2001

Challenging the Gendered Hegemony of Space: Acknowledging 'Difference' in Development Planning

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Abstract

A review of Gender, Planning and Human Rights, edited by Tovi Fenster. New York: Routledge, 1999 (International Studies of Women and Place Series). 240pp.

Traditionally, feminist efforts to promote and protect women's rights as human rights have focused on legalistic strategies, such as advocating for the inclusion of gender-specific concerns in international human rights conventions, the implementation of national legislation, the revision of laws that are discriminatory to women, and the strengthening of police and judicial procedures. In recent years, however, feminist activists and academics have recognized that advancing the status and empowerment of women requires recognition of the multiple dimensions of gender and human rights and, consequentially, the adoption of proactive strategies aimed at social, economic, and institutional change. Gender, Planning and Human Rights, edited by Tovi Fenster, is illustrative of the increasing feminist challenge to the purely legalistic conceptualization of human rights. The book comprises nine case studies that explore the geographies and spatialities of human rights in multicultural societies, with the goal of identifying methods for integrating gender and human rights issues in planning, development, and policy-making.
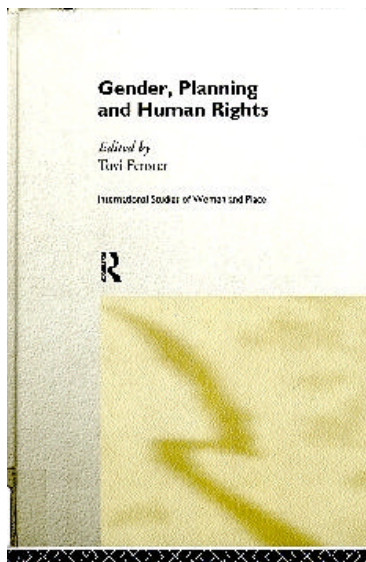
Keywords

Gender, Hegemony, International development

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Gender, Space and Human Rights

Traditionally, feminist efforts to promote and protect women's rights as human rights have focused on legalistic strategies, such as advocating for the inclusion of gender-specific concerns in international human rights conventions, the implementation of national legislation, the revision of laws that are discriminatory to women, and the strengthening of police and judicial procedures. In recent years, however, feminist activists and academics have recognized that advancing the status and empowerment of women requires recognition of the multiple dimensions of gender and human rights and, consequentially, the adoption of proactive strategies aimed at social, economic, and institutional change. <u>Gender, Planning and Human Rights</u>, edited by Tovi Fenster, is illustrative of the increasing feminist challenge to the purely legalistic conceptualization of human rights. The book comprises nine case studies that explore the geographies and spatialities of human rights in multicultural societies, with the goal of identifying methods for integrating gender and human rights issues in planning, development, and policy-making.

The contributors to the book assert that space is relevant to an understanding of gender and human rights violations, given its relationship to public/private constructs, cultural norms, and social and power relations. Spatial planning is defined as "a set of rational actions, which aim to organize the use of space according to principles and goals determined in advance, usually by those in power" (Fenster: 8). Planning is therefore recognized as a hegemonic process that shapes economic, social, cultural, and physical spaces, usually to the benefit of the most powerful actors in society. Given the marginalization of women as planners, as well as the neglect of gender-specific needs, planning is identified as a male-dominated process that often reinforces gender inequality, discrimination, and abuse.

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The book is divided into three sections. Part I briefly reviews existing literature on gender, human rights, and development planning to provide a methodological framework for the following case studies. Part II examines the linkages between the concepts of gender, planning, and human rights in four geographical contexts: the UK, Israel, Canada, and Singapore. Part III focuses on the implications of gendered human rights in development and policy-making processes through case studies of the economic rights of Appalachian women in the United States, the rights of migrant women in the EU, indigenous women and land rights in Australia, and women's rights in the post-Communist Czech Republic.

Power and Control in Planning

In examining the relationships between gender, planning, and human rights in four distinct contexts, the case studies in Part II address the implications of the unequal distribution of power between men and women, a lack of women as planners, and the effects of universalizing approaches to planning. With the exception of Jo Little's analysis of gender inequality in the built environment through town planning in the UK, each of the case studies additionally focuses on the intersection of gender with ethnicity and cultural norms.

In her analysis of women and town planning in the UK, Little argues that even when institutional mechanisms intended to promote gender-specific concerns are in place, these mechanisms do not always adequately respond to women's needs. Gendered planning initiatives continue to be individual responses to specific problems, rather than part of a broad-based strategy aimed at altering the inequitable distribution of power between men and women. While Little acknowledges that identifying a specific correlation between women's presence in planning and the implementation of gendered planning initiatives is not possible, she maintains that women's participation is important for raising awareness of women's needs and experiences within the built environment. The absence of women, in turn, sanctions a lack of sympathy for gender-specific concerns and is likely to reinforce the status quo.

Tovi Fenster's study of two minority communities in Israel—the Muslim Bedouin and the Ethiopian Jews—examines the implications of overlooking the cultural and gendered nexus in planning even if these cultural values abuse women's rights. Fenster's description of top-down, universalistic planning initiatives in Israel, which ignored unique cultural needs of Bedouin and Ethiopian communities, illustrates that such planning may have the effect of restricting women's mobility, marginalizing them within the community and within the household, and, in general, worsening their situation. In the case of Muslim Bedouins, the lack of Bedouin participation in the planning process (males and females alike) led to the creation of towns which increased residential density, compromised the traditional need for privacy, and threatened cultural codes of honor, particularly with respect to women. As a consequence, women's freedom of movement has significantly declined, thereby affecting other rights, such as the right to work. For the Ethiopian Jews, the lack of planning consideration for traditional menstruation huts in developing Ethiopian housing schemes has contributed to tension among family members, with women feeling guilty and ashamed for 'polluting' the household. In both cases, the cultural norms valued by the communities may be perceived as patriarchal and reinforcing women's subordination. The imposition of universalizing approaches to planning, however, has, in fact, worsened women's position within the

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household and community. Fenster therefore supports the concept of 'transversalism,' a dialogue encouraging participation of affected communities and an acknowledgment of difference. She argues for a recognition in development planning of women's strategic needs, those women identify as contributing to their subordinate position relative to men, and their practical needs, the immediately perceived needs women identify in their socially accepted roles in society.

Wallace and Milroy's discussion of planning in Canada's multicultural cities additionally explores the implications of universalizing approaches to planning which are blind to ethnic, class, and gender differences. Immigrants to Canada traditionally arrived from European or Commonwealth countries and shared similar cultural backgrounds with the Euro-Canadian majority. Increasingly, however, immigrants to Canada represent diverse cultural backgrounds. At the same time, government funding for policy accommodations for multiculturalism is in decline. As demonstrated by the case of Ontario's Planning Act (1996), the assumption of people as 'generic and undifferentiated' does not take into consideration differential access to legal protections for minorities due to poor language skills and a lack of knowledge of the system. Furthermore, as is particularly true in the case of non-European women, migrants are concentrated in the informal sector, which is unregulated and unprotected by the state. The concept of identical treatment may therefore produce serious inequality in practice. Wallace and Milroy recommend accepting diversity as the point of departure in planning practice, that is, viewing the country as already constructed by existing diversity along dimensions of gender, class, and ethnicity. Furthermore, the authors recommend on-going pressure from activists capable of linking urban experience to theories from human rights, cultural studies, feminism, and design.

Gillian Davidson's study of gender planning in Singapore examines the influence of state promotion of multiculturalism and Asian values on the marginalization of gender issues. Davidson notes that Singapore is a successful example of the linkage between multiculturalism and development, focusing on cultural values, national ideology, ethnic tolerance, and economic dynamism. The example of Singapore also confirms, however, that progress and economic growth do not necessarily contribute to the promotion or protection of human rights. In proclaiming paternalistic Asian values, the Singapore government maintains that freedoms and rights are a form of Western cultural imperialism. Consequentially, the rights and equalities of women have been obscured by attention to ethnicity, cultural values, and neutral planning. While the participation of women in development is actively promoted by the government, they are conceptualized as 'tools' of state planning through reproduction and pro-family policies. As a result of women's significant responsibility for upholding Asian values, gender discrimination, inequality, and exclusion is viewed as justified by the state. One consequence of the cultural association of women as mothers, wives, and caretakers is the limited availability and access of women to protective and legal remedies for domestic violence. Davidson therefore argues that the Singapore government must meet demands for the recognition and respect of the multiple dimensions of diversity and difference for the realization of women's full human rights to be possible.

The four case studies outlined above clearly identify and describe serious obstacles to the responsiveness of planning to gender-specific concerns and needs. Where the case studies are most weak, however, is in identifying concrete—rather than idealistic—means for altering the theory and practice of planning. To acknowledge the need for a dialogue among all those affected by planning,

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to recognize the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and class, and to promote government respect of diversity and difference may be an important first step, but it does not offer much in the way of new insights into how development and planning can contribute to the realization of women's human rights. The case studies reiterate the problem of women's marginalization in planning, but fail to identify potential prescriptions for alleviating their peripheral position, thereby offering only a preliminary analysis of the linkage between gender, planning, and human rights.

Gendered Human Rights in Development and Policy-Making

Part III of *Gender, Planning and Human Rights* shifts the focus of the book to the policy-making implications of gender and planning within a human rights context. The case studies approach gender, development and policy-making from five distinct angles, including the relationship between household dynamics and economic opportunities in the Appalachian region of the U.S., the gendered linkages between structural adjustment and micro-enterprise development programs in Peru, gender and the rights of migrants in the EU, indigenous women and land rights in Australia, and perceptions of feminism and human rights in the post-communist Czech Republic. Although the case studies are grounded in the specific experiences of women in each context, the analyses correspond to concerns of global interest.

In "Households, Violence and Women's Economic Rights," Ann Oberhauser challenges traditional development and human rights notions of the household as a homogenous, equitable, and harmonious unit. Based on her analysis of women in the Appalachian region of the U.S., Oberhauser argues for an understanding of the household as a heterogeneous, complex unit that is often the site of contestation. By focusing on traditional gender roles in the household and the prevalence of domestic violence, Oberhauser illustrates how intra-household gender dynamics impact women's participation in the workforce. As a consequence of gendered divisions of productive and reproductive labor, the subordinate position of women in the household, and the effects of gender violence on women's capacity to participate in the workforce, household dynamics directly contribute to gendered discrimination in accessing resources and employment opportunities. Oberhauser therefore argues that planners and policy-makers should focus on household gender relations and their sexual divisions of labor as the point from which to initiate community-based economic strategies and gender-sensitive planning. Such community-based opportunities are viewed by Oberhauser as essential to enhancing women's financial, marketing, and productive skills, thereby contributing to their empowerment.

Hays-Mitchell's study of informal employment in Peru points to two interrelated sources of discrimination against women, namely the neo-liberal model of development pursued through structural adjustment programs (SAPs) in Latin America and the traditional exclusion of women from micro-enterprise development. A number of feminist critiques of structural adjustment exist (Elson, 1989; Gladwin, 1990; Kuenyehia, 1994; Sparr, 1994) that point to SAPs as adding to women's work burden, intensifying gender inequality in the formal and informal economic sectors, and depriving women of traditional wage sources through the concentration on export-production. Hays-Mitchell reiterates these critiques by pointing to structural adjustment in Peru as intensifying the feminization of poverty through its support of patriarchal interests, ideologies, and institutions. As a consequence, she recognizes a connection between structural adjustment, women's limited

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access to productive resources, and, subsequently, their exclusion from conventional micro-enterprise programs due to a lack of income-generating and credit experience. Hays-Mitchell concludes that micro-enterprise programs must not only consider the gender-specific social and economic constraints women face when conceptualizing such programs, but the alleviation of problems associated with SAPs requires a reconsideration of neo-liberal restructuring to acknowledge non-economic factors affecting women's lives.

In "Gender, Migrants and Rights in the European Union," Eleonore Kofman addresses the hesitance of European Union members to recognize the rights of migrants as human rights. European conventions establish obligations of states towards citizens. With respect to migrants or temporary residents, however, individual states are afforded considerable discretion. Kofman's analysis of women migrants in the EU raises two important points. First, women who enter a European state as the spouse of a migrant enter the country as a dependent. Not only do dependent female migrants confront problems of limited access to formal labor and resources, lower wages, and housing problems, but, given probationary regulations pertaining to dissolution of marriage, women may find themselves having to choose between domestic violence and deportation. Second, family reunion procedures in European states continue to assume a male primary migrant, in spite of the increasing masculinization of family reunification in which women are the agents. Given that women's earnings are lower than men's, women are confronted with difficulty in accumulating resources and fulfilling the conditions of family reunification. Kofman raises significant concerns about the vulnerability of both male and female migrants, noting that "changing places internationally should not have to be equated with an extreme loss of rights" (137). However, her analysis is largely descriptive and offers no practical policy recommendations - beyond challenging the operation of probationary periods for migrants - for how to address the insecure position of women migrants.

Deborah Bird Rose's study of Aboriginal land rights in Australia points to the imposition of male-dominated colonial constructs that have the effect of marginalizing and disempowering indigenous women. While the realization of land rights for the Aboriginal population is a significant achievement, the emerging laws were written by men and the legal system remains dominated by men. As a result, the legal system has produced a situation that did not exist previously, in which Aboriginal males are privileged to speak for females. Such a process has concealed Aboriginal women's significant role as managers of country, kinship, culture, and social relations, as well as obscuring the importance of their ecological, geographical, and religious knowledge. Rose speaks of the "erasure of the power and presence of women" (148). The effect is not only to marginalize women's status and actions, but to threaten long-term Aboriginal cultural survival. Rose's analysis is compelling and points to the potential of laws implemented in the name of human rights to negatively affect gender social equity. Again, however, her critique of human rights in relation to gender and cultural survival does not go beyond description to offer alternative policies and practices.

Siklova's analysis of women and human rights in the Czech Republic offers a critique not only of the on-going subordination of gendered concerns in Eastern Europe but of the inappropriateness of conventional policies and practices of the human rights and feminist movements for post-Communist states. During the socialist regime, Siklova notes that feminism was perceived by the

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state as bourgeois ideology intended to split the working class into groups pursuing individual interests, thereby delaying the victory of the proletariat and the building of socialism. The terminology and meaning of human rights, in turn, was co-opted by the socialist regime and took on a distinctly non-Western meaning, in which the language of human rights was used to support claims of a classless society as necessarily inferring the realization of the human rights of all people - including the poor, ethnic minorities, and women. In the post-Communist era, the terms 'feminism' and 'human rights' remain ideologically contaminated. Women that have endured decades of oppression under a powerful state remain reluctant to concede power to a state or supranational body to ensure the implementation and enforcement of women's legal, economic, social, and political rights. The application of universal policies and practices of feminism and human rights, given the failure to understand the Communist and post-Communist experience, consequently does little to contribute to the emancipation of women. Siklova therefore argues that altering prejudices and misinterpretations of feminism and human rights in countries such as the Czech Republic will be a long process, and one that must originate from the 'inside,' as opposed to being imposed by external actors.

The case studies in Part III highlight policy concerns that go beyond the specific experiences of women in each context. A number of studies of gender and intra-household dynamics, micro-enterprise development, and migration have previously been undertaken. Oberhauser, Hays-Mitchell, and Kofman, however, provide additional insights that encourage further attention among planners and policy-makers to the social obstacles constraining women's full participation in development and planning. The analyses offered by Rose and Siklova, in turn, raise issues that are often peripheral to both human rights and feminist studies. While international human rights encourages states to implement laws protecting indigenous rights, Rose alerts us of the potential for such legislation - given the endurance of patriarchal structures and institutions - to erase the power, knowledge, and presence of indigenous women. Siklova's analysis presents a challenge to the universalizing policies and practices of human rights and feminism originating not from cultural relativist perspectives, but rather from ideology and fear of a strong state. The lack of awareness among Northern feminists of the historical experiences of women in post-Communist states may, in fact, undermine contemporary assertions of women's rights as human rights.

Despite the contributions of these scholars to an enhanced understanding of the linkages between gender, development, and planning, as in the previous four case studies, the analyses remain weak in moving beyond description. If, as Tovi Fenster argues in the introduction, this book is to serve as a foundation of a new development and planning agenda, further consideration must be given to practical strategies aimed at alleviating discriminatory practices and policies, altering gender-biased institutions, and creating a space for women's collective action.

Conclusion

Gender, Planning and Human Rights purports to offer the reader "the foundation of a new agenda for planning and development, which is sensitive to gendered human rights" (Fenster: 16). The linkage between gender, development, and human rights, however, is hardly a new phenomenon. The right to development as a human right is explicitly recognized in international human rights mechanisms, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of

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Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). International organizations, such as the United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM), have shifted significant attention and resources to initiatives aimed at mainstreaming women in development and planning (see Heyzer, ed., *A Commitment to the World's Women*, 1995). Numerous scholars and activists have focused on the gender and human rights dimensions of development planning, including Rounaq Jahan, Rhoda Howard, and Marsha Freeman. Furthermore, academic fields such as women's studies, international studies, sociology, and anthropology are broadening curricula to include courses on gender, development, and human rights, thereby producing increasing numbers of students specializing in gender and development planning and gender and human rights.

Given the already significant scholarly and activist work that has been done on gender, development and human rights, and the authors' limited attention to practical recommendations, the book does not fulfill its claim of offering us a novel and foundational approach for integrating gender and human rights into policy and development strategies. Furthermore, while the book focuses on a number of geographic and political contexts, the concentration of the case studies on Northern contexts and the complete absence of attention to Africa encourages allegations of elitism and Western bias. In spite of these flaws, the case studies collectively provide a good overview to the study of how questions of power, identity, and culture intersect with gender, development, and human rights. For students and scholars already familiar with the study of gender and development and/or human rights, Gender, Planning and Human Rights is unlikely to offer significant new insights. However, for those seeking an introduction to the linkages between gender, development, and human rights - particularly one which goes beyond the conventional treatment of human rights in legalistic terms - the book provides interesting 'snapshot' perspectives on the complexities of the geographies and spatialities of gendered human rights in planning and development.

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