Summary report

Gita Sen – Where is the trump card?

Overcoming the critical barriers to gender equality in development

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On April 29th Gita Sen, Professor of Public Policy at the Indian Institute of Management in Bangalore and Professor at the Harvard School of Public Health, attracted her audience with her prolific analysis on gender equality and development processes. Her talk was organised for the lecture series “Feministisch Entwickeln?!”, which is currently carried out by the Department of Development Studies. This event was co-organised by VÖDC, Frauensolidarität and Verband feministischer Wissenschaftlerinnen and financed by the Austrian Development Agency. Gita Sen is a founding member of DAWN (development alternatives with women for a new era) which is one of the most important and pioneering networks of women from the global South. The 1984 founded network was the first one to criticise the approach of WID (women in development) and has since been a critical voice at various occasions, such as at UN conferences and social forums. DAWN coined the term empowerment when highlighting the need to look at inequality in gender relations, advocated against WTO policies and addresses global religious fundamentalism. Her association with DAWN gave her lecture a practical approach to development and gender discourses.

At the beginning of her talk, Gita Sen pointed out the specific history of Austria – not in regard to the Second World War but in regard to its almost non-existing colonial history outside Europe. This would enable Austria to have a different approach to development, one that is opposite to a guilty, nostalgic one of Western European countries. This is an important aspect when looking at the role Austria could play within the European Union when it comes to solidarity with other countries. She argued, however, that not having a colonial history can also lead to passive politicians in the development debate and its necessary activism. Nonetheless, Sen believes that there is a potential of Austria´s role, particularly in regard to women´s rights and gender equality.

When DAWN started about 30 years ago, issues, which Gita Sen highlighted in her talk, were only partly evident to DAWN´s founding members. After the UN conference on environment and development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, they have become aware of a peculiar problem that faced them in regard to development, women´s human´s rights and gender justice. This initiated a discussion on economic justice versus gender justice. DAWN has focused on these opposing discourses and reflected upon them by referring to current developments in the framework of the MDGs, Rio +20 and ICPD (International Conference on Population and Development) +20. Before introducing her audience to these reflections, she drew on her own experiences as an advocate and official delegate at UN meetings on development and
gender as well as the head of an action-research project on maternal mortality in the Southern Indian state of Karnataka.

In the initial project phase worries arose if all the dots of an NGO project, which tries to have an impact on women´s lives, can add up to something bigger. It was clear, though, that the project is not designed to provide any survey data for the government as it is the government´s responsibility and job to do so. Instead, the project aimed at bringing the community and the health service providers closer together. Sen analysed a distance between both institutions and argued that this is the reason for human rights´ violations of women´s health. Gita Sen emphasised that despite all these problems, solutions and answers are limited. When working on gender equality, however, one might lose direction as there are too many issues women face. The big landscape of issues, such as health, education, violence against women, agricultural labour, problems women are facing at work, absence of child care, water and sanitation, is part of development and has strong impacts on women; particularly, on women´s economic, social and political rights. Hence, it needs a road map for NGOs as these issues cannot be tackled in the same way. Otherwise, NGOs lose their directions on how to go from point A to point B. Therefore, the question of how NGOs make various dots meet is an important one in the development discourse.

Gita Sen took the issue of child marriage, which is particularly high in the district which she is working in, as a point of reference for the following question: what are critical barriers in the form of structural underpinnings of gender inequality and the missing implementation of women´s rights? She pointed out three barriers and argued them as such:

First, women work around the clock but without control or ownership of either assets or income. The recognition of women´s hard work is a lot bigger than in the beginning of her career but it is still a long way to go to reach equal awareness on women´s work. She highlighted this change in awareness with the example of the Indian census which takes place every ten years since the middle of the 19th century. India having a federal structure with many states, the official census of the participation of women in the workforce has huge variations from state to state. Women´s work percentage varies from under 20% to over 50%. The variation for men, however, is much smaller than for women. Punjab and Haryana, for example, are states in which the percentage of working women was very low. Sen, however, argued that observations clearly give a different picture. Therefore, the question is what these numbers were referring to; numbers which were far from observed reality. After some investigations, the reason came to light: the census does not count certain kind of work as work. It did not only include care and household work, work such as taking care of animals and poultry, taking care of small scale gardening and providing vegetables for the market. Although subsistence farming has been part of the Indian census for centuries, gender segregated data on work was not counted for. This is why women´s work and their rights for economic assets and income became invisible. This invisibility led to a lack of ownership and control of their work.
Sen pointed out that this further leads to the big issue on land ownership and rights to land. Particularly for women in Africa and Asia this has been a crucial problem. In traditional societies, so Sen, women do not have rights to land; as men are solely entitled to it. Those, who inherit land, are largely sons. In a patrilineal system this means that daughters, daughters-in-laws, mothers and wives will always be dependent on their male family members. In this context, Amartya Sen has coined the term “cooperative conflict” which suggests that relationships within the family are cooperative but due to the different positions of women and men it can be conflictive at times. Gita Sen gave the example of a woman facing violence in the family who is not vocal about it because she does not have any economic assets and income to fall on. Therefore, she tries to be cooperative within the family. On the other hand, in Indian states in which matrilineal systems have been important, such as in Kerala, inheritance only goes to female family member which means that having a daughter is very important. Nevertheless, though women own land, the control of it is in the hands of male family members. Sen argues that matrilineal systems support women in having better positions in society but they do not change enough to make an effective and lasting difference in the lives of women. Looking at China, Sen pointed out the progressive shift from collective and communal ownership of land toward a privatised one which is based on private lease to people, who have been cultivating a particular piece of land. The most striking of this development is that everybody’s work was worth and counted for in work-points. One earned work-points on the basis of the work one did. This means that women’s and men’s work were counted for equally. The moment the land got in private ownership, though, one could observe a dramatic change in gender relations within the family and in a worsening sex ratio in the population – known as the one child policy. In Africa, on the other hand, the problem of land grabbing by foreign companies is increasingly alarming. In Madagascar, for example, 40% of agricultural land is owned by foreigners. Summing up her main points of land and agriculture and its impact on women’s lives, Sen highlighted once again that ownership of and control over land is crucial for women to achieve an equal position in families and societies.

This leads to the discussion of women’s position in the labour markets. Women’s dominant position in what can be collectively called domestic and care work disables them to participate actively and equally in the paid labour market. Women face a specific pattern in the labour market: they join when they are young, drop out when they become mothers and join in again when their children have grown older. The years, which they have not been part of the paid labour market, cannot be made up for, and can particularly not be compared to their male counterparts who have concentrated on their careers, have joined trainings and have established a good position in their working environment. Therefore, women can never participate in the labour market on an equal basis, especially in an economic system in which care and reproductive work is undervalued. Sen argued that this vicious cycle has to do with economic policies, the decreasing focus on health and education systems and the disrespect toward women’s reproductive and care work. People who produce commodities are valued but not those who produce people, so Sen.
A second crucial point in this debate is that even when women are participating in the labour market, they are not equally present at decision making processes. They experience a lower position in the hierarchical ladder. Be it at their homes, in organisations, in companies or government jobs, women are hierarchically lower than men. Changes have been taking place, though. In India, under a constitutional amendment one third of village council seats are reserved for women. However, it took time for women to actually inhabit them as in the beginning men often took up the seats of their wives, mothers or daughters. After the initial years of this policy, women stood up for their right to participate in the village council and started changing processes. Sen referred to studies that show that women in such councils spend the budget differently. Their focus is on schooling, proper water and sanitary systems as well as health institutions. The biggest argument for women why budget must be spent in such a way is that they have experienced what it means if these sectors lack money and implementation. Due to the social division of labour and their roles in society, they would have to take care of the named sectors if government money is not spent in such a manner. The same holds true for women in parliaments. Ruanda, for example, has the highest amount of female parliamentarians and has seen a shift in budget spendings.

A third critical barriers women face is that they do not have a bodily autonomy and integrity. During DAWN’s first ten years the focus laid on economic issues and rights, until its members have understood that women’s rights to control and have autonomy over their bodies need much greater attention. Sen argued that unless women do not have autonomy and integrity over their bodies, societies will not become gender equal. Without eliminating various forms of violence, one cannot move forward in gender equality. These forms are under nutrition due to son preference, sexual harassment and rape, marital rape, rape as a weapon in communal conflict, religious battles and war, under-age marriage, FGM, lack of proper health care for girls coming into puberty, vaginal cleansing, the believe that child sex prevents HIV, acid attacks and dowry burnings are forms of extreme violence against women.

These three structural barriers – women´s paid and unpaid work, gender hierarchy and violence against women – must be part of any road map on how to move forward in achieving gender equality. Sen argued that discussions on WID (Women in Development) and GAD (Gender and Development) approaches, for example, tend to lose focus on critical aspects. Therefore, the following road map must be designed and must include four levels:

1. Changes in laws
2. Changes in policies
3. Changes in institutions
4. Changes in norms and believe systems

If NGOs, women activists and academics do not address all four levels nothing will change, so Sen. In her elaboration on how these changes must occur, she argued as follows:
Changes in laws and policies

India creates good policies but is insufficient in implementing them. At Sen’s institution, she and her colleagues have found out that there are laws and policies which are meant to work and others which are not meant to work. Such laws and policies will stay on the level of framework. As they are intended to pretend to work, they are designed to take the heat away from the government. If one goes deeper into such policies, one will find holes and a vacuum but no actual reforms for change. On a global level, the same holds true for the UN policy on women and conflict. People involved deal with men to de-mobilise them and to integrate them into society. Despite the fact that women have been holding the communities together while conflicts happened, the focus does not lie on women. This discussion brought Sen to the third aspect, namely

Changes in institutions

For changes in institutions it needs a clear mandate on what has to be done, physical and financial resources, rules and accountability on what has been and on what has to be achieved. An example from India explained her perspective. In the 1980s in India, the government had launched a national literacy mission to reach out to communities where illiteracy was very high. In the course of two years it has changed the face of and the approach to illiteracy in India. This campaign had ingredients to be successful: a clear mandate, physical and financial resources, rules and accountability. Last year, however, the same government has launched a national mission on the empowerment of women without these necessary points. Sen argued that it is not the importance of creating an institution but the inevitable need to know which factors make an institution successful.

Changes in norms and believe systems

The big question of how we change how and what people believe is central for this discourse. When it comes to gender equality, so Sen, this one provides easy excuses for governments. Governments usually argue that social change will come slowly and that normative believes cannot be changed by policies. In this regard, early and continuing education on gender is highly important. If institutions start to educate boys when they are already 12 or 13 years old, it is already too late to sensitise them on gender equality and violence. Sen argued that in some societies boys are supposed to be the exact opposite, gender insensitive and macho-like. There are, however, positive examples of sensitising boys from an early age onward. In Brazil sportspeople, rock and movie stars are icons for gender sensitivity and decent behaviour programs. Around the globe, mobilising public figures, such as sportspeople or movie stars, would make a difference in bringing across the message to a bigger audience. This is, however, a minor point compared to the discourse on secular states. Sen believes that it is difficult to change norms in a state that is not secular. This is particularly so in regard to women’s bodily autonomy and integrity. In Ireland, for example, an Indian woman died because the hospital did not abduct the abortion she would have needed to save her life. The Irish law allows abortion if the life of a woman is at risk. Despite
the fact that the woman was having a miscarriage and that the doctors knew that the woman’s life was at risk, the hospital said that till the foetal heartbeat can be heard, an abortion cannot be done. The woman died a few months ago. A similar case is currently taking place in El Salvador. A 22-year old mother of a two-year old child is pregnant with a baby which does not have a brain. El Salvador does not permit abortion under any circumstances, also not to save the life of a woman. If a woman undergoes an abortion she is likely to get a jail sentence of 50 years and the doctor for 12 years. In this case, however, the ministry of health has allowed for the abortion to take place as the woman is having kidney failures, among other health risks. The decision is now in the hands of the Supreme Court which has been pending for some time now. These two examples clearly point out the need for separating norm and religious systems from the legal system.

Sen summed up this crucial point by coming back to the question of what this discourse has to do with the discourse of development and its barriers toward women’s rights. Looking at the MDGs, especially the MDG 5 on maternal mortality, the post-2015 development agenda, and the ICDP+20 gaps and deficits in the fulfilment of women’s rights are visible. If one looks at the eight MDGs, one can observe that it is those people whose needs have not been met who are the most vulnerable in societies, economic poor people and among those women. In the post 2015 development agenda the mere interest is in addressing the economic inequality and not gender inequality. Unless one looks at gender inequality and how it intersects with economic inequality, it continues to be the poorest women who are the worst off.

Finally, Gita Sen raised a few questions which are crucial for further discussions:

What are the roles of policies and institutions? How can laws and norms be changed?

What economic policy is a country based on? Sen argues that it matters what macroeconomic policy a country has in terms of trade, investment as well as debt as it affects gender inequality.

Does it matter if we move toward democracy? The experience of the Arab Spring shows that not all movement toward democracy are good for women as they open up too much space for traditional, religious forces.

At the end, Gita Sen referred to the question, what is the trump card? She does not think that there is a trump card for just one aspect or issue. There have been too many trump cards already, such as women’s empowerment programs and gender mainstreaming, which have not removed gender inequality. It is, therefore, crucial to remove barriers. One needs to recognise that all development policies as well as poverty are deeply gendered, that countries need to follow laws and that neo-liberal economics are effecting women badly which woman have been addressing this since the Structural Adjustment Programs of the 1990s.
Discussion

1. How do you address gender issues in a room full of men? How do you persuade boys and men to be gender sensitive?

Boys and men have to be approached on their basis. The problem with the term gender is that people forget that it is about the relationship between girls and boys, women and men and this has to be done in relation to the cooperative conflict which Sen spoke about earlier in her talk. There is a great need in a transformation in the education system toward gender awareness and sensitivity that starts with young children.

2. How do economic and power interests play a role in development discourses?

A change and shift in our economic understanding and in the current economic neo-liberal system can only take place from where we are now. This place is marked by economised globalisation. The Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) have now reached the European Union. The International Monetary Fund, however, has changed its tunes. Since the early 1980s, the IMF told economic poorer countries that SAP are the key to development. In the current situation, though, the IMF has agreed that it will need capital control to decrease countries’ debt. In the post-world-war era, neo-liberal economy is the dominant form of economy. Institutions, such as the IMF, do not have any accountability. Women’s organisations and the work for gender equality need to be a part of a larger struggle against neo-liberal systems, such as the IMF, because women have been affected by their policies the most.

3. An Austrian Member of Parliament in the audience emphasised the importance of the ICPD and addressed the difficulty of language. She spoke about the recent experiences of the Commission on the Status of Women and the discussions on women’s reproductive rights vs. women’s reproductive health. She invited Gita Sen to the yearly conducted mother’s night which remembers maternal mortality and which urges for concrete advocacy. At the same time, mother’s night is a platform where various NGOs demand an increase of the development budget, particularly for gender issues, from the Austrian government.

Gita Sen thanked her for the comment and referred to solidarity that is needed on all levels, especially from the European parliament, NGOs and civil society movements in this regard. This solidarity is needed in current negotiations. Sen pointed out that the EU has increasingly become wobbly in its support to sexual and reproductive rights in international negotiations in the last two years. Sen, being part of official delegations, has experienced the silence of the EU when it comes to this fundamental topic. When the EU was approached to speak up,
EU delegates said that they have an agreement with Malta that they will remain silent on this issue. However, they said that Norway and Switzerland, both countries not part of the EU, will raise their voice in favour for this issue. Uruguay, Bolivia, and Peru speak up for sexual and reproductive rights but the European Union remains silent. EU-articles on human rights are not strong enough in women’s human rights. To date, international negotiations are struggling due to Malta’s, Poland’s and Slovakia’s positions with great support of the Holy Sea. Unless European parliaments and civil society organisations urge the EU to step up for sexual and reproductive rights, nothing will change in the current situation.

Another area that came up in the Commission on Population and Development in mid-April 2013 was the issue of economic vs. gender justice which Sen referred to the beginning of her talk. In 1992 in Rio the Holy Sea commented on poverty, inequality in relation to the global South, and the importance of debt cuts. This occurred after a long period in which the pope had refrained from commenting on these issues and went back to an even stronger theological approach. From 1992 onward, however, the Holy Sea picked up the issue of economic justice between the global North and the global South and added to the neglect of gender justice. Although the Holy Sea only has an observatory status at the UN, one can find them in every UN negotiation, be it in the Commission on Population and Development or the Commission on the Status of Women. Sen argued that it is very important for people working for women’s rights and toward gender equality to take back the middle-ground which has been lost in this debate. Sen believes that the future is “our, because young people are with us”. Solidarity is necessary to raise such issues and overcome difficult negotiation processes.

4. How Gita Sen uses the term development and what she means by the general expression of “the women”.

Sen said that women are not a universal category and that gender intersects with economic class, caste, and ethnicity. Bodily autonomy and integrity, however, is crucial for all women across the globe. The use of the term development is used pragmatically as the discussions around development do not bring NGOs and women activists any further. Development is human growth, justice and human rights but one needs to go beyond and tackle the conceptual challenges on human rights. Finally, Sen emphasised that it is important to question how the content of human rights can be linked with the content of human development. This is the challenge that lies ahead of us.
**Speaker**

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