

## Reflections from Rio+20 part 2: “Women working in development organizations are not allowed to be feminists”



*This post is a follow-up to the [previous post](#). In this continuation, Caitlin Fisher discusses the panel presentation by Gita Sen, head of the Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN). Fisher tries to find a way to move forward in the gender and development discourse.*

Another pocket of inspiration at Rio+20 came from a panel presentation given by Gita Sen, head of the Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) on June 18<sup>th</sup>. In the panel, titled “Sustainable Development: Juggling Gender Justice in the Three Pillars”, Sen spoke ‘truth to power’, as coined by DAWN. She spoke passionately and honestly about the state of gender and development today within the prism of her experience, having attended the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992. Although she had a somewhat dim outlook on the advancements, or lack thereof, since the 1992 Summit, she forced us to think more radically about gender within the UN development framework.

She noted that the worrisome top-down, Neo-Malthusian paradigm that emphasizes control of population growth, is resurfacing again after 15 years underground, and the momentum gained during this period around sexual and reproductive rights is now losing sway. Sen asserted that we are back to the same two silos of family planning and maternal health that we had twenty years ago, with no holistic view of women in the context of ecology, sexual and reproductive health, and human rights. Sen’s call to action was for exploring alliances that can allow us to transcend these tensions between the narrowly defined categories for action and a more holistic approach to ensure that the autonomy and integrity of women are not separated from the mainstream global economic agenda. The 1992 Rio Agenda 21 document progressively acknowledged that under every environmental problem is a problem of inequity, she added, and that you cannot solve the environmental problem until you solve the poverty problem.

She pushed us by asking, “How can we bring development issues into a feminist discussion, and how do we get the women themselves who work within these organizations involved in this agenda?”

She then said something that resonated deeply with me and sprung into the room as an undeniable truth standing in stark contrast to the mainstream discourse; she said, “Women working in development organizations are not allowed to be feminists—they shy away from human rights talk.” This was it. She had put in words my experience working within the development field. This was exactly the underlying frustration that I experienced in much of my previous work in international development. I could not stand up too strongly for women and girls within a feminist rights-based framework because it did not mesh with the overarching driving message behind our work: ‘[gender as smart economics](#)’—also the World Bank’s message. As such, I was in a constant uphill struggle to find ways to be authentic and true to myself in terms of pushing for broader questioning of structural inequalities. Moreover, my frustrations were certainly not eased by my senior managers at the time—the majority of whom were women. I distinctly remember the day that our managing director stated, “I would be the last person to consider myself a feminist”. I thought to myself, ‘me too’—not fully aware at the time that my frustrations were largely the result of this tension between expectations of me as a Development professional and my underlying feminist feelings



Sen also raised an interesting point about social development objectives, suggesting that developed countries have stopped worrying about their social development—their work patterns, living arrangements, education, health, and other aspects of life and *living*. She maintained that social development objectives must also apply to developed countries because it will affect how they treat and approach developing countries. This was an important reminder to us all to revisit and think critically about the development paradigm more broadly. What type of *development* are we are talking about? The US may be economically developed, but we appear to be socially un-developed or under-developing in terms of our lack and loss of value on interpersonal social connectedness. As Brazil follows our Western development model towards economic prominence, there is an underlying nostalgia tied to the social un-development that appears to be occurring.

Unfortunately, it was clear at Rio+20 that Northern governments are advocating for corporate interests that “have warped the sustainable development paradigm in the so-called ‘green economy’ that is skewed toward the economic pillar, emphasizing sustained economic growth over equitable development and without any ecological limits.” [i] According to DAWN, “The Rio+20 outcome document has relegated women’s rights and gender equality to the periphery without recognition of a wider structural analysis”[ii], which stands in stark contrast to the 1992 Earth Summit when linkages between gender and all **three pillars of sustainable development** were comprehensively acknowledged. Although many of the Rio principles were reaffirmed at Rio+20, the outcome is imbalanced across the three pillars, with the greatest focus being on economic growth. The outcome of Rio+20 “fails to tackle the systemic inequities of the international monetary, financial and trading systems; and prioritizes economic growth over the ecology and equity.”[iii] As long as this is the case, we will never see true sustainable development and we further jeopardize our and our planet’s existence

“The right to development is great, but the right to *what* development and *whose* right to development,” Sen asks. [iv] We must continue to think critically about these questions and dig deep into the tiresome rhetoric to unveil the problematic underlying assumptions that keep us locked in the same vicious cycle. I personally see the answer lying in a 21<sup>st</sup> feminism—better known as a critical lens concerned with issues of social justice and equality that aims to reveal systems of subordination and generate integrated ways of addressing these sources of injustice—a lens that looks holistically at gender and various axes of difference, and not just women. This 21<sup>st</sup> century approach must confront conventional paradigms and open up new spaces by challenging us to challenge ourselves—a mission that requires us to reconnect with each other in real ways. Only then will we see true sustainable development...with *time* now being one more element that we cannot afford to waste.

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[i] Nabulivou, Noelene and Anita Nayar (2012). ‘DAWN Speaks Truth to Power at Rio+20’. <http://www.dawnnet.org/advocacy-cso.php?id=235>

[ii] DAWN (2012). ‘Governments Gamble with Our Future: South Feminists Demand Responsible Action Now’. <http://www.dawnnet.org/advocacy-cso.php?id=248>

[iii] Ibid

[iv] Rio+20 Press Conference on Human Rights and Equity, DAWN: <http://www.dawnnet.org/advocacy-cso.php?id=230>

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August 13th, 2012 | [Development, Environment](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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