

Rethinking Gender Planning: A Critical Discussion of the Use of the Concept of Gender SASKIA E. WIERINGA Saskia E. Wieringa, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, The Netherlands. 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. 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). 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 gtd.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on April 8, 2016 366 Kabeer for her critique on Mies), 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. Molyneux (1985), who introduced the concept, paid attention to: abolition of the gender division of labor; removal of institutionalized forms of discrimination (actually, Molyneux 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 Downloaded from gtd.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on April 8, 2016 359 exploitation of women and coercive forms of marriage (as cited in Kabeer, 1994: p. 301). 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 state-led mass organization, PKK, I found that the distinction between Downloaded from gtd.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on April 8, 2016 363 strategic and practical gender interests was not helpful at all (Wieringa, 1992). 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. 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'). 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. Downloaded from gtd.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on April 8, 2016 350 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. Adapting Molyneux's distinction between practical and strategic Downloaded from gtd.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on April 8, 2016 360 gender interests, 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'. Various approaches have been distinguished, including welfare, equity and anti-poverty approaches (Buviniq, 1983), and the efficiency and empowerment approaches Downloaded from gtd.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on April 8, 2016 352 (Moser, 1989). 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 emphasis on subjective identity is drowned in vague references to socialization and the rather functionalist way in which Moser deals with the issue of Downloaded from gtd.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on April 8, 2016 365 'gender roles.' She conceptualizes gender as functioning in a dual way, as a constitutive element of social relationships and as a primary way of Downloaded from gtd.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on April 8, 2016 355 signifying a relationship of power (ibid.: p. 94). Women are located at the crossroads of many intersecting and at times contradictory relations of oppression,² engaged in a process in Downloaded from gtd.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on April 8, 2016 364 which their identities are constituted by these relations while they are at the same time reproducing them. Though this issue was defeated, it was the first time a discussion on lesbianism was held at such an international forum.³ Lastly, the insistence that gender is an issue of importance to both men and women has downplayed the power struggle between the Downloaded from gtd.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on April 8, 2016 368 sexes. And I suggest that if we do Downloaded from gtd.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on April 8, 2016 351 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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.' 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. 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. 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. 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. 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.

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). 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. 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). 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. 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. 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

Downloaded from gtd.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on April 8, 2016

362 practices. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. Cross-cultural analysis suggests that not only are sex and gender culturally divergent variables, but that the relation between them, as well as the relative 'weight' both have in relation to identity formation, is subject to cultural variation (see also Moore, 1994). Sexual relations and issues of symbolic representation or identity formation receive only scant attention. 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. 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. 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). 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. Rubin combines insights from French structuralist anthropology, mainly from Lévi-Strauss, Freud and Marx. Young aptly criticizes mainstream empowerment approaches as too economistic, limiting the concept to enhancing women's entrepreneurial self-reliance.