Rethinking Gender Planning: A Critical Discussion of the Use of the Concept of Gender

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Saskia E. Wieringa, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, The Netherlands. The introduction of the concept of gender has allowed development practitioners to focus on social relations and powerstructures underlying women’s subordination. Since then the term Gender and Development (GAD) has replaced the term Women in Development (WID). This approach has been welcomed by ‘mainstream’ development agencies. The price for acceptance has been the depoliticization and desexualization of gender planning. In this article I argue that gender should be used by gender planners in the comprehensive and radical way used by feminist social scientists. I investigate three recent texts of major theorists on gender and development issues, Kabeer, Moser and Young. I argue that by reducing gender to socio-economic issues, gender analysis loses its critical edge, its political, symbolic and sexual content. I maintain that feminism should be seen as the motivating force behind gender planning and planning efforts should be directed towards maximizing the transformative potential any project or program may have. Introduction The introduction of the concept of gender in planning circles makes it possible to view practices that are oppressive to women not solely as women’s issues but as concerns deeply embedded in the social relations between women and men. This concept has given gender planners as well as feminist social scientists concerned with development theories and practices an important tool to analyze those relations and formulate policies to improve women’s conditions in many locations. Downloaded from gtd.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on April 8, 2016

Gender has become such a widely used concept in both the theory and the practice of 'Women and Development' that since its introduction, the Gender Analysis in Development (GAD) approach has gradually replaced the Women in Development (WID) approach, which was mainly based on the groundbreaking work of E. Boserup in the early 1970s. The WID practitioners aimed to integrate women into development, as women were seen not to profit from the supposed benefits to the development programs which had been set up after the Second World War. The GAD approach emphasizes the centrality of the social relations of gender at various levels of policy making, from socio-economic concerns to macro-economic structures. A particularly popular approach in this respect is the work of C.O.N. Moser on the distinction between practical and strategic gender needs. Her guidelines have become so popularly used in planning circles that feminist planners and theoreticians complain that gender planning has become 'moserized.' In this article I first discuss the origins of the concept of gender and stress its radical and comprehensive elements. I then deal with the concept as it is used in three major texts on gender and development—those by Kabeer, Moser and Young. I argue that in presentday development literature such a watered down version of the concept is used that women’s issues have become depoliticized, sexual oppression has been rendered invisible and concern for women’s issues has been reduced to the socio-economic components of women’s lives. I then criticize more extensively the problematic aspects as I see them in Moser’s conceptualization of the distinction between practical and strategic gender needs. In the concluding part I provide some suggestions on how to avoid the problems sketched earlier. I try to reinvest in the concept of ‘gender’ its critical edge and stress the broad range of issues it actually can and should cover. I argue that women’s empowerment, which is a major goal of gender planning, can only be addressed meaningfully if the full range of issues
women are confronted with, from physical to symbolic, political and economic, are tackled. I maintain that in development processes no preconceived models should be dropped 'from above' on the women concerned, and that social planning is not a process in which easily quantifiable goals should be set. I stress that feminism, as the process and politics of the transformation of social relations of gender towards a greater equality between the sexes, should be the basis of gender planning. And I suggest that if we do not consider that gender oppression is mainly acted out on women’s bodies, that the control of women’s sexual and reproductive powers is a central element of women’s socio-economic exploitation, we simply do not go deep enough. It would be a case of merely applying a palliative where major surgery may be needed. I maintain that it is particularly important to critically engage in a theoretical debate on the way major concepts used in the women and development literature relate to gender planning, as there is a proliferation of short programs for gender training which churn out impressive numbers of self-styled gender experts. I am often appalled by the low level of theoretical understanding of even the basic concepts of feminist theories of many of these so-called ‘experts.’ Some of them argue that the poor women they work with are better helped with practical work than with abstract theories. I maintain, however, that by their untheoretical insistence on 'practical work' they leave major structures of women’s subordination intact. Women’s subordination cannot be reduced to its socio-economic components. Reductionist theories, therefore, cannot address the major issues at stake. Gender Planning: A Radical Practice? Gender planning can be defined as that approach to development planning which is based on an explicit recognition of the unequal gender relations between women and men in society, which are justified by symbolic codes, normative concepts and institutionalized practices. The effects of these unequal social relations between the sexes include a skewed sexual division of labor, unequal access to basic resources and assets, a limited political representation of women, a certain tolerance of male violence against women and gendered processes of identity formation. Although the concept and practice of gender planning is of recent origin and reflects the growing realization that women’s issues cannot be dealt with in isolation but should be seen in the context of the power relations between women and men, efforts to address women’s concerns in development processes date back to at least the International Women’s Year in 1975. Various approaches have been distinguished, including welfare, equity and anti-poverty approaches (Buvinic, 1983), and the efficiency and empowerment approaches of these the last approach seems to be the most useful. Many advocates of the empowerment approach, especially those from the South, such as the activists and scholars from the DAWN network,’ insist on the relevance of feminism for women’s empowerment. Rather than speaking of feminism or the women’s movement I suggest referring to feminist processes and practices which are always historically and culturally specific and thus need to be contextualized. Feminism should be understood as a highly complex, multilayered set of political practices and ethics, elements of which may be in contradiction to each other, and intersect with other transformative practices, such as the struggles against oppression on the basis of class, race, ethnicity and sexual preference. Feminist processes are located at the intersection of the material and the symbolic. De Lauretis (1986) asserts that feminism enables the
rethinking of the materiality of the ideological. Feminism is not only a transformative political practice, but also a discursive process, a process of producing meaning, of subverting representations of gender, of womanhood, identity and collective self (Wieringa, 1995). The interweaving of the symbolic and the material, of the conceptual and the political, is one of the major sites where the transformative potential of the empowerment approach should be located—the construction of a collective self of women who see themselves as vocal subjects, able to define and defend their gender interests. As De Lauretis asserts, the identity of a woman is the result of her own interpretation and reconstruction of her history, as mediated through the discursive context through which she has access. To empower women to critically and creatively reshape their worlds, wumeii’s concepts of themselves have to be decoded and reinscribed. This is a difficult and often painful process. Valente Vargas (1995) has analyzed this process for the Peruvian women’s movement and demonstrates that women are often ‘fearful of the new,’ not daring to discard the old and to embrace the unknown. Although the old may be painful and uncomfortable, it still provides the security of tradition and the consent of one’s social surrounding. Because of its insistence on the relevance of feminist theories, its potential openness to the diversity and complexity of social relations and its stress on cooperation with women’s groups and organizations, the empowerment approach is, to my mind, the most fruitful way forward for issues related to gender planning. However, in order to fully ensure its potential, serious attention must be paid to the conceptualization of gender. What do the three adherents of the empowerment approach actually mean when they use the concept of gender? Gender: A Radical and Contested Concept Gender theories are mainly embraced by Anglo-Saxon theorists, while many French feminists prefer theories which stress sexual difference (see Braidotti, 1991a; Marks and De Courtivron, 1981). Yet the French feminist, Simone de Beauvoir (1947), is generally seen as the precursor of the gender theorists in the present wave of feminism in the West, although she herself did not use the concept. She formulated a critique on biological determinism, introducing the famous adagio that ‘woman is not born but made.’ She was the first to point out the distinction between ‘natural’ sex and ‘cultural’ sex roles which became the basis for later sex/gender theories. There are some major problems with De Beauvoir’s theories. In the first place she does not attack patriarchy as such, although she attempts to deconstruct women’s ‘otherness.’ In her view the way out for women would be to transcend their ‘otherness,’ and become subjects of history and knowledge, just as men have established themselves. In the second place, De Beauvoir located the site of women’s ‘otherness’ in women’s bodies, that is in sexuality and motherhood. She did not problematize the body and biology as such, as postmodernist feminists do. ‘Woman’ remained the problem, the deviant one, the one to be explained, while ‘man’ was the norm (see also Braidotti, 1991b; Flax, 1990). More than 20 years later Gayle Rubin introduced the concept ‘sex/gender system’ which she defined as ‘the set of arrangements upon which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied’ (1975: p. 159). I will deal with her views at some length, as many theorists in gender and development quote her as one of their sources. Rubin combine insights from French structuralist anthropology, mainly from Lévi-Strauss, Freud and Marx. From Marxism she took her views on the sex/gender system operating as a
system comparable to that of political economy under capitalism. She accepted the ideas of Levi-Strauss (1969) on the exchange of women as the basis of kinship systems and thus of society. This led her to postulate the circulation of women in marriage as the key to the sex/gender system which is thus based on a male homosocial contract. In this view, women are merchandise in a patriarchal system, the symbolic and material capital upon which the process of accumulation rests. Rubin thus points to a male-controlled heterosexuality as the basis of women’s oppression. Adrienne Rich (1980) takes this view one step further by pointing to the workings of compulsory heterosexuality as the basis of the present-day gender system. There are several problems with the work of Rubin. First, she bases her insights on at least two unstable founding fathers. The gender blindness of Marxist theories has been stressed by several authors (Coward, 1983; Barrett, 1991). Levi-Strauss’s theories on the universality of the exchange of women seem untenable in the light of matrilinear systems in which men can be seen to circulate, rather than women (see also Peletz, 1996). It appears that he has taken that which he should explain historically, i.e. male domination, as given, as the basis of his theories. Flax (1990) points to a second problem in Rubin’s theories—her inability to trace the links of the sex/gender system to other systems of unequal exchange, such as the economy. In Rubin’s view these systems exist parallel to each other, rather than interacting with each other. A third issue is that Rubin bases her insights upon dichotomies, such as those between the biological and the social, instead of deconstructing them. This means that Rubin is unable to see women’s or men’s bodies as simultaneously natural and cultural, in which the natural too is part of a cultural system. This Nicholson (1995) calls the coatrack theory of gender. The body is seen as stable, natural, unchanging; differences have to be accounted for by analyzing what has been hung over it in various socio-historical contexts. Yet, in spite of these problems, Rubin’s analysis remains powerful for her insistence on the importance of the way women’s sexuality is controlled in present-day patriarchal systems. Scott (1989) tackles some of the major problems in the conceptualization of gender which were left unresolved after Rubin and Rich. She is one of the major theorists of what has come to be called social constructivism. She focuses on the way the concept of gender can be used as an analytical category to designate social relations between the sexes. In her view gender theories need two central elements—a historical perspective and a deconstruction of the terms of sexual difference. She conceptualizes gender as functioning in a dual way, as a constitutive element of social relationships and as a primary way of signifying a relationship of power (ibid.: p. 94). She stresses the need to study the interrelationship among four elements which together make up a gender system, and the way they change. These elements are the symbols in which gender differences are couched, the normative concepts used, which often operate in systems of binary oppositions, the political and social institutions in which a gender system is embedded, such as kinship and the economy, and lastly the formation of a subjective identity. Scott’s stress on the functioning of gender relations within a system of power, and her view of gender as operating in the whole field between sexuality (here she refers approvingly to Rubin), language, the economy and the political makes her theory on gender highly comprehensive. Recently Nicholson (1995) took the postmodernist
debate on the conceptualization of gender one step further. After criticizing the 'coatrack' view of gender in which sex (the body) and gender (the social) are seen as two distinct categories, she conceptualized gender as 'the social organization of sexual difference,' including 'the knowledge that establishes meaning for bodily differences.' For, she explains, our 'knowledge about sexual difference cannot be isolated from its discursive context' (ibid.: p. 39). The body is not the stable category that Rubin and other radical feminists see it as. We cannot 'know' our bodies in some pure form, for every form of knowledge is a product of the discourse in which it is constructed. So we can only 'see' our bodies through lenses that are always already social. The 'natural body' thus disappears from her texts; instead it becomes a 'historically specific variable whose meaning and import is recognized as potentially different in different historical contexts' (ibid.: p. 61). In this extreme constructivist position the scope for political action becomes very limited. It is reduced to the giving of, and the unearthing of, meaning. While Scott left a theoretical place for the inclusion of the sexual in analysis, Nicholson denounces any form of 'biological foundationalism' in which the body and its signals are accepted as given. As such Nicholson is firmly opposed to any remnants of essentialism which in her eyes 'difference feminists' keep falling prey to. Several present-day radical feminist theorists deplore the turn 'strong' constructivism has taken. Barry (1996), for instance, argues that by disconnecting sex from gender, theory has become divorced from politics. There is no room any longer for attention to issues such as sexual behavior and desire, battering, rape, incest, reproductive...
an area in which women and men are socially connected yet artificially separated. Marriage is seen as one of the specific institutions in which such cooperation is structured. The issue of (hetero)sexuality Downloaded from gtd.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on April 8, 2016 357 as the basis of the conjugal contract is not mentioned in this context. Sexuality does appear in Young’s discussion of women’s empowerment. Young aptly criticizes mainstream empowerment approaches as too economistic, limiting the concept to enhancing women’s entrepreneurial self-reliance. Feminist visions of empowerment transcend this view, Young argues, in their insistence that women’s subordination must be tackled. Women’s subordination is then defined as resting on two pillars, the ‘regulation and control of female sexuality and procreation, and the sexual division of labor which allocates women a heavy burden of responsibilities while denying them control of valuable social resources’ (ibid.: p. 158). Empowerment thus is not only an individual, but also a collective process which, Young warns, ‘implies some degree of conflict’ as those ‘currently holding power’ (i.e. men) should ‘relinquish’ it (ibid.: p. 159).

Young advances no suggestions on how to end male control over women’s sexuality. Even though she recognizes that sexuality is an important area of concern, there is no special section in the book devoted to the topic. Instead there are chapters on agriculture, manufacture and the urban informal sector. The book is heavily biased towards productive processes and economic sectors. In her chapter on concepts and assumptions, she ignores male domination and men’s control over women’s sexuality, but discusses the distinction between productive and unproductive work, the conceptualization of women’s employment and the household. Where intra-household relations are discussed, the focus is again on economic relations, on consumption and decision-making patterns. These are the kind of issues which featured prominently in socialist feminist circles of the 1970s. Thus, while Young recognizes that gender relations imply a degree of male control over women’s sexuality, and while she mentions that women’s empowerment carries with it an element of struggle, both these issues, which were crucial to the way Rubin (heterosexuality) and Scott (both analysis of social relations and relations of power which span the whole range between the symbolic and the political) defined gender, are virtually ignored. These authors are not even mentioned. What remains is an analysis of social relations which foregrounds their consequences for the socio-economic sphere. Naila Kabeer, in her book Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought (1994), does refer to Rubin’s groundbreaking article. She uses Rubin’s insistence that capitalism cannot explain the Downloaded from gtd.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on April 8, 2016 358 existence of various forms of ‘Byzantine, fetishized indignities’ (quoting Rubin, 1994: p. 40) and other forms of violence perpetrated against women in various times and places to refute the Marxian thesis of the primacy of relations of production and class struggle. As Young does, Kabeer advocates the gender relations approach as the most fruitful way to deal with issues related to women and development. However, while Kabeer refers to male control over women’s sexuality, (hetero)sexuality never receives the analytical emphasis it has in Rubin’s work. Instead, Kabeer delegates the issue of sexuality to the sphere of kinship and family and generally refers to it in the context of gender role socialization and relations of reproduction and contraceptives. In Kabeer’s view, a gender relations approach can be particularly helpful in the following ways: it shifts the focus away from the earlier WID approach on women and development issues; it points to the fact that
gender is not the only relation of inequality in which men and women live; it extends the Marxist concept of social relations beyond the production of objects and commodities to the production and care of the human body and human life; it is concerned with the complex process by which the simple ‘facticity’ of biological difference becomes socially constructed as gender difference and gender identity; and it seeks to avoid the universalist generalizations that characterize the more structuralist approaches which see women’s oppression as produced by the capitalist mode of production or by a global patriarchy (such as suggested by Mies, 1986). The topics that receive most attention in Kabeer’s analysis are household economics, poverty and population policies. She advocates women’s empowerment, as does Young, but pays no more than lip service to the link with (heterû )sexuality and the struggle against male control over women’s sexuality. Issues related to ideological and political empowerment are hardly addressed.

Women’s empowerment, Kabeer notes, should take place in the context of addressing women’s ‘strategic gender interests,’ an approach I criticize shortly (see also Wieringa, 1994). Kabeer starts the discussion by listing the strategic gender interests. Molyneux (1985), who introduced the concept, paid attention to: abolition of the gender division of labor; removal of institutionalized forms of discrimination (actually, Moly-neux wrote about the ‘alleviation of the burden of child care and domestic labor on women’); establishment of political equality; reproductive choice; measures against male violence, the sexual exploitation of women and coercive forms of marriage (as cited in Kabeer, 1994: p. 301). On the same page Kabeer adapts this comprehensive listing for policy makers and development planners; they are then reduced to: ‘legal reform, reproductive choice, employment promotion, access to new extra-household resources, organizational activity.’ Any analysis of sexuality, politics, and ‘other institutionalized forms of discrimination’ has disappeared from the list. Likewise, the centrality Scott gave to gender as a relation of power is diffused into a discussion about the way in which gender planning can build up an infrastructure to assist in the process of women’s selfempowerment. Kabeer is hardly concerned with the realm of the symbolic, processes of identity formation and the sphere of the male-defined political. Moser wrote her book, Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training, to describe the ‘conceptual rationale for a new planning tradition based on gender roles and needs’ (1993: cover). Like Kabeer, she refers to Rubin as one of the authors who make a distinction between sex, ‘biological differences from men’, and gender ‘that is, the social relationship between men and women, in which women have been systematically subordinated’ (1993: p. 3). On the same page she remarks casually that ‘the critical distinction between sex and gender is well known’ (ibid.). However, Moser ignores the centrality of sexuality in Rubin’s work, and does not refer to the critical work by Scott and other authors on gender mentioned earlier. Moser recognizes that power struggles play an important role in any attempt to end women’s subordination. As she writes, gender planning, with its fundamental goal of emancipation, is by definition a more ‘confrontational’ approach (than Women in Development). Based on the premise that the major issue is one of subordination and inequality, its purpose is that ‘women through empowerment achieve equality and equity with men in society’ (1993: p. 4). Apart from the question this statement raises about the nature of society and the role men play in it (those do not need to be transformed in Moser’s view; as according to De Beauvoir, women just need to catch up with
men for the problems to end), it points to the need for a feminist struggle. Yet this is exactly where Moser withdraws. Whereas Kabeer is supportive of feminism, Moser seems to be more concerned about the bad name the concept has in some planning circles. Adapting Molyneux’s distinction between practical and strategic gender needs, she explains why she propagates the need to pay attention to practical gender needs: It has become very popular for policy-makers and the media alike to label any policy or program associated with women as ‘feminist’ or ‘women’s lib’. Such terms are used by many in such a derisory manner that they provoke a hostile and negative reaction from female and male planners alike. The differentiation between practical and strategic gender needs provides a critical planning tool. This allows practitioners to understand better that planning for the needs of low-income women is not necessarily ‘feminist’ in content. Indeed, the vast majority of interventions for women world-wide are concerned with them within the existing gender division of labor, as wives and mothers. These are intended to meet their practical gender needs. While such interventions are important they will only become ‘feminist’ in content, if, and when, they are transformed into strategic gender needs. Gender needs differentiation, therefore, can provide a useful tool for planners. Not only does it help diffusing the criticisms of those who find ‘feminism’ unacceptable by showing them that working with women is often not ‘feminist’. In addition, it is helpful for policy-makers and planners responsible for meeting the practical gender needs of women, in assisting their adoption of more ‘challenging’ solutions (1985: p. 41). As I have already mentioned in my discussion of Kabeer’s text, I am critical of the distinction between practical and strategic gender needs or interests. As I will explain shortly, I maintain it is theoretically unfounded and empirically untenable (see also Wieringa, 1994). Moser’s statement reveals the underlying reasons for her adaptation of these concepts: she is afraid the word ‘feminist’ may antagonize too many people. Yet, I argue that fear of the word ‘feminism’ is in itself a major tool to maintain women’s subordination. Instead of accepting this resistance to use the concept, it should be analyzed and adapted to the relevant socio-economic situation, and feminism be made as common a word as say ‘socio-economic equality.’ As are Young and Kabeer, Moser is most concerned with addressing the needs of poor women. The issues most frequently addressed in her book are the gender division of labor, the household, employment, relations of production and reproduction, health and housing.

Sexual relations and issues of symbolic representation or identity formation receive only scant attention. In the concluding chapter, in which Moser broadens her topic of gender planning to discuss the way planners can build links with women’s movements and organizations, again the issues of sexuality, political transformation or consciousness raising are ignored. A short section on intra-household relations in this chapter focuses on the importance of women’s economic independence. Domestic violence and fertility control are mentioned in passing, and it is advocated that rape crisis centers and battered women’s homes might be established as a local planning solution (1993: p. 206). One other reference follows to the Bombay Forum against the Oppression of Women which organized around rape and domestic violence. However, an analysis of issues related to body politics such as rape and sexual violence against women is in no way integrated into her discussion of gender planning. Sexuality is only
discussed in the form of male violence against women. The existence of physically non-violent ways to regulate sexuality is ignored and sexuality is not seen as a potentially empowering force. No attention is paid to Scott’s critical insights into the conceptualization of gender. Practical versus Strategic Gender Needs or Interests Moser’s work is best known for its insistence on the distinction between strategic and practical gender needs. These terms are often used in a static, rigid, binary way in gender planning projects; critics have deplored the widespread ‘moserization’ of planning practices. I have some serious problems both with the way she defines these concepts, and with the unquestioning acceptance of them in planning circles. Molyneux (1985) originally introduced the difference between practical and strategic gender interests to address some of the criticisms leveled at the performance of the Nicaraguan Sandinistas. She started her discussion with making a distinction between ‘women’s interests,’ for which women could be mobilized, and ‘women’s gender interests,’ which referred to interests deriving from the social relations of gender. While this distinction is a useful one, I am less convinced by that between ‘practical’ and ‘strategic’ gender interests. The way Moser adapts Molyneux’s original concept is confusing. She shifts from the use of gender interests to gender needs and adapts the usage of these terms to a much wider range of development. Moser defines the distinction between them as follows: ‘Strategic gender needs... are formulated from the analysis of women’s subordination to men’ while ‘practical gender needs... are formulated from the concrete conditions women experience in their engendered position within the sexual division of labor’ (1989: p. 1803). As both needs are derived from women’s engendered position in society, the difference seems to be that we can only speak of strategic needs if this position has been analyzed, while practical needs arise where such analysis is not available. The way Moser defines the distinction between the two kinds of interests thus points to a problem of accountability and representation. Who actually decides what are ‘strategic’ or ‘practical’ needs or interests? Planners, or women from the target groups themselves? The above formulation leaves little space for a more complex analysis of women’s shifting, contextualized conditions. Molyneux (1985, 1998) herself is more aware of the complex relation between subjective agency, identity formation and mobilization. Moser’s conflation of needs and interests means that the more flexible, intentional and therefore political category of interests is replaced by the more static category of needs, which coheres in planning discourse (see also Molyneux, 1998). In the following discussion I will use the concept of gender interests when referring to the political process of women’s collective action (see also Wieringa, 1994). I have a number of other problems with the distinction between ‘practical’ and ‘strategic’ gender interests. In the first place I am wary of introducing another binary opposition. Binary oppositions such as those between mind and body, nature and culture, woman and man, are intrinsic to western science. Feminist theorists have sharply denounced this exercise of the dualistic ordering off reality as the attempt of male scientists to control nature and women (Braidotti, 1991a; Haraway, 1991; Braidotti et al., 1994). The distinction between practical and strategic interests is another attempt, in the words of Foucault, not to explain reality, but rather to control and normalize it (Foucault, 1972). Further, I would like to point to the impossibility of making an empirical distinction. Although Molyneux defends her theory as a ‘heuristic’ device, she claims more universal theoretical status for it. However, in a comparison of
two women’s organizations in Indonesia, the communist–oriented women’s organization, Gerwani, and
the stateled mass organization, PKK, I found that the distinction between Downloaded from
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interests was not helpful at all (Wieringa, 1992). Gerwani attempted to mobilize women to fight for their
gender interests as well as for justice and equality in general, as defined by Indonesia’s ‘leftist family’ of
the time. The organization was banned after the coup of 1965, and many thousands of its members were
brutally killed (Wieringa, 1995). PKK is one of the organizations set up by the military bureaucratic
government of President Suharto to control and re–subordinate women. The activities of both
organizations show a remarkable resemblance and as they are in both cases based on the problems
women face in their daily lives, they could be categorized in Moser’s terms of addressing women’s
‘practical’ gender interests. However, the context in which they were carried out, and the political
consciousness behind it, determine the effect of these activities. Gerwani’s programs included strong
elements of consciousness raising, while similar activities of the PKK aim to make women obey the
military leaders of their country. I concluded that it is not the nature of the activities concerned which
determine whether they affect the relations of oppression women are faced with, but the context in which
they take place, and the political motivation behind them. In other words, the distinction between
strategic and practical gender interests is empirically not tenable. Any planning intervention may be
empowering if it is carried out in ways which specifically aim to do so, just as any program which may be
potentially interesting to women can lead to a continuation of women’s subordination, if dominant
interests are being served. A cooking course of Gerwani for instance can have a transformative potential
if it is embedded in discussions about the sexual division of labor, price rises, women’s discrimination in
the labor market or domestic violence. Cooking courses with similar recipes can strengthen patterns of
gender subordination if they are taught in the framework of women’s duty to serve their men and
ultimately an autocratic regime, as PKK’s courses do. I suggest it is more fruitful to focus the analysis on
increasing the transformative potential any planning intervention may have, than to try to find out
whether the policy concerned addresses practical or strategic gender interests (Wieringa, 1994; see also
Young, 1993, who speaks of ‘transformatory potential’). In this context it is critical to realize that women’s
gender interests are constituted in shifting and diverse social and political settings. Women are located
at the crossroads of many intersecting and at times contradictory relations of oppression, where engaged in a
process in which their identities are constituted by these relations while they are at the same time reproducing
them. Women’s gender interests cannot be conceived in an abstract, universal manner. They have to be
contextualized, and seen as elements in a continuous process of identity formation and political
conscientization. Analyses of women’s collective action, upon which gender planning programs and
policies should be based, should reflect more complex debates on identity formation, subjectivity and
gendered forms of collective agency than mechanistic and heuristic divisions between practical or
strategic concerns allow. Desexualizing and Depoliticizing the Gender Concept This short excursion into
three major texts which address GAD issues reveals the limited way in which gender is conceptualized.
Although Rubin is regularly quoted as one of the founders of the distinction between biological sex and
social gender, her insights are presented in such a watered-down and reductionist version that their critical edge is lost. The issue of sexuality as a major element in constructing women’s subordination is ignored; the concept of gender has thus lost the analytical and critical importance that Rubin gave it. Even more remarkable is the fate of Scott’s theoretical contribution to the debate on gender. I regard her as one of the major theorists on the analytical potential of gender relations, yet her insights are completely ignored—she is cited by none of the three authors discussed. Thus the strength of her comprehensive view of gender relations is lost. As already discussed, she stressed that a gender relations analysis should pay attention to four elements—symbols, normative concepts, political and social institutions and the formation of subjective identity. This was necessary, she explained, as gender relations are involved in the whole range of social relations between the sexual, symbolic, economic and political. The three texts discussed earlier limit their analysis of gender relations to the socio-economic realm and the household, and the area of political and social institutions. Some attention is paid to the working of some basic binary oppositions, e.g. the divide between the public and the private. The realm of the symbolic is hardly touched. Scott’s emphasis on subjective identity is drowned in vague references to socialization and the rather functionalist way in which Moser deals with the issue of gender roles. Thus the three textbooks have undertheorized and desexualized the gender concept and have depoliticized its critical potential. A recent report on specific initiatives and projects aimed to benefit women in major sectors of World Bank project lending provides an illustration of the consequences a limited understanding of the concept of gender can have. The authors, Buviniq, Gwin and Bates, note that: In theory the shift to gender requires confronting the root sources of women’s subordination to men; in practice gender has taken on a much more apolitical connotation in the Bank and other development institutions. Since gender analysis examines the roles and responsibilities of women relative to those of men, gender has been interpreted as being inclusive rather than exclusive of men. Because of this perception, gender tends to be more palatable to Bank clients and staff than the term WID. Thus, instead of understanding gender as the complementary approach or a tool needed to address women’s needs in development, it is viewed by many as a substitute for WID. Indeed, several Bank staff interviewed, uncomfortable with a specific emphasis on women, willingly embraced gender (1996: pp. 23–24). How is it that in recent GAD debates the discussion is so economistic and reductionist? That gender has lost its political, critical potential and has become ‘palatable’ to many who would be unwilling to take feminism seriously? And that sexuality and the symbolic have been made invisible? And what are the consequences of this reductionist and debilitating treatment of the concept of gender? I suggest some of the reasons lie in the background of these authors. Formerly it was ‘not done’ to link one’s academic work to one’s history, affiliations or preoccupations. Feminist epistemology with its emphasis on positionality has stressed the importance of disclosing those aspects of one’s personal history which are reflected in one’s work (see for instance Haraway, 1991). Still hesitantly, I therefore venture the following remarks. To start with, the three authors discussed share a more or less Marxist or at least socialist feminist past. Although all of them denounce the gender blindness of Marxist theories, and at some stage engage in a critical encounter with Marxist–feminist theorists (see especially Downloaded from...
they retain the Marxist focus on material conditions, on relations of production (to which since the early 1970s relations of reproduction were added), and they share the inability of historical materialists to deal meaningfully with the realm of the symbolic and the sexual. Second, the authors discussed share an Anglo-Saxon background and/or training, which may have left a legacy of Victorian prudish-ness to discuss anything related to sexuality. This is surprising, because I have found this one of the topics the women I worked with were always ready to discuss. This is also the experience of Evelyne Accad, who has done research on women in the Middle East: It also became clear to me that, contrary to the perspective of many intellectuals and political women and men involved either in the United States or in the Middle East, rural and urban women from the lower strata of society are very outspoken on the subject of sex, love, and their relationships to their husbands and family (1996: p. 467). Another reason the three authors discussed here are so silent about sexuality may be because they are afraid of being perceived as essentialists. Essentialism still carries with it the odour of biological determinism. However, a 'strong' constructivism which rejects any mention of the body and sexuality as essentialist falls prey to reinforcing the binary opposition between the body and the social which constructivism set out to criticize in the first place (see also Fuss, 1989). In ignoring the sexual and the symbolic they cannot be analyzed in their relation to the cultural either. By its analytical outsider status the body thus becomes homogenized and ultimately essentialized. In my view it is important to look at the body not as the product of an unchanging biology, but as the site in which embodied needs and desires interface with cultural values. Another consequence of this fear of essentialism is the inability of the authors to analytically accommodate the bodily demands around which women readily organize. Thus they ignore an important strategic moment in the processes of women’s empowerment. Another aspect worth noting about the way sexual relations are treated in the three texts is their focus on control and misery: rape and domestic violence are seen as issues that need redressing. Women are thus presented as victims of male aggression. This has, , Downloaded from gtd.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on April 8, 2016 367 two consequences. First, other processes in which women’s sexuality is regulated to suit a particular (hetero)sexual domain are disavowed, including women’s internalized (hetero)sexism. Second, by ignoring sexual desire, the wide range of sexual practices and sexual object choice, the authors undermine the potential for women’s agency and collective and individual empowerment these issues might have. For instance, lesbian groups are typically omitted from the discussion on women’s organization. The consequences of the way gender is treated in these texts are manifold. In the first place the discussion of women’s issues is depoliticized and their sexual oppression is rendered invisible, as are symbolic aspects of women’s subordination. The neutral, ’scientific,’ descriptive way in which gender is used feeds into patriarchal fears of feminism. Feminists both in the South and in the North who do try to link socio-economic with sexual relations, and the realm of the symbolic with that of the political, are not only seen as ’radical feminists’ but also as theoretically backward—was it not gender the bright new concept that would lead us to a world of gender equality? Second, the reductionist and economistic treatment of gender issues has led to an emphasis, in proposals for funding projects for instance, on socio-economic aspects at the expense of projects and campaigns which link these issues
to body politics. Third, these theorists actually reinforce the gap between the South and the North. By ignoring issues of sexuality they imply these issues are not relevant to the South. That in those parts of the world socio-economic issues are primary. And that sexuality and the symbolic are concerns of western radical feminists only. Northern women have body politics and struggle about issues of performance and representation, Southern women have GAD and focus on the socio-economic. At the same time these texts reinforce the gap between development institutes and agencies and women’s organizations all over the world. This is remarkable as sexual rights for women was an important point in the discussions around the Platform for Action in Beijing, September 1995. Here it was agreed that sexual rights for women were important all over, and not just in the North. In fact it was a black woman from South Africa who spoke on behalf of lesbian rights. Though this issue was defeated, it was the first time a discussion on lesbianism was held at such an international forum. Lastly, the insistence that gender is an issue of importance to both men and women has downplayed the power struggle between the sexes.

Scott already warned that the way ‘gender’ is often substituted for ‘women,’ as it sounds more neutral and objective, carries with it the danger that it is dissociated from the politics of feminism. This is, I fear, exactly what is happening in many places in the development scene, as illustrated by the report on the World Bank discussed earlier. Instead of a rigorous analysis of male domination, care is taken that men too should benefit from gender projects (as if they are not already the beneficiaries of the other 95 percent of the projects). And I have even heard complaints that in order to ensure gender equity men were appointed to direct gender desks (as if they do not already control most of the other desks and agencies). Some Concluding Suggestions In what ways can the depoliticization of feminism and the invisibilization of sexuality and the symbolic be addressed in women and development thinking? How can we avoid a further ‘moserization’ of gender planning? First, I suggest that when women and women’s oppression are discussed, these exact words be used, ‘women’ instead of ‘gender.’ The use of the word gender should be reserved for those instances when an analysis of gender relations is important. Second, this gender analysis should then encompass the full range of analytical moments that Scott distinguished, and it should be sensitive to the whole field of relations between the economic, political, symbolic and the sexual. Gender should be given back its critical potential. And development should be conceptualized as a much more holistic process than is done at present, with its narrow focus on the socioeconomic. This does not mean that I advocate a return to an earlier welfarist model of WID practices. The shortcomings of WID have been aptly exposed. However, its focus on women as the major beneficiaries of women and development projects should be maintained. We should likewise keep from the GAD approach its insistence on the power differentials between women and men as embedded in a set of social relations. In my view, gender planning can best be seen as a set of situated practices of feminist activity. Practitioners should learn to ask new, ethical questions, based on an explicit concern with the relations of oppression women face, both in terms of gender and in terms of the gendered effects of race, class, ethnicity, age and sexual preference. Women’s gender interests are incorporated within a network of imbricating power relations. The basic questions of planners should be: Does this intervention...
make a difference? What is its transformative potential? Does it empower women to critically assess their own situation and to creatively imagine and shape other, less oppressive social relations? These questions will not be answered easily and not always in quantitative terms. Third, women and development theorists and practitioners should be aware that they are dealing with power relations between the sexes which are historically created, and that feminism is the name of the game to address the changing patterns of male domination. Instead of buying into the patriarchal fear of ’feminism,’ using a bland version of gender to make women’s concerns more ’palatable’ to nonfeminist planners, the concept of feminism should be hotly debated and its contents adapted to the present socio–cultural situation. After all, there isn’t one but several kinds of feminisms. Instead of disassociating any gender project from feminism, such programs should instead be made as ’feminist,’ as defined in its particular sociohistorical context, as possible. Any project concerned with women can potentially entail a transformative element. In the final analysis, I maintain that the dichotomy between essentialism and constructivism be deconstructed. The body cannot and should not be ignored so easily as ’strong’ constructivists propagate. By virtually ignoring the body the authors discussed here are unable to see the body as interacting with culture in processes in which both are being transformed. This is important not only because the binary oppositions between the body and the mind, and between nature and culture, need to be deconstructed, but also because women’s bodily needs, their desires and their pain are to a considerable extent the basis of their consciousness as actors in this world. Ultimately a disembodied, depoliticized gender discourse hardly holds out the hope for transformation and women’s empowerment that is harbored by the three authors discussed in this article.