shah:11).

Despite the difficulties, a review of six projects supported by DFID (Kanji and Salway, 2000:26), to analyse the extent to which they address issues of gender equality, comes to the following conclusion:

Projects which take a participatory approach with deliberate consultation of women and men (in different stakeholder groups), at the beginning and through the project cycle are more likely to identify gender-specific interests and to promote gender equality. This is not to say that participatory approaches will necessarily promote a discussion of unequal social relations nor are less powerful groups always involved, but the approach allows for more context-specific gender equality strategies than past top-down approaches.

Space and time for women's participation
One key challenge for gender-aware practice at community level is to extend the 'space' and time in which participation can take place, to everyday fora and not to consultations and one-off public events, where men may dominate. Understanding the practical conditions which enable women to

Astan Traore uses a scooter in her work with AMAPROS (Association Malienne pour la Promotion du Sahel). The group works to promote public health, education, environmental conservation and economic sustainability in sub-Saharan Mali

Photo: © 1994 Bridget Fahrland/Lutheran World Relief, Courtesy of Photoshare

participate in specific cultures and contexts can make all the difference. An article in *PLA Notes* 22 (Euler, 1995) entitled 'Women prefer lunchtime' is a simple example of how preference ranking with women and men in rural Bangladesh increased the chances of project supervisors being able to meet with women. However, low-income women's heavy workload is a problematic issue in many parts of the world, and participation takes time! Sarin's (1998) example of community forest management is unusually honest about how half the women involved in preparing seasonal calendars of firewood and fodder availability had to leave before the end of the exercise to attend to multiple chores.

The use of participatory time-use exercises can be an important tool to sensitise men and mobilise for action, for example, to invest in labour-saving devices. Bilgi (1998) describes the way in which men's understanding of women's work was increased by asking them to describe a women's day in villages in Gujarat, India. This work was done as part of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, as part of efforts to help men develop a better understanding of women's

strengths and capabilities to participate in community development. Similar exercises to map the daily activities of women and men have been used as part of gender training programmes, for example, with both villagers and project staff in East Africa in the mid-1990s (Kanji, 1995). Follow-up activities in areas where NGOs had been active showed that some men had changed their behaviour over time. For example, some were more willing to help with domestic tasks while others feared that 'people would think they were controlled by their wives' (SNV Tanzania, 1996).

Gender and policy processes
Current approaches to policy development and implementation now pay much more attention to the need for the participation of a wide range of stakeholders, including those who will be directly affected by policy measures. This is exemplified by the expansion of Participatory Poverty Assessments, which are meant to feed into Poverty Reduction Strategies at country level. They are expected to provide dynamic and differentiated accounts of processes of impoverishment

**Spinning
cotton in
Tajikstan**

Photo: Nazneen Kanji

which should increase the understanding of policy makers and provide the basis for more comprehensive and effective strategies for action.

Gendered analysis of participatory poverty assessments indicate that even when poor groups are consulted, women's voices continue to be under-represented or their concerns are not reflected in the resulting recommendations (Whitehead and Lockwood, 1999). Their analysis shows how gender issues become increasingly marginalized in the process of producing the overall Poverty Assessment.

When participation is expected to function at policy level, the challenges are even greater than at community and project level, where there is already much room for exclusion and misinterpretation. When 'people's' views are expected to feed into policy processes, the potential for misinterpretation, selection and the chances that more powerful groups simply ignore inconvenient or oppositional views, increases. Sometimes, a gender perspective is reduced to counting the number of women and men consulted! We have to be much more careful to examine whether participation in policy processes actually offers opportunities for real change for women and men. The next issue of *Participatory Learning*

and Action will allow NGOs to share their experiences in participating in Poverty Reduction Strategy processes over the last decade and discuss the potentials and limitations.

Women's participation and the role of the facilitator or change agent

Cornwall (2000) highlights another tension between GAD and participatory development. She raises the issue of how participatory development practitioners address situations where women choose not to participate in mainstream projects, preferring interventions which seem to reinforce what outsiders regard as their subordination. She uses a case study of an OXFAM project in Sudan on promoting livelihoods to illustrate this point. Female women's coordinators worked with village women to identify their priorities and they requested support for handicrafts, food processing and poultry raising, activities which were separate from the main thrust of the project. The reluctance of the project coordinator to fund such activities reflects, Cornwall argues, the dilemma of inviting 'the community' to design their own interventions, but then running the risk of reinforcing the *status quo*.

However, it can be argued that what may be more important than the actual choices made by the women is the question of whether the project was able to help create spaces and opportunities for more marginalized or less powerful women to negotiate with other groups and to exercise choice. As Cornwall then points out, the core of the 'problem' is not that of participatory methods per se but rather the use of the methods and the assumptions of project workers themselves. Whether and how gender issues are raised depends on who is facilitating the exercise and what they think gender means. There are usually different views in communities (and nations) about gender – what activities and behaviour are appropriate for women and men, what assets they should have and how they participate in society. The values of individual facilitators will influence participatory processes and the extent to which women's rights are supported.

What are some of the achievements?

Over the last ten years, awareness has grown for the need for gender analysis in development. Expertise in using participatory methods and tools in a gender responsive way has increased. The articles in *Participatory Learning and Action* are a reflection of this growing awareness and expertise and contain a mix of good practice and constructive criticism. All that it is possible to do here is give some brief examples of a few positive approaches and methods.

**Indian women in slums
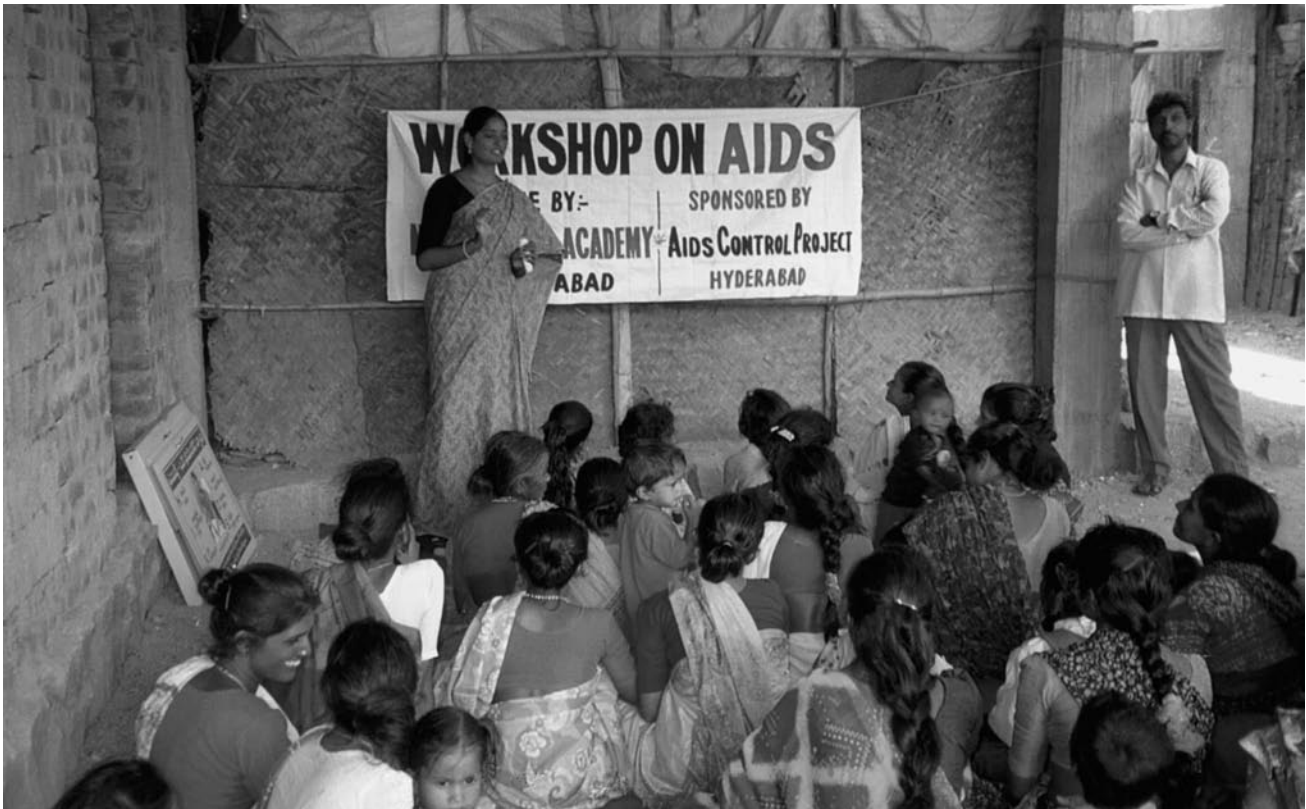and villages attend a
workshop on AIDS**

Sexual and reproductive health

As Gordon and Cornwall's article in this issue points out, working with participation in addressing sexuality and gender is not the same as working with natural resources or water supplies and the like. It is much more challenging in that talking about sex, gender and HIV remain a taboo in many cultural contexts. The *Stepping Stones* manual (Welbourn, 1995) describes a series of participatory exercises designed to facilitate HIV prevention by encouraging a gender analysis of sex and its context. It includes assertiveness training, encouraging participants to be assertive about their feelings and dialogue with their partners. The role and skills of the facilitator are critical in providing a safe environment to discuss such personal and sensitive issues.

PLA Notes 37 (2000) contains a range of articles which show how participatory methods have increased women and men's awareness of sexual and reproductive health issues and contributed to an analysis of the factors contributing to the spread of HIV/AIDS. Shaw and Jawo (2000) provide a useful discussion of how they used and innovated with the Stepping Stones approach in the Gambian context. Issue 37 also discusses why and how sexual and reproductive health is a development issue and the enormous threat that the spread of HIV presents for livelihood security and for the safety and survival of those most vulnerable to infection[1].

Literacy and adult learning

Reflect (Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowerment Community Techniques) is a structured participatory learning process which facilitates people's critical analysis of their environment, placing empowerment at the heart of sustainable and equitable development. The methodology was developed by ActionAid as a new approach to adult literacy, between 1993 and 1995. A manual was produced in 1996 and in 1998, there was a special *PLA Notes* issue on Participation, Literacy and Empowerment. The Reflect approach has now spread through the work of at least 350 different organisations (including NGOs, CBOs, governments and social movements) in more than 60 countries (see Archer's article in this issue).

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[1] You can read all the articles from this issue online here: www.iied.org/sarl/pla_notes/pla_backissues/37.html

Women at a market in Nigeria mobilise support for women's participation in local government

In 2003, core elements of the Reflect approach were described including one on creating democratic space which provides a statement on gender equality:

Reflect involves creating a democratic space – one in which everyone's voice is given equal weight. This needs to be actively constructed as there is almost nowhere in which people have an equal voice (people everywhere are stratified by gender, age, hierarchy, status, ability etc). As such it is counter-cultural – always challenging local culture to the extent that power relationships and stratification have created inequality. It is never easy and may never be perfectly achieved but it should be a constant focus.

Archer's article in this issue gives some examples of how the approach has been used to address gender inequalities and women's empowerment; for example, opposing domestic violence in Peru by adapting Reflect for work with Quechua men and women to break the silence on taboo issues of sexuality and domestic violence, with participants producing posters, radio programmes, TV adverts etc. to raise the wider profile of the issues they discussed.

Linking the local to the national

The involvement of women's groups representing women's interests is critical in participation at local level and in policy processes. However, the key point here is 'representation' and there has to be an analysis of the particular historical and political context to understand which organisations are best placed to represent which constituencies. Representative groups can assist in opening up the debate on women's interests, in the short and longer-term, and lobbying to keep these on the agenda.

One of the best examples of such a successful organisation which has maintained its strong grassroots base over a long period is the Self Employed Women's Association in India. This organisation has at the same time been active in networking and promoting women's interests at the national level.

What are the challenges?

If participatory development is to be equitable, it has to deal with gender-based oppression. As Guijt and Kaul Shah argue, this is only possible if attention is paid to conceptual

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The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Ahmedabad, India

SEWA was founded in 1971 and registered in 1972 as a trade union movement for women in the informal sector. A few thousand women subsequently established the SEWA bank as a co-operative to provide poor, self-employed women with access to credit and financial services and to reduce their dependence on exploitative moneylenders.

SEWA has strategically used the collective bargaining tools which have characterised many trade union movements. However, in areas where there are few prospects for employment, traditional unionising techniques do not work. In such situations, SEWA has worked at the grassroots level to form village organisations. SEWA helps women to run their own organisations, form cooperatives and bargain collectively in the market place.

More important than only access to credit, SEWA has concentrated on empowering women to use their own resources more effectively. In the villages of Gujarat, and in the city markets of Ahmedabad (where SEWA has its headquarters), women are speaking out more, taking leadership roles, and realising how far they can go when they have collective bargaining power for wages, better working conditions, combatting domestic violence, or improving education and family health.

Source: Adapted from SEWA Homepage: www.gdrc.org/icm/sewa.html

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clarity, appropriate methodologies and organisational support. Rather than repeating their useful and specific recommendations, I will focus on some of the challenges which, in my view, confront advocates of gender equality and participatory development.

The impact of liberalisation and privatisation has made it more difficult for women in many contexts to participate in the public sphere

Research on the effects of liberalisation and privatisation, particularly structural adjustment policies, has shown an increase in income and gender inequalities (Afshar, 1992; Grown et al, 2001). Groups with greater assets, both material and social, have been better able to take advantage of neo-liberal, market-based development. The reduction in the role of the state in providing basic and social services has particularly affected women, who have gender-ascribed roles in caring for households. At the same time, there has been a rapid and substantial increase in the proportions of women in paid work over the last two decades. What this means is that women tend to face increasing workloads. A small study on women's livelihoods carried out for the Aga Khan Foundation in Tajikistan illustrated the way in which women's increasing workloads, in the post-Soviet era, have made it even more difficult for women to participate in the public

sphere, even at the local level (Kanji, 2002). Increasing workloads combined with gender biases in the structures and processes of governance make it more difficult to increase women's participation in public life.

Participatory development is a political project

The political project can be viewed as working towards a functioning participatory democracy – which requires a strong and articulate civil society, including organisations which represent women's interests, a network of participatory institutions at all levels through which different social groups can defend their interests, and vertical mechanisms of consultation which allow the local level to defend its interests at higher levels.

Working to increase the participation of excluded groups, both men and women, is a political rather than technical project. I first experimented with participatory methods within gender and development work. The methods were productive and exciting; role play, the use of video, gender-differentiated mapping exercises and calendars were just some of the tools which increased levels of involvement and generated animated discussions and insights. However, methods are a means to an end – which in this case, was to discuss and work towards changing unequal gender divisions of labour, access to resources and power relations. Participatory methods help to effectively use spaces to strengthen the voices and perspectives of disadvantaged groups. However, the critical issue is to analyse the nature of the spaces for participation and whether they offer opportunities to increase control over resources and decision-making institutions for marginalized groups. The questions of whose participation, in what and for which ends remain critical.

Individual values are important but so is institutional change

There is no doubt that individuals can have essential positive and catalytic roles – urban, middle-class activists, teachers, priests, political party activists, trade unionists, government officials and NGO staff. However, the importance of the beliefs and values of these various facilitators and change agents cannot be underestimated, in the ways both participation and gender are interpreted and promoted. My own work on gender mainstreaming, in different organisational contexts, show the positive gains made when there are particular individuals, with strong values of gender equity and social justice, in positions which allow them to promote approaches and action in support of these values. However, the challenge remains to institutionalise the kinds of incen-

tives and accountability structures which allow such action to continue and develop, irrespective of the individuals in place at particular moments in time.

The wider context of globalisation provides opportunities as well as constraints

While the dominance of current global neo-liberal economic paradigms works against participatory, gender-aware and more equitable development processes, information technology has opened up spaces for organisation and alliances at a global level (although access to IT is also gendered). The significance is growing of NGOs, citizen groups and networks that work towards changing the policy agenda and rules set by some, more powerful parts of the development establishment. Transnational movements are growing – to promote human rights (and women's rights are human rights); to protect the environment, to challenge the oppression of women, of indigenous groups, to name only a few.

Critiques from gender and development advocates have been useful in showing how approaches to participatory development have homogenised communities and ignored a range of differences between people. However, gender advocates have also been prone to homogenising women and stereotyping men, and much can be learnt by listening to the

> **Key Resources:**
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> Cornwall, A. (2000) *Making a Difference? Gender and Participatory Development*. IDS Discussion Paper, no. 378. November.
>
> Guijt, I. and Shah M.K. (1998) (eds) *The Myth of Community, Gender Issues in Participatory Development*, London: IT Publications.
>
> Vainio-Mattila, A. (1999) *Navigating Gender: a framework and a tool for participatory development. Manual for applying the often theoretical understanding of gender issues into practical development work.* Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Department for International Development Corporation/ FINNIDA. Available at www.eldis.org/gender/index.htm

voices of different groups of women and men. While we have come some way in raising the importance of gender issues in participatory development, there is still a long way to go. It is important that advocates for gender and for participation share their insights and learning and jointly develop innovative approaches and methods. Alliances between different groups and movements, including those which specifically focus on women's empowerment and gender equality, are required to prevent the cooption of visions and weakening of values which underpin efforts to promote both gender perspectives and participatory approaches to development and social change.

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