

New Gender Policy's Expectations: break down stereotypes and give power

*by Jelke Boesten**

The MDGs (Millennium Development Goals) have been criticised because of their relative conservatism on gender issues, as their objectives did not demand changes in fundamental areas such as reproductive health, care regimes, gender-based violence or respect for sexual preferences. The proposed new goals seem more ambitious, although we do not know what they will mean in practice. Nonetheless, I can tell you what I believe would be important to do for the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) and the cooperation between Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and the European Union (EU).

Gender equality is a very important issue in Latin America, with several issues being part of contemporary public agendas of increasingly, broad groups. For a start, it is necessary that “we” (researchers and policymakers) broaden our own understanding of what gender is about.

As we know, because of different assumptions about gender, poverty affects women and men differently. We perceive those differentiated effects also on employment, political participation, health access, education, consumption, credit opportunities, sustainable energy as well as on water pollution, the melting of glaciers and on citizen security. If we aim for a global society where all of us can live with dignity and equity, we ought to actively foster opportunities and inclusion, beyond addressing everyday discrimination.

The new development agenda includes the idea of equity and dignity for all. The SDGs also contain a specific objective on gender equality and women’s “empowerment”. This is very good; however, to achieve this goal, one ought to be proactive in all the other Goals in order to promote women’s participation from all social strata. We do not have to wait for marginalised individuals to feel and act sufficiently “empowered”; we can actively *give power*. We can assure that higher education scholarship programmes take into account who is able to apply and who gets accepted. Likewise, when suggesting the construction of infrastructure or promoting sustainable technology, we can seek the views of those who are often not heard.

We can promote an education which takes into consideration young women’s need for information on sexuality, and which takes into account that young men must learn about gender dynamics like young women do. That is to say, gender cannot be an aim

conceived separately from the other Goals. It must be a perspective integrated into all other Sustainable Development Goals.

Until recently, such an agenda would have been called a *gender mainstreaming* agenda. However, gender mainstreaming has clearly not achieved the objectives of gender equality, or even of cross-cutting policy making. In practice, mainstreaming meant that development organisations had a gender expert who suggested specific policies targeting women, often to empower them, and often from a marginal position with the respective organisation, not at all mainstream. Hence, the time has come to *give* power, to cultivate respect and confidence between men and women, regardless of their origin, sexuality, religion or other factors that could lead to inequality. An agenda of gender equality has to be embedded in all development goals, not in the sense of “empowering women” –as a separated species- but with the goal of giving them what they are entitled to: their rights and opportunities as it would be the case of any other person.

Yet, and that is my main point, we have to work towards the equality and dignity of men and women, as well as for lesbians, gays, trans and all the others whom do not identify themselves with the “mainstream”; it does not suffice to limit gender equality work to working with women. If the agenda is not opened up beyond traditional understandings of gender, and hence, of women (as those who are poorest, victimised, vulnerable, in need of protection), then we are not breaking the actual assumptions and stereotypes. We ought to redefine the mainstream.

We have to be more feminist in our research: the term feminism is not very popular nowadays, neither in Latin America, nor in Europe. Only small groups dare to declare themselves as feminist. But feminism is the understanding that everyone, men, women and all other identities have the same rights, deserve the same opportunities, the same participation, security and dignity. This goal has to be central to every action we take in the area of development cooperation. This means that the aim of our actions cannot be focused just on “women in LAC”. It also has to take into account the structures for cooperation, of global finance, of institutions and, of course, of LAC men, men and women from the EU and all people living their lives outside gender stereotypes.

Broadening our conception of *what is* gender and what is sexuality; showing respect and recognising equal rights to people who live in a different way from the old conventional masculine and feminine roles - stereotypes which limit what we are as human beings- is strongly related to the gender equality issue. I hope I have made my argument clear: such a point of view has consequences for all the other SDGs’ themes. To unsettled and

question gender stereotypes and their associated roles is necessary to break with the great social, political and economic inequalities we face.

***Jelke Boesten** is Reader in Gender and Development at the International Development Institute, King's College London. Her latest book, *Sexual Violence During War and Peace: Gender, Power and Post-conflict Justice in Peru* was published by Palgrave in 2014, and is in print in translation with the Biblioteca Nacional del Perú. In 2010 she published *Intersecting Inequalities: Women and Social Policy in Peru*, with Penn State University Press. She has published widely on gender justice in Peru in international journals and books, as well as on gender, HIV/AIDS and activism in East Africa.

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