



Report on the symposium "From Exclusion to Inclusion" Organized by Femconsult to celebrate its 30th anniversary

On the 16th of June, 2016, Femconsult, Consultants on Gender and Development celebrated its 30th anniversary with the symposium *"From Exclusion to Inclusion: Lessons learned and current challenges in advising on Gender Equality"* in The Hague.

During the symposium keynote speaker Caroline Harper, Senior Research Fellow and Programme Head of Social Development at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in London, gave a keynote speech. This was followed by an interactive panel discussion with gender consultants from various thematic backgrounds who regularly work with Femconsult. The panel shared challenges, best practices and lessons learned.



Retrospect of Femconsult and Femconsult today

Angélique Verweij, Femconsult's Managing Director opened the symposium with a short presentation of Femconsult's history and its current activities.

Femconsult was established in December 1985 in the aftermath of the 3rd UN *World Conference on Women* in Nairobi in 1985, with the design of the so-called FLS (the Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women). The main objectives to set up the organisation of Femconsult were:

1. to increase the attention for gender issues worldwide, and;
2. to involve more female consultants in international development.



In the first year of its existence Femconsult developed a research proposal (which was funded by DGIS and NCO) that focused on drawing up an inventory of Netherlands female technical specialists with knowledge and expertise on Women in Development (WID). The result was quite impressive and resulted in setting up a "Skills Bank". This was the start of Femconsult's extensive database with international and national consultants; the database that Femconsult still uses today.

Initially Femconsult carried out evaluations of projects to assess if and how these were beneficial (or not!) to women, and designed "women components" to be included in existing projects. After a few years, Femconsult also started to work in earlier stages of the project cycle and carried out assignments such as gender analyses and contributing in project identification and project formulation.

Up to today, the objective of Femconsult, *to increase the attention for gender issues*, is still very relevant. The activities of Femconsult have become quite diverse:

- Fund management of large programmes on gender and women's rights: From 2008 onwards Management of the MDG3 and FLOW 2012-2015 fund of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) together with consortium partner PwC.
- Implementation of the Gender Resource Facility (GRF) together with the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) through which gender advisory services are provided to the MFA including its embassies and other related institutions.
- Support to the Technical Assistance (TA) team of a large 6-year water development "Blue Gold" programme in Bangladesh implemented by MottMacDonald, by Kitty Bentvelsen, an in-house gender expert of Femconsult, as the international gender specialist (long term).
- Conducting various gender (and also other) consultancy/technical advisory assignments for NGOs and donors, such as evaluations/reviews, gender analysis, provision of technical assistance and thematic expertise (results based) programme and proposal development, assessments of proposals etc.
- Participation in 3 EU Framework Contracts (lots on agriculture, education and humanitarian work) through which experts are delivering technical advisory services to EU delegations on many themes in international development.
- Management of the secretariat for the Neys-van Hoogstraten foundation (NHF), which strengthens and stimulates socio-economic research in the field of food security and nutrition in Indonesia and other South-East Asian countries.

As emphasized by Angélique Verweij, when working on gender issues in developing countries it is important to realise that this requires strong gender expertise combined with expertise on thematic subjects, for example on food security, water, education, sexual and reproductive health rights, as well as solid knowledge and understanding of the (cultural) contexts in which gender issues are being addressed. It is this expertise that Femconsult provides in its technical advisory work, most ideally by forming diverse teams involving international as well as national consultants.



The introduction was followed by the keynote speech of **Caroline Harper**, Head of Programmes of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI, UK).

Keynote speech

The keynote speech of Caroline Harper unpacked the key challenges for today's gender and development work by illustrating recurrent themes in struggles for gender justice and women's empowerment. History reveals these themes, but one must also understand specific (local) contexts. The 1970's are identified as a key space for the evolution of gender in development, building on the

feminist thinkers of the previous decades, academics and philosophers, and social theorists such as Ester Boserup and Simone de Beauvoir, among many others. Institutions began to build their gender mandates, but fundamental empowerment proved to be elusive as institutions focused both on welfare gains and benefits to economic growth, rather than on social justice as an end in itself. Nevertheless the resulting trend data reveals that important and highly valuable gains are made in women's welfare, e.g. maternal mortality and adolescent childbearing dropped, life expectancy rises, and gender parity in primary education increased. The struggle remains centred on ownership and control over economic assets, including labour force participation and severe problems with under-recognised care economy burdens. This lack of empowerment is also reflected in bodily integrity where women do not have control over sexuality and violence against women remains high. Examples of empowerment focus on girls and women taking control within the context of available opportunities, such as education and contraception and decent work. As perceptively identified in 1792 by Mary Wolstonecraft, sometimes referred to as the founder of western feminism, 'it is justice not charity that is wanting in the world'. Or in more contemporary terms as Hilary Clinton said in a 2013 'Helping women is not just a nice thing to do'.

Caroline ended her speech with the following five affirming challenges and inspirational lessons learned:

COURAGE: We are not in the frontline any longer, many battles have been fought for us in the past. Nowadays feminism should be seen as inspiring and leading to social justice. Not anti-men, social justice for both for men and women!

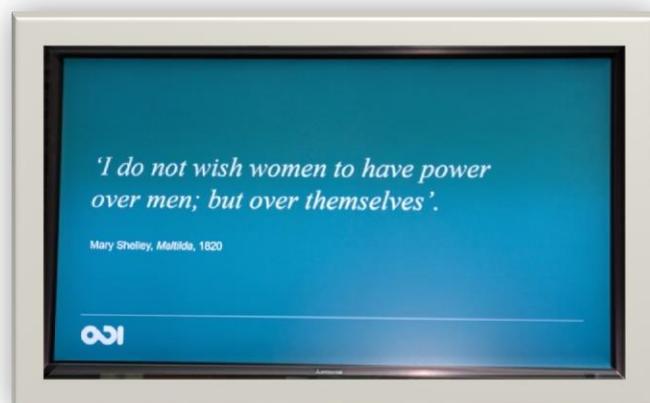
KNOWLEDGE: Know the context and history for appropriate interventions. Enable those that are at the right place at the right time to take the right actions.

SOLIDARITY: Recognise and acknowledge each other's similarities instead of differences. Basic values and feelings can be similar. Let's put energy in being part of a global social movement and support this thereby also educating others, newcomers or people who are not familiar with gender equality..

PATIENCE: Recognition that social change is slow and sometimes painful. Impact might not be seen quickly, it might even take a lifetime.

Understanding of **EMPOWERMENT:** Take power of oneself, only then can people can live well. In Mary Shelley's words: *"I do not wish women to have power over men, but over themselves"* Let us make this happen!

Please contact Femconsult for a transcript of the keynote speech and the Powerpoint Presentation if interested.



Panel discussion

After the keynote speech, the panel consisting of Gerda Heyde, Jan Reynders, Saskia Vossenbergh and Kitty Bentvelsen - facilitated by Madeleine Vreeburg (chairperson of Femconsult) - came to the following interesting conclusion after an inspiring discussion:

In order to achieve more gender justice, transformation of power is needed at more than one level, as it is not only about personal empowerment and organizational transformation but also about societal and political change.

The panel discussion in general centred around three issues: personal motivation of the panel members, the lessons learned of the past and the challenges today. Summaries of part of the discussions are highlighted below.



Women and Men

Gender equality is not "just" a women's issue, it is related to unequal power relations that often are based on patriarchal structures and inequality based on class and race, which also for many men result in disempowerment. Moreover, one has to take into account that worldwide neither women and men are homogeneous groups with the same needs, aspirations and priorities. In order to be successful, men will have to be included when working on gender equality, as experience shows that men are needed as part of the solution and are not only the problem. A change of mind-sets of both women and men will be required in order to realize gender equality. An example cited by a panel member about water boards in Bangladesh makes this rather concrete: "when both men and women are involved and are being active in decision making roles of the board, this makes both the women and the men better leaders."

Funding

One of the challenges identified in the panel discussion is the fact that nowadays longer term funding seems to be decreasing. Projects have a relatively short duration and are focused on easy fixes, while in the case of behavioural change more time is needed to develop more gender-just societies. Moreover donors want to see measurable results, while empowerment and changes in power relations cannot always easily be captured into quantitative data.

Gender concepts

Another issue identified is that although organizations are familiar with gender concepts, they do not know how to apply these concepts. Often, gender consultants are requested for a tool to integrate gender, as a 'one size fits all' method/approach, while contexts and therefore also opportunities for change may vary and requires a deeper analysis.

Gender Fatigue

Another challenge that came up during the discussion is the so-called term *gender fatigue*. People are getting tired of "repeatedly hearing the word gender" and having to integrate gender into their projects and policies. For the private sector, for example, in which gender is a relatively new topic, it is difficult for people to immediately be open to transformative approaches. Consultants have to make gender "digestible" – by reframing the messages. It has proven to be much easier if you address topics that are related to (in)equality rather than using terms as gender and/or feminism.

Collaboration

Awareness raising can be done in many ways; the panel has experienced that bringing gender issues into a more personal sphere often opens up people's eyes. In this context adding another key principle to the five principles presented already by Caroline Harper (*Courage, Knowledge, Solidarity, Patience, Understanding of Empowerment*), was suggested by one of the panel members, namely *collaboration*, to assist us in strengthening gender justice/equality. Collaboration by those that work on gender. They should regularly reflect among each other on best practices and perhaps also develop new language and messages through which processes to strengthen gender equality can be taken further and are better understood. There is a role for consultants to improve on this and to spread these (new) messages to policy makers and organizations.

How can we involve men in the gender debate?

In relation to the identified challenges one of the symposium participants was wondering how best to involve men in the gender debate. One of the male participants replied that perhaps it is better to speak of inequality instead of gender. This will be more inclusive and addresses inequality experienced by both women and men. In doing so also other intersectional aspects may become more visible, because there may many other reasons why men and women are not included apart from their gender, such as race, social class, income, physical abilities, etc. The participant pointed out that men are often also locked in socially constructed roles related to masculinity, which are not the preferred role of many men either. In response to this remark an example of a best practice mentioned by one of the panel members is the MenEngage movement, which is an alliance of NGOs worldwide that is working together with men and boys to promote gender equality. Although their main target group is men and boys, it is certainly not a men's only organization. Separate men/women only movements are not the solution, it is necessary to target both women and girls, and men and boys to achieve gender equality.



Women as smart economics

In relation to the speech of Caroline Harper, one of the consultants reflected on the growing interest in investing in women as smart economics. This approach seems to focus mainly on the economic development of women as a starting point for their empowerment, rather than striving to reach social justice and a more gender equal society. In her work as a consultant, but also as a researcher on this topic, Saskia Vossenbergh always tries to include feminist principles, although it is a "bumpy road" with usually limited project funds available and focus on short term solutions. However Caroline Harper's speech demonstrated that this is very important as otherwise the debate will continue to stay in the area of improving the welfare status of women only. And we know from our history, that this is not sufficient to achieve gender justice, as it is necessary to also address other issues, such as power relations. Caroline Harper further emphasized that the current business models focusing on women entrepreneurship needs more evaluation to find out how companies actually perform on women's empowerment and how it affects women on the ground. She has seen examples of studies where this is totally neglected and conclusions are drawn without any of the participating women being interviewed.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

In light of the, in 2015 concluded, SDGs - which after much lobby and advocacy of the gender and women's rights movement includes a separate goal on gender - one participant wonders what will be needed/what are the strategic approaches to best work on the SDGs and what kind of expertise in organizations, companies, donors, for example is required. According to Caroline Harper it is important to identify the right actors to work with. She questions whether there are sufficient actors from the south working on these goals as well. The achievement of the SDGs will also require a change from institutes in the global North to a shifting of focus and power to actors in the global South. "Southern organisations need be fast-forwarded through all of this and be brought up to speed on gender issues."

Knowledge sharing

Overall it is felt by the consultants that still much more awareness raising/education on gender related issues is needed in order to achieve real (transformative) change for gender equality. Also independent consultants who do not have expertise in gender & women's rights but work other thematic sectors should familiarize themselves with gender issues and whereby contributing to achieve gender equality. According to the panel, knowledge sharing among consultants could be an area in which Femconsult might play a valuable role.



Let us be inspired!

During this symposium challenges, best practices, lessons learned and opportunities were shared. There are still many challenges ahead before a gender-just world can be achieved, nevertheless the symposium has provided fresh energy to do this. Let us be inspired by the many courageous women and men who are working on gender equality and women's rights in local contexts and continue to support them. Femconsult will certainly continue to explore possibilities to contribute to increasing gender equality in cooperation with likeminded organizations and networks in The Netherlands and abroad.

Pictures of the event can be found on Femconsult's Facebook page through the following link:
<https://www.facebook.com/femconsult.org/>

All pictures are made by Nancy Tjong <http://www.fotografienancytjong.nl>.