

# THE IMPORTANCE OF FEMINIST DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION THROUGH NEOLIBERAL TIMES

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‘The story of We is the story of I and the story of She’.

‘We refuse to be “foot-soldiers” plugging the holes of neoliberal policies’.

‘But if you push on one side, and we push on the other, we can join our efforts to have a stronger voice and move a step ahead’.

‘Sasa! Action Now! We are Mná Sasa!’ (Banúlacht, 2011: 4-6)

The quotations above trace themes of subjectivity, relationality, gender, collectivity, knowledge, shifting positions, power, resistance, neoliberalism, solidarity, agency and action. These are all themes which, in different ways, are worked through the four Focus articles in this issue of *Policy and Practice* on the theme of ‘Development Education and Gender’. The quotations are from the Mná Sasa Manifesto (*Mná* is the Irish for ‘women’, *Sasa* is the Swahili for ‘now’), a document by grassroots feminists from Tanzania and Ireland. It connects their stories to the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) and a pedagogical project of building feminist grassroots solidarity movements. It was produced through solidarity exchanges between the Irish feminist development education (DE) organisation Banúlacht, the Tanzanian Gender Network Project and Kivulini Women’s Human Rights Organisation. But in 2012, Banúlacht closed, refusing to apply for core funding under Irish Aid’s new DE criteria which would compromise its political advocacy.

This brief fragment of feminist DE history speaks to the fraught context of feminist DE in neoliberal times. But in 2020, the ‘Beijing+25’ conference will be held in Mexico City and Paris. Already, feminist activists are strategising in recognition of the urgent political opportunity presented by the forum for resisting neoliberalism and climate change. In this context, it is timely to put questions of feminism and gender on the DE ‘radar’. In the spirit of generating debate with regard to the importance of feminist DE, my editorial will explore some of the

resonances and provocations which criss-cross through the four Focus articles. My own positioning is as a feminist educator with many years of involvement with Banúlacht, and with a core interest in alternative knowledges and rationalities for countering neoliberalism.

Eilish Dillon's Focus article titled 'Connecting the Personal and the Political: Feminist Perspectives on Development Education', explicitly brings insights from feminism(s) to the fore for development education. Her nuanced exploration of feminism's core theme, 'linking the personal and the political', is developed through interviews with three feminist development educators. The theme is emphasised by each woman, albeit from different ideological, theoretical, epistemological and geographical positionings. Bringing these perspectives into critical dialogue with discourses of DE among development educators identified in her previous research, Dillon argues that these feminist educators challenge many taken-for-granted understandings of 'the political' in DE. Normative understandings include the idea that DE is about 'others' or issues 'out there', and that the personal and political are linked by 'starting with' the personal (understood as a singular individual) and then 'moving to' the political (understood as the public, formal world). Feminist DE, however, where the personal and political are intimately connected, is about the 'people in the room'. The personal is understood in collective and socially constructive terms, with power relations operating in all facets of life, including domestic and intimate relations. Dillon's article is a highly textured and reflexive negotiation of multiple positionings which exemplifies her point of the importance of holding complex, diverse and sometimes contradictory realities in tension. This, she asserts, is DE which is simultaneously intensely political and extremely sensitive which is not an easy balance to strike. She argues that feminism adds to critical understandings of the political in DE, but it also calls on development educators to articulate their politics in 'complex and nuanced but strong and clear terms'.

This is precisely what Ronaldo Munck and Tanja Kleibl do in their article, 'NGOs and the Political Economy of International Development and Development Education: An Irish Perspective'. While Dillon's article is concerned with DE's role in facilitating voices from the margins, these authors address how the aid industry works to discursively silence the voices of people in

the global South. Two reported scandals frame their analysis: the sexual exploitation of young girls in Haiti by senior Oxfam GB officials, and the involvement of the Irish non-governmental organisation (NGO) Goal in financial corruption. Rather than aberrations, the authors argue that these abuses reflect systemic power inequalities endemic to the NGO/majority world relationship, including Irish NGOs. Their critical discourse analysis drills through sedimented layers of a discursive regime to expose supposedly ‘moral’ interventions as ‘a frontline force of imperial intervention’.

A key object of critique is the notion of ‘development’ – the ‘dominant central organising concept of our era’. They historicise and politically contextualise its successive iterations, from its positivist roots in ‘order and progress’, to the project of modernity, to the 1990s globalisation project of privatisation, through to a more recent technical discourse of results-based monitoring and top-down global indicators imposed by funders such as Irish Aid. Intertwined with and supporting these ‘development’ discourses are notions of ‘civil society’ and ‘human rights’, generally deemed to be uncontested goods. In parallel with this historicising narrative, the authors trace the cumulative effects of its cosy rhetoric which perversely silences critiques of structural violence and perpetuates and deepens colonial relationships. The subordination of Irish NGOs’ own visions to financial growth and Irish Aid priorities is in tandem with a reduction of support for development education that ‘would have kept that critical lens more active’. All this, argue Munck and Kleibl, provides an enabling environment for power abuses such as sexual harassment and financial wrongdoing. To interrupt the status quo, they propose a critically engaged research agenda involving the participation and engagement of the Irish NGO sector and, crucially, ‘the critical development education sector’.

Following Dillon, however, one might wonder about the space for feminist DE voices in Munck’s and Kleibl’s construction of ‘the critical development education sector’. Certainly, their elision of gender as an intersecting axis of power for addressing issues of sexual abuse is problematic. Eikenberry and Mirabella (2019) also argue that corruption practices exist because NGOs are often treated as neutral/altruistic actors, but they insist on a critical feminist perspective to centre the politics of sexuality. They argue that this can help to highlight the gendered and racial structures of power in NGOs and the

patriarchal and capitalist political economic environment which enables sexual corruption to persist (Ibid: 28). The twin feminist concern to valorise agency also raises questions about the extent to which Munck and Kleibl adopt totalising accounts of discourse which work to obscure resistances. Indeed, the ethical commitments animating their analysis - the position that sexual abuse is *wrong*, that we *should* be shocked - are constitutively forged from historical feminist struggles of linking the personal and the political. For Eikenberry and Mirabella, a critical feminist examination of NGOs requires ways to reclaim a solidarity society that addresses the conditions leading to violence against women. Rather than the top-down bureaucratic accountability usually favoured by donors, they argue for bottom-up accountability, including to those on the front lines of movements for social justice. Such a proposal clearly converges with that of Munck and Kleibl above, albeit with the explicit caveat that feminist development educators are sitting at the table.

Munck and Kleibl's analysis, however, also raises some provocative questions for feminism. Their analysis of the shift from state-organised capitalism to neoliberalism articulates with Fraser's (2013: 223) argument that previously unambiguously emancipatory feminist ideals are now 'fraught with ambiguity' (Ibid: 220). The welfare state, for instance, previously challenged by feminists as patriarchal, is now under attack from free-marketeers. In this context, she argues that feminist ideas are unwittingly supplying 'a good part of the romance that invests flexible capitalism with a higher meaning and a moral point' (Ibid). This opens up questions about the extent to which feminism's emphasis on linking the personal and political may also be resignified. If the action of feminist DE is 'the people in the room' (Dillon), is this just conversation which is 'an objective in its own right' so that 'it can never reach a consensus to act as a collective agency'? (Munck and Kleibl). Is 'the room' somehow symbolic of the neoliberal domestication of politics? Privatisation is not only an institutional matter: 'Today's politics is privatised, and privatised to the hilt' (Elliott, 2002:12). Fraser cautions (2003: 224), 'we for whom feminism is above all a movement for gender justice need to become more historically self-aware as we operate on a terrain that is also populated by our uncanny double'.

This is the terrain which Erin Welsh critically negotiates in her article, 'Assessing Microfinance as a Means of Socioeconomic Empowerment for Vulnerable Women in Jordan'. Welsh identifies two competing discourses of 'empowerment: a neoliberal version which focuses on producing women as neoliberal subjects responsible for their own welfare through microfinance'; and a Marxist/Freirean radical one which conceptualises empowerment as 'one component of collective liberation grounded in identifying and challenging oppressive systems'. Like Munck and Kleibl, she contests neoliberal discourses of development. However, her analysis highlights the multiple situated intersections between neoliberalism and patriarchy which produce gendered poverty. Thus, for instance, microfinance relies on and reinforces the sexist assumption that women's labour is informal, flexible and non-contractable. Not only does it fail to challenge the wider neoliberal context of gendered poverty and violence against women, it also obfuscates these conditions. Behind the 'empowerment' rhetoric, the reality is one of precarious, short-term, informal employment, non-unionisation and the fracturing of class consciousness. Welsh argues for the role of Freirean conscientisation in order to interrupt the structures of oppression and facilitate a move from the 'dominated consciousness' of 'neoliberal empowerment' to the critical consciousness of 'radical empowerment'. However, this is contingent on applying Freire's conscientisation as intended. Welsh critiques appropriations of Freire which work within oppressive systems and therefore foreclose the possibility of critique. Like the previous contributors, she highlights the importance of reflexivity in DE in order to ongoingly interrogate discursive constructs such as 'empowerment'.

Welsh's contribution provides the opportunity to acknowledge the central importance of Freire for feminist DE (see also Dillon). His notion of praxis, in particular, has been adopted by many feminists (Ryan, 2001). However, his work has also been critiqued by scholars pointing to its universalist, masculinist, and rationalist assumptions (Weiler, 1991). Their point is not to reject Freire's thinking but 'add to it what we know about subjectivity' (Ibid: 453). Indeed, the need to keep debates about subjectivity open is a political imperative because this is a key site of neoliberal governance. Gill (2009) argues that the present moment is marked by a dramatically increased *intensity* of self-surveillance and regulation of women. This is exemplified in Welsh's article by the targeting

of women for microfinance, and the shame produced by their ‘failure’ to repay loans. It is necessary therefore to be reflexive about reflexivity itself. Dillon, for instance, cites Alasuutari and Andreotti (2015) for whom a key skill in critical education is to ‘unsettle’ in order to resist the modern desires of mastery and control. Such unsettlings open possibilities for becoming attuned to other rationalities. Sharma (2008: 228) shows how neoliberal ideas ‘confront other political rationalities’ in her study of the governmentalisation of women’s empowerment in India. She argues that empowerment is not simply a regulative discourse but a ‘contentious, and unpredictable site on which both conforming and unruly subjects, communities, and struggles take form’ (Ibid: 223). These popular struggles compel democracy to function and look like it is meant to: ‘not an exclusive and regulated domain of polite conversation indulged in by privileged members of society but an unruly political theatre’ (Ibid: 236).

An analogous confrontation of rationalities takes place in the fourth Focus article, ‘Women on the Frontlines of Resistance to Extractivism’, by V’cenza Cirefice and Lynda Sullivan. These are not frontlines of polite conversation, but of rural and indigenous women in the Americas fighting for their survival. The specific issue here is the mining and extraction required where renewable energy is being assimilated into the neoliberal agenda. There is also a gendered dimension to mining impacts; women are in contact with natural resources for subsistence, but there is also a link between sexual violence and the mining industry. This is why women are leading the resistance. Such resistances are also the scenes of a confrontation between world views; while extraction sees the world through relations of ‘taking’ and dominance, these women’s resistances are embedded in alternative meanings. For example, indigenous Mapuche women fighting against fracking in Argentina have no language for ‘natural resource’. This respect for indigenous women’s knowledge is enabled by the sensitising theoretical frameworks of socialist/materialist ecofeminism and feminist political ecology. Accordingly, capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy are understood as connected. Decolonising practices then require the elimination of all types of domination. Women’s experiences are not homogenised or essentialised. Nor is their resistance idealised but is understood in relation to gender relations and resource management. These frameworks seek to move ‘from a dualistic, extractive, mechanistic, anthropocentric worldview to relations

of an interconnected, relational and biocentric world'. The authors highlight the patriarchal capitalist worldview as a legacy of Cartesian binaries of thought. Finally, they make suggestions for DE on how to use the case studies they present.

Implicit in Cirefice and Sullivan's identification of Cartesian dualism as setting the foundations for the patriarchal capitalist/colonial world view is the unavoidable conclusion that our current system cannot be eliminated without an intersectional feminism. Attention to the framework of binaries also provides a way of synthesising some aspects of the above articles. Thus, Dillon's insistence that linking the personal and the political cannot be accomplished within an individual-society binary, and her concern for holding complexities, reflects a refusal of binary terms. Munck and Kleibl's critique of bureaucratic governance in the aid sector can also be linked to feminist critiques of bureaucracies which contest the objectification of social relations installed by subject-object and emotion-thought binaries (Ferguson, 1984). In Welsh's account of microfinance, women's disadvantaged position within the capitalist economy is constituted, not only by the public/private binaries, but also the ontological disregard of the body and its need for food and shelter.

But here we must pause at Cirefice and Sullivan's perhaps too hasty move to insert the women's stories into the DE classroom. There are hazards here in their possible absorption into existing 'folds of the known' (Pillow, 2003:192). Paradoxically, one might say that a DE concerned with 'the other' leaves untouched 'our' frames and habits of thought, with the contingent risks of exoticisation. Yet, the ramifications of Cirefice and Sullivan's own epistemological framework provide a return to the feminist terms of Dillon's 'linking the personal and the political' in conditions that do not, after all, partake in their recuperation by neoliberalism. On the contrary, these alternative rationalities, based on the dissolution of binary thinking, subvert the rationalities which ultimately nourish neoliberalism. At stake in the 'people in the room' is embodiment, and a DE therefore which is about 'bodies in struggle rather than simply ideas in contention' (Lyons, 1999: 34). This opens up emotion as a feminist epistemological resource, as registered by Caoimhe Butterly in Eilish Dillon's article. Crucially, emotions must be understood as mediated rather than reified – what Rosaldo (1984) calls 'embodied thoughts'. But 'the people in the

room' also has a temporal dimension in the embodied relational moment of *Now*. It provides for the actualised as well as philosophical derailing of habits of mind linked to the temporalities of modernity and 'development', indexed in the linearity and closures involved in 'moving from the personal to the political'.

The four articles combine in different (although not always explicit) ways to make an important and exciting contribution to foregrounding the politics of gender, feminism and feminist movement through critical DE methodologies. An overarching theme is that of politics and action, including attention to how their meanings are slippery and open to contestation. A related theme is the importance of reflexivity in order to resist becoming (too?) entangled in the neoliberal project. Intersectionality has also emerged as an important theme in order to attend to how gender/patriarchy intersects in complex and situated ways with other axes of power, including capitalism and colonialism. Interestingly, there has been relatively limited attention to the specificity of feminist epistemological frameworks and their relevance for DE. It is my hope that this issue will spark curiosity and interest in this theme.

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