

BACKGROUND NOTES FOR MEETING BETWEEN WOMEN's GROUPS

4th JUNE 2013

In a series of meetings and discussions between women's rights organizations and activists in the course of the last two years, the need for women's groups to strategize collectively in the face of shifting donor trends and the steady de-politicizing of the women's NGOs within Pakistan was highlighted.

The increasing corporatization of development aid and the threat to local and indigenous groups survival and agenda came under discussion in the meetings held in August 2011 when a group of organizations came together to put forward their expectations from the proposed UN Women being set up.

The discussion was taken up again in the ASR conference in February 2013.

In response to a Newsline article in March 2013¹ that picked up on some of these discussions (although some issues were reported erroneously and subsequently have been corrected by Nighat Said Khan – see attached document) a number of e-mails were exchanged between those present at the conference and others who expressed similar concerns.

Certain positions in terms of approaching or understanding this dynamic that have emerged are as follows:

- Donor policies and funding mechanisms are a significant driver in the way work on women's rights/development/empowerment unfolds within the country.
- NGO's that accept these funding requirements become part of the problem. The 'blame' cannot be attributed to external forces (imperialist, capitalist) alone. NGO/women's groups create these dynamics and not just as a reaction or adaptation to donor trends but also sometimes to serve self interests and sometimes because they are not politically trained enough to see how they are being co-opted.

Hence, the discussion must acknowledge both groups as problematic even whilst recognizing the power differentials, where the former certainly dictates and controls more.

The following section puts forward the primary concerns that have been debated in these various fora. Much of this discussion has happened within the ambit of donor funding challenges and its impact on women's groups and their work. The 2nd area namely NGOs/women's groups as a problematic are insufficiently addressed, although by the very nature of the collusive process, their role comes up repeatedly

¹ <http://www.newslinemagazine.com/2013/03/say-no-to-ngos/>

but more as groups that are co-opted as opposed to groups with agency that too contribute to the problem.

KEY DISCUSSION POINTS

A question of autonomy: Whose agenda do we serve?

Agenda framing and restriction by donor groups (down to objective and output setting) is a trend that has become popular based on the felt need for building 'coherence' within donor agendas. This has lead to NGO groups being driven, and becoming fragmented in their coverage of issues. It has frankly sapped the capacity of groups to be responsive to needs and learnings from the field and instead programming is responsive to the funding available. This is not necessarily mal-intention but simply a slow and insidious trend visible sometimes in the best of groups.

A case in point has been the donor insistence of inclusion of the 'gender' agenda in mainstream development work. This has led to a mushrooming of groups with little or no commitment to the feminist agenda struggling to mainstream gender within their more 'important' programmes and the entry of men led development organizations within the work on women's rights. Sexual reproductive health rights work also went down the same route. The flavor of the day phenomena continues and some new entrants in the field include 'work with men and boys', 'interfaith harmony', 'peace and conflict resolution' etc.

It is important to underline that these agenda are real and evolve from indigenous contexts but they are framed within a language and projects constraints that make them superficial and de-politicized. As such agendas may not be determined by funding agencies in as much as that the issues are organic and have been raised by Pakistanis themselves but the agendas get 'framed' by donors within increasingly constricting 'solicited' projects.

This process is very akin to colonialism where the raw material was produced in the colonies, taken to the metropolitan centers for processing and the finished products then sent back to the colonies for marketable consumption. The raw material in this case are ideas, experiences, knowledge and initiatives which get appropriated and are then channeled back within tight project frames for furthering the agendas and methodologies of the funding agencies. Bilateral, Multilateral, International NGO, consultancy firms and increasingly National NGOs act either as contractors or as indirect 'implementers' or in Marxist terms are the 'comprador bourgeoisie' serving the interests of international capital and international political agendas. Ironically different arms of the government, national mechanisms such as the National Commission on the Status of Women and mid and smaller NGOs then find themselves in the position of applying for funds even to national NGOs and being answerable to non democratic, non representative and non transparent funding outlets.

To take the earlier discussion further, the fast shrinking space for unsolicited funds as opposed to solicited funds by funding agencies is a core issue. Earlier most NGOs were able to develop their own plans based on their learnings and perceived needs from their work in the field or at least their own understanding and conceptualization of the work that needed to be done. These translated into proposals that were floated to various donor whose 'interests' were defined through umbrella terms like women's rights, child rights, service delivery, capacity building, advocacy , political participation etc. These terms have increasingly being made more specific with donors mostly funding through solicited grants. This has become the preferred mode of operation, where a 'call' or a request for proposal (RTF) is put out, much like a bid- which spells out the nature of work including often thematic and geographical area, time line and activities.

Sometimes, the RTF is developed on a proposal/strategy paper developed by the funding organization for which the group has applied to another larger funder. The multiple layers of control and reporting and subsequent limited space of maneuvering by the actual groups that are locally based is obvious within this. Important to point out that the strategy paper of the middle man/donor agency and the actual proposal developed by the local organization is often sub-contracted out to independent consultants and firms.

Restrictive Terms of Reference: Programming in strait jackets

The 'formats' and frameworks used in funding are becoming more and more removed and unsuitable to the needs and requirements of the work of women's groups. At one end, they serve to alienate groups that work at the grassroots and lack the technical capacity to produce proposals or speak this language and at the other, it leads to groups tweaking and adapting their plans to suit donor requirements.

Primarily these project formulation demands stem from the business capitalist model and produce tensions when up against feminist thinking and conceptualization. Processes such advocacy, awareness, capacity building cannot be determined by result and output project demands alone especially since awareness, advocacy impacts and training capacities cannot always be numerically determined nor are time bound. Challenging dominant and patriarchal patterns of thinking be it in institutional policy, legislative reform, or community attitudes is a terrain that cannot be necessarily predicted, evaluated and ticked off the list. Programming requires a constant engagement, capacity to contextualize within indigenous setting and responsiveness to ever changing demands of the external scenario. Currently, the restrictive and instrumental way of measuring change based on pre determined outputs and indicators, the pressure of being able to predict how this change will play out and the need to spell out exact beneficiaries puts NGOs in a position where the goal becomes to write a 'sellable' proposal as opposed to designing a programme responsive to needs of women and/or the feminist agenda.What these restriction translate into is

- donors dictating the nature of the projects, methodologies, line items, time frames
- the need for rigorous but often repetitious paper work leading to increased superficiality

Important to point out the need for the donor where the 'outcomes' are more in terms of how they can 'market' their 'successes' rather than support long term, flexible, holistic programmes that can lead to an impact that is not often quantifiable or even immediately visible.

Misplaced Accountability: So why are we here?

Most NGOs are not financially corrupt and many meet fairly strict standards of external audits and donor scrutiny but the problem with accountability lies in its direction. Where there is considerable focus on upward accountability there is less attention paid to downward accountability. The erroneous assumption being that interests of the group at the top and the group at the bottom are the same. NGOs have a power that is unprecedented and undemocratic since they are not answerable to anyone other than their donors. Certainly the people in whose name these funds are received cannot question their authority. The constitutional right to freedom of information is not applicable to them and nor can they be challenged or voted out. While they fulfill increasingly rigorous requirements of their donors, the disconnection and disjuncture between themselves and those they are supposedly meant to 'represent' leads to 'moral' corruption or a 'corruption of principles'. In case of larger grants (especially the consortium model) this power is proportionately higher.

Accountability thus is upward, geared towards meeting requirements of donor, both financial and programmatic which essentially can be so exhausting that downwards accountability becomes a lesser prioritized goal. A small example is the preponderance of awareness and advocacy seminars being held in five star hotels as opposed to more public and people centric venues often under the guise of these places being 'safer' for international staffers who need to be invited for monitoring purposes or they need to stake claim to a particular intervention.

Institutional costs and rising perks demands of NGOs staffers:Subsidizing activism and passion

Within NGOs and increasingly across the 'development sector' the demand is for higher salaries, and extra perks etc. In keeping with the larger capitalist market mentality there is less room for volunteerism and a bigger demand for careers that pay. In addition to having to compete as viable livelihood choices with other more lucrative options, these groups are also placed in direct competition with INGOs who seemingly do the same kind of work but with better pay. This latter competition is perhaps more destructive as INGOs need local trained staff and actively lure them from local groups sometimes even when they are direct 'partners'. The salaries and packages they offer are often double or triple what these smaller national groups

can pay. The INGOs are often guilty of refusing similar pay scales to the organizations they fund under the guise of keeping costs low.

Moreover, the 'professional' requirements, paper work and constant quantitative monitoring of their projects by their donors necessarily entail enormous institutional costs. This leads to increasing pressure within NGO to corporatize their management and pay scales so that they can compete with these groups thus raising institutional and programme costs and taking them to levels that are sustainable and even more dependent on whims of external funding. It is not uncommon for at least 25-60% (the figure spills into the higher end, the bigger the 'contractors' involved) of the project amounts going towards salaries, administration, service fees, consultants, vehicles, offices, five star hotels, travel and other perks to the middle men/ international groups and to subcontractors.

For example the salaries of the 'Chief of Party' of the US AID project managed by Aurat Foundation and 'Chief of Party' of the British DFID project AWAAZ also 'implemented' by Aurat Foundation and a NGO consortium of 'rights based' NGOs get salaries that can compare with the corporate sector and are higher than the basic salaries of the President and Prime Minister, Supreme Court Justices, Ministers, legislators and the top brass of the military.

Men's leadership of women's group: The blind leading the....

A disturbing trend being witnessed today within the groups working on women's rights in Pakistan is the increasing presence of men in leadership positions. At the outset it is important to state that not all men are insensitive to women and not all women are feminists. However, this discussion emanates from a concern that women must be at the helm of the design and implementation of programmes rolled out in their name.

Part of the rationale for the increased visibility of men is obvious. As stakes increase with increasing amounts of funding and the establishment of women's rights activism as a legitimate, viable avenue for employment, men will step in. However, the problem is more complex than this. The challenge is not that men are taking interest in this work and are getting paid for it- many women too have been participating in this field because it offers an income- but that should men are taking 'leadership' positions sometimes exclusively so, within consortiums or NGOs devoted to women rights. This needs more analysis as the reasons could be multifaceted. These could range from women opting out of leadership positions within the 'sector' as the modes of operation have become cut throat/masculine or simply that men are positioned better by view of their historic advantage of being solely focused on their career and are deliberately elbowing women out. Either ways, it is an important issue to ponder and challenge or we will end up with men 'delivering' for us.

International NGOS and organizations: Uneven playing fields

International INGOs and their increasing presence within Pakistan is troubling. Staff is mostly local, picked up from national organizations for three times the salary and

perks that local groups can offer, projects are short term, small in nature and require implementing partners who are 'contracted' to do an already defined project with limited ability to influence, contextualize, innovate.

These groups compete for the larger international funds available in the country and are more advantageously placed to secure them. This now includes the UN bodies. There are numerous examples where these groups apply for the same projects/bids to donors within the country that the national groups apply to. Upon securing the grant, they turn to the national group for implementation and sub contract them, having taken out a 'cut' for design and 'technical input'. The donor is happy that it does not have to maintain stringent quality and financial check as the INGO or UN body meets their ISO 2000 or some other such international standard, and the middle contractor is able to stay viable and afloat. However, the national partner is left with a smaller kitty of funds to deliver, a restrictive TOR, limited autonomy and room to innovate, in other words a just a 'implementer'. This severely limits local organizations from developing their own programmes and capacities.

This instrumental approach to local NGOs is inhibiting their development. Pakistan has enough experienced and well staffed organizations in all the social sectors and hardly needs messiah INGOs to teach them the basics and take away the funds meant for local organizations.

Consortium funding: Tell me again that I work *against the mainstream* !

The recent trend of basket or consortium funding is troubling for many reasons, many of which have been described above with reference to the international groups, restrictive TOR, pre-determined agenda. It also brings to the surface some new challenges.

It has led to 1) has led to much more stark competition between NGOs 2) large NGOs are well positioned to take on these grants with smaller groups coming in as implementing partners with obviously reduced autonomy. This creates a certain power hierarchy which brings its own dynamics as a result of which we have larger NGOs now acting as donors. Also the 'larger' NGOs tend to be ones that may or may not have the required expertise on women's rights as many feminist groups have remained comparatively smaller due to ideological grounds and less focus on service delivery 3) Because these funds are necessarily large, they are well organized around a stipulated and fairly dictated project outline which groups involved have to implement around specific geographical areas, themes and strategies already set by the donor agency. 4) many of these grants/basket funding have a stipulation that there be an international group as lead organization. This is creating the new middle 'man' in this system and these groups are often consultant firms with little or no understanding of issues on ground. Moreover, these groups then exact their pound of flesh and dip into the funds available.

Consortium funding or at least the way it is designed right now, seems like the final nail in the coffin for the increased corporatization of NGOs in the name of 'coherence', 'accountability' and 'efficiency'.