Thinking about 'culture': some programme pointers

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This article is a collaboration, from a lawyer and a poet, on those aspects of being 'Southern' or 'Third World' women which seem most important when we think about how to transform culture, from a gender perspective.

In order to consider culture in the programme work of development agencies, it is necessary for development workers to examine their own cultural heritage, and recognise that the way we look at the world is affected by our own experience of race, class/caste, sexuality, and gender. We need to learn to take this subjectivity into account in our daily lives and activities. Transformation, whether individual or institutional, must always begin with us looking at ourselves and our reactions to what goes on around us.

Culturally-based attitudes to race and ethnicity are among the most difficult to challenge. Precisely because we all view our own cultural assumptions as the norm, it is difficult to bring to the fore the impact of these assumptions. Cultural subjectivity flavours both the North/South dialogue attempted by Oxfam in its Women's Linking Project (Oxfam, 1994), and the South/South dialogues that are essential for an understanding of gender and development. Gender discrimination is global, but unless racial and ethnic biases in the context of North/South dialogue are confronted, the various manifestations of gender discrimination within different communities can be neither recognised, nor dealt with.

This is not an argument for 'cultural relativism', which asserts that each society has its own values which must be judged in their specific context. We must question the normative idea of the white liberal feminist, and the assumption held by such feminists that gender oppression is the primary (and only) ground of struggle. While acknowledging that gender oppression is universal, it is imperative to avoid what Gayatri Spivak terms the spectacle of 'White women saving Brown women from Brown men' (Spivak, 1988). Acknowledging the importance of taking race and ethnicity into account allows us to challenge firmly what Mohanty calls 'the authorising signature of Western humanist discourse' (Mohanty 1991).

There are certainly many culturally legitimised practices, harmful to women, which some women have challenged, within their own communities, and will continue to fight. But there will be tensions if outsiders attempt to dictate to people about their cultural practices. What must be respected is that it is the Southern

women themselves who, tired of being unveiled, rescued from fires, or inspected between the legs, have done a great deal of self-empowering work to combat those situations, and whose understanding of their cultural roots result in powerful analyses based on their first-hand experience.

Examining cultural constructs

Much of the tension aroused by Northern attempts to address aspects of Southern cultural practice is rooted in the way in which Western academics have shaped their view of the South as alien and 'other'. The very language we use shapes the way in which we see the world:

An old Englishman I met in Africa was reminiscing about his exploration in earlier days, and the shock of one culture meeting another for the first time. 'Can you imagine', he said, 'people so primitive that they love to eat the embryo of certain birds and slices from the belly of certain animals? And grind up grass seed, make it into a paste, burn it over a fire, then smear it with a greasy mess they extract from the mammary fluid of animals?' While I shuddered at such barbarism, he went on: 'What I've been describing, of course, is a breakfast of bacon and eggs, and buttered toast.'
(Gaskill 1964)

Western organisations must make the effort to examine cultural, including linguistic, practices which shape their own world view, as rigorously as they do those in Southern societies. A culture can only be understood in its political, social, and economic context.

We should examine aspects of unfamiliar cultures bearing in mind that they serve a purpose, even if the nature of this purpose remains unclear to us. Cultural dictates are social structures based on economic and political needs. Though the

rise of a particular cultural practice can rarely be traced back to a precise economic or political cause, the way in which such practices are promoted and protected within the community shows their purpose. As the Ghanaian philosopher W E Abraham notes, '... culture is the common life of the people... {Whatever it} may not do, at least it puts a bridle on individualism...{and serves an} integrative function...' (Abraham, 1962)

Within the context of a given culture there are norms that guide the behaviour of individuals and of the community as a whole. These norms may be simplified into rights and responsibilities, firstly, of individuals to each other, and, secondly, between individuals and the community. Cultures are co-operative systems, whose *raison d' tre* is the survival and perpetuation of the community. One of the issues which distinguish cultures in North and South is that, in general, Northern societies tend to encourage behaviour based on a sense of personal individualism whereas, for the most part, Southern cultures are still organised on communal lines. While the North may question the limitations of such a collective identity, it should realise that its own standpoint is not objective, but is, like that of the South, a product of culture. When speaking of cultural dictates and practices in relation to women, we very often find ourselves questioning the extent of a community's efforts to govern the behaviour of individuals, and its right to do so.

Gender issues and culture

Gender identity is a social construction, whose rationale is related to the biological difference between the sexes. The way in which gender identity is formed reflects the particular needs and world view of each society. Culture and gender are thus intertwined, interdependent, and mutually defining to a certain extent.

It is an acknowledged factor that in nearly all civilisations women have been viewed as 'guardians of the culture'. This remains true even when, if viewed from the outside, certain aspects of the culture can be said to be harmful to women. Underlying such anomaly is the general view of cultural practices as beneficial to society, and the privilege accorded to those who conform to the culture by practising and maintaining it.

While there is a great deal of work being done to address the most oppressive and harmful aspects of culture as it affects women, there is a danger that the very important and difficult work of defining local needs and setting agendas based on them will be subsumed by indignation which is not based on an analysis of the cultural context. Compare the extremely informative work and writings of local and regional activists on female genital mutilation in parts of Africa, and dowry death and sati in the Indian Sub-continent.[1]

We must be aware of the risks of a cross-cultural dialogue which, while trying to highlight similarities, and ground for women's solidarity and concerted action, actually ignores critical cross-cultural differences in the economic and political bases of women's oppression. If we group together all aspects of culture which present problems for women under the title 'harmful cultural practices', the danger is that this may result in an assumption that the impetus for each oppressive practice is the same; it might seem, therefore, that the solutions should be equally transferable.

Instead, when we consider the relationship of gender issues and culture, we must start by viewing each situation as unique, and only then consider the similarities between it and other situations; not the other way round. We must ground our work on culture and gender in an awareness of the need to look at the precise context of harmful practices. It may seem an academic point, but part of the process of learning how to think about culture is to change radically the ways in which we are trained to think.

Let us consider two cultural practices which have a negative impact upon women. On the face of it, the 'reason' for the existence of female infanticide in China and female foeticide in India is identical: the over-riding preference for male children (Hom, 1992, on China, and Cheetu, 1991, on India). Below the surface, however, different historical, political, economic, and social factors come into play, laying the basis for these practices. There is at least one notable difference between foeticide in India and infanticide in China, namely, the attitude of the State. Though India permits abortion, the Indian government has outlawed the use of amniocentesis as a basis for female foeticide. China, on the other hand, has a stringent one-child population policy.

We need to ask ourselves the following questions: at what historical moment might such practices have come into being? What are the social and economic demands that perpetuate them? Is class a factor in the prevalence of oppressive practices? What combination of social, economic, and political changes might diminish the incidence of these practices? How do local people understand and explain them?

The responses to these questions, among others, reveal the differences between practices which are similar, but not identical. It is the differences, and not the similarities, which will determine the specific steps to be taken towards defining a programme to address the problem, which has a good chance of success.

Recommendations for action

Women from different parts of the world may be approaching the question of culture from different angles, but there seems to be

a general agreement that tackling gender oppression based in culture necessitates enabling women to empower themselves and raise their status in their societies; it cannot be achieved only by raising women's consciousness of their oppression.

The emphasis in development initiatives should be on long-term investment, as opposed to short-term results, since meeting the development goal of furnishing basic needs means that cultural norms and gender biases must be identified and addressed, to ensure that women as well as men have the resources they need: adequate nutrition, employment, credit, housing, and health care. Altering culture is by definition a long-term process.

Cultural considerations cut across all the major themes currently being addressed by development agencies: it is very difficult to generalise about the different sorts of work being done to challenge those aspects of culture which have a damaging effect on women. In Asia, there is an emphasis on general literacy, and legal literacy in particular, as a means of raising women's consciousness as well as enabling them to bring about change through knowledge of their rights. In Latin America, there is a strong focus on women's reproductive health care, and freedom from gender-based violence.[2] In many parts of Africa, much work is being done around HIV/AIDS in relation to women, including the effects of the disease on members of the family, the care of orphans, cultural practices that put women at higher risk, and legal remedies for destitute families.[3]

There needs to be more support for long-term research and programmes on attitude-change about gender issues and the status of women among women, men, girls, and boys. There is a need for more research on the knowledge of, attitudes to, and practice of, harmful manifestations of culture.

Illiteracy is intricately tied to the overall problem of the low status of women in most parts of the world. If any lasting positive change is to be brought about in the status of women, the illiteracy rates for women and girls must be brought down. The United Nations estimates that, while illiteracy rates have dropped, increases in population have caused the actual numbers of illiterate women and girls to increase (United Nations, 1991). The work of literacy organisations is, therefore, critical to diminishing the negative impact of traditional gender roles. But literacy is not the work of these organisations alone. Any donor considering a proposal and any grantee preparing one should ask themselves: where is the education in this?

This is particularly urgent for Southern women's NGOs, who do not have the luxury of focusing all of their efforts on one

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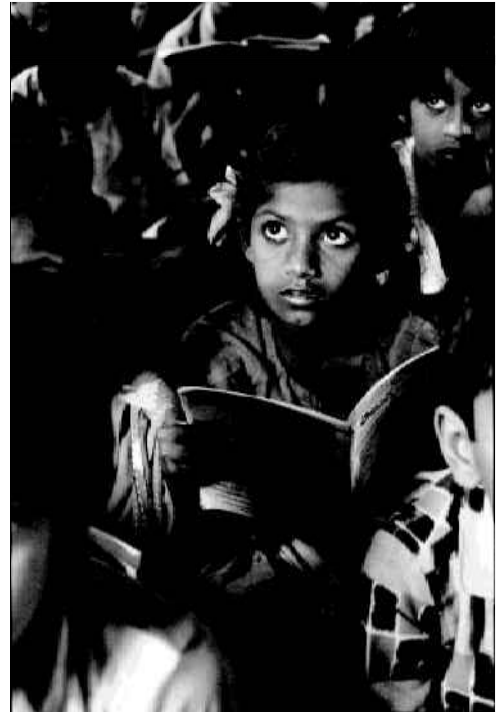
Young reader, Andhra Pradesh. Literacy is of great importance in enabling women to bring about change, through knowledge of their legal rights.

issue. It is imperative, therefore, that health clinics not only provide services but also provide some sexual and general health education. Projects for economic activities and empowerment may provide information on how the larger economy functions. Such project-specific literacy does not demand extra time of women, is more immediately useful to them, and involves them in the work of the service they are patronising.

It is in the very nature of Oxfam as a donor institution, or charity, that the flow of material resources is from Oxfam in the North to us in the South. There are in-built cultural assumptions about this North-South flow, which need to be recognised in creating a true sense of partnership. A key to facilitating, and building upon, interaction between a donor agency such as Oxfam and local NGOs working on gender issues is local agenda setting. Often, donor-driven initiatives are frustrating for both donor and receivers. While the former wants results, but often lacks knowledge as to what is truly feasible, the latter need support to do the kind of work they feel is appropriate and useful. In trying to come to an understanding, either one or both often settles for work that they do not find useful.

When women's groups are allowed to guide the development of their own programmes, an investment is made in local capacity-building. Organisations working on the same issue, such as reproductive rights, should be encouraged to link up, as should organisations working on related issues. In this way, information can be shared, and can have an impact upon those who are the target beneficiaries of programmes, as well as educating providers about relevant work on gender issues that they may have neither the time nor the inclination to examine themselves.

Women's organisations must also contribute their own efforts to this linking initiative. Larger NGOs might, for example, run workshops on writing proposals and reports, and can educate and inform each other on a reciprocal basis. For example, legal services and legal information may be offered to a health-care organisation in exchange for allowing the health workers the opportunity to give health education to women in the legal-aid waiting room. There are local groups already connecting in innovative ways, but these collaborations need to be encouraged by funding agencies, and formalised as programmes where possible (Rao, 1991).

Relationships between women's NGOs and traditional NGOs should also be encouraged, to ensure that work on women's issues is not marginalised. Ideally, a gender component would be integrated into the work of every NGO because, ultimately, women need to be recognised as an integral part of every major programme area and the social system as a whole.

The following are general recommendations for governments:

- integration of a gender component into the work of every Ministry and not merely the creation of a Women's Ministry;
- more emphasis on literacy for girls and women, including implementation of laws on the education of school-age girls;
- public support for local women's initiatives, such as childcare centres, women's shelters, small business co-operatives, community health services, and legal aid services;
- training in gender-sensitivity for judges, police, teachers, clerics, and students of law and medicine;
- more and urgent attention to the particular situation, status, and needs of adolescent and young women;
- more women in visible official posts in public service.

In conclusion, we must keep in mind that, while the above are general guidelines

for programme activities, the definitions that are ultimately relied on during the development of individual programmes must come from communities themselves (Alexander, 1990). Whether the interest is to strengthen or question culture and tradition, the approach needs to be based on indigenous knowledge, and not on external perceptions of that knowledge.

Notes

1 On the former, see Mohammed A'Haleem, A (1992) 'Claiming our bodies and our rights: exploring female circumcision as an act of violence in Africa', in Schuler, M (ed) *Freedom From Violence: Women's Strategies from Around the World*; Koso-Thomas, O (1987) *The Circumcision of Women: A Strategy for Eradication*, Zed Books, London; Walker, A (1993) *Warrior Marks: Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*, Harcourt Brace, New York; Hosken, F P (1979) *The Hosken Report on Genital and Sexual Mutilation of Females*, WIN News. On the latter, see Cheetu, S (1991) 'Growing menace of female foeticide in India', *Indian Socio-Legal Journal*, 17: 1 and 2, pp. 76-86; Newman, E (1992) 'For richer for poorer, till death do us part: India's response to dowry deaths', *International Law Student Assoc. Journal of International Law*, 15, pp. 109-143.

2 See, among others, the work of organisations such as Flora Tristan in Peru, SOS Corpo in Brazil, CEFEMINA in Costa Rica, ISIS in Chile.

3 See generally, Lamptey, P and Piot, P (1990) *The Handbook of AIDS Prevention in Africa*, Family Health International, Durham, NC; Obbo, C (1993) 'Reflections on the AIDS orphans problem in Uganda' in Berer, M and Ray, S (eds) *Women and HIV/AIDS: An International Resource Book*, Pandora Press, London. See also the legal aid work of the Uganda Women Lawyer's Association.

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