

## ON WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT

A CONVERSATION WITH JOYCE OUTSHOORN

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**T**UESDAY WAS A TYPICAL DUTCH summer day. The morning was sunny but cold, there was a thunderstorm complete with torrential rains in the afternoon, and that evening around 6pm, I attended a pleasant outdoor barbecue with my friends.

That day I also had the chance to interview a rather unusual Dutch woman. I first met Dr Joyce Outshoorn when I was assigned to her class on political theories and analytical approaches at the University of Leiden. But I later discovered that her interests ran much wider than methods used to discuss the major events of the day.

Dr Outshoorn was born in Hilversum, the Netherlands, but spent her high school years in Zimbabwe, then still known as Rhodesia. She has been studying social and women's issues since 1972, when she wrote her doctoral thesis on the Dutch Social Democratic Party and its relation to women.

Since then she has taught at a number of prestigious political science faculties, including the University of Amsterdam and her current position at the University of Leiden. She has also chaired or directed several women's studies organizations, supervised numerous theses about women and politics and currently manages a number of networks dealing with women's issues ranging from prostitution to policymaking. With credentials like these, it's small wonder that when we were looking for candidates to interview for our issue on gender and development, Dr Outshoorn was the first person that came to mind.

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*“The symbolic importance of seeing women in government is so encouraging for women because it sets an ideal.”*

I was curious about women's issues, but in particular, issues faced by women in the developing world. What is the reason for the significantly higher poverty rates for women? How effective are measures aimed at gender equality?

Why do these issues seem to be discussed primarily in the industrialized world? Over the next hour, we discussed these issues and more.

*I'd like to ask you about paid and unpaid work. The common reasons why women in the developing world tend to be excluded from the paying sector are social roles, lack of education, influence of genetics on the female personality. How accurate do you think this perception is?*

Agriculture is the main work women engage in to produce food for their families, so it is important to look at to what degree agriculture is marketised [farming increasingly industrialised and for sale commercially]. When agriculture moves into the market, men push in and take over, which means that women carry out productive work, but do not get paid for it. In marketising economies, women also tend to have inflexible jobs [not governmentally recognised, but the only work available in the region], or informal work, also called “grey areas”

of work. So they do get paid, but not very much.

The way that social roles are embedded in the nuclear family is also important. From a very young age women are seen as the ones who must care for the family and household. In this way kinship networks also play a role in how much help women have in taking care of the nuclear family.

*Do you tend to find, then, that in societies where the extended family is very important, women are more able to work and to be active in the formal sector?*

That depends on the location and culture of people. In India there is often an extended family, but because young women marry into the family of their husbands, they take over the lion's share of the burden of cleaning and house-keeping. That is good for the mother-in-law.

In Latin America nuclear families are much more common: it is a very different family system. There, you often see that sisters, aunts, and grandmothers help out with the children, allowing women to migrate to find work as well.

So the shape of the kinship system and which tasks are done by who is also determined very much by the geographical and cultural context.

*But is it the case that there is something in women's nature that makes them less aggressive? And furthermore, if there are physically intense jobs that men can perform more easily, should we still be pursuing equal hiring practices?*

There are, of course, genetic differences between men and women, but there are more similarities than differences. The one difference on which there is wider agreement is that men tend to have more genes that lead to aggression. But then of course, the next question is to what extent is aggression necessary in order to be able to do jobs properly. Even in the case of soldiering, aggressiveness as such does not make good soldiers. In parts of Africa where I've lived, women do all the agricultural labour, and that is backbreaking work. Carrying water is extremely heavy and it is typically women's work in Africa and India. So, physical differences have never been the only reason why tasks are allotted the way they are.

As far as genetic explanations are concerned, in former times people would say, it's the rule of the Bible, or God, or Allah, or some other supernatural power; using genetic differences is the newest translation. So, there are genetic differences, but they do not justify the huge disparity or the huge discrimination that you see on the basis of gender.

*In a sense, traditional values can serve a function: to help people stay alive in the developing world. For instance, if a family is in a war zone and the woman goes out to work, that leaves the children vulnerable to be kidnapped into the army. So, should traditional values be changed in order to achieve goals of development and equal opportunity for women?*

In most countries when there is no state or police force or any institution offering protection the family serves such an essential function that it becomes really necessary for sustaining people's lives. In such a lawless situation, people do need their brothers and fathers as traditional fighters.

A person can only survive and get enough food when they function as a family, where there's a division of labour and people pool their resources.

In some societies, traditional institutions are eroding and the family is often the only hold that people still have. Unfortunately, I have become pessimistic because the erosion of the family which we have seen going on, driven by economic change and by war – which often has an economic basis as well – is progressing faster than the rise of new institutions. That is a discrepancy that I find worrying from the point of view of safeguarding people's lives.

On the other hand, things are changing. For instance, despite the very strong emphasis on the mother, especially in the Catholic countries in Latin America, women are migrating for work. It has become much more accepted for women to migrate to the cities or even travel across

the borders for work than it was twenty or thirty years ago.

Further, the general attitude towards reproductive rights is changing as well: despite the fact that ideals are not changing, women are seeing the opportunities which reproductive rights offer them, and they are incorporating them in their lives for their own purposes. This may not always be in ways that their men like, or governments like, or you and I like, but obviously women are feeling empowered by this because it enables them to do something about their home situation.

So from that point of view, values are changing, especially with the necessity and availability of work. "Necessity is the mother of invention," I think that is very true.



Angnolo Bronzino (1503-1572), *Lucrezia Panciatichi*.

*Many scholars argue that education and more work for women aid the development of the entire society. If this is the case why don't more development NGOs focus their resources on women, who are the key to this?*

It has been solidly proven that education of women will lead to lower disease rates, lower birth rates, and increased chances of employment. But it took a long time for gender experts and demographers, who were looking at the statistics, to convince those giving development aid that this was the case. They thought that large-scale projects, like building dams, were the key.

There is also a huge patriarchal resistance because the linchpin to the argument is reproductive rights: giving women a

means of control of their fertility and their sexuality. And I think that is one of the mainstays of patriarchy. So there is resistance not only among development workers but also among governments and international programs.

Fortunately, the link between improving women's lives and improving social welfare has become established through various UN population conferences, particularly the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo. People are beginning to realize that to lower the fertility rate and to alleviate poverty, women have to be educated.

*But there are valid reasons for not focusing on women: nations who have to prioritise because they are at war or because they are fighting the spread of disease, may not consider women's issues. Can it be argued that these governments are just doing the best they can within the political reality?*

At the level of the individual, also known as the micro-level, the argument does make sense. If you are really concerned about staying alive, you do not have the time or the resources to attend to these issues.

At the level of the state, or at the macro level, I do not think so. When human rights are disregarded, child labour, or women's rights, development cannot proceed properly because a number of really important angles are missing. If you are not going to take into account the human perspective, whom are you doing it for? If to the government concentrates on stopping the fighting in combat zones and does not take into account the human factors, there will not be peace anyway. It needs to be part and parcel of the same policy. And you cannot isolate the one aspect from the other.

*Can you explain briefly what gender mainstreaming is?*

It is the idea that taking the gender angle into account should be part of regular public policy. It should be in the perspective of regular policymaking: not that it should be done by a sort of special gender official, but that it should be done by people normally charged with developing, deciding and implementing policy.

That is the Council of Europe definition which is most prevalent in Europe, and which fed into the platform of action in Beijing.

*Do you think that gender mainstreaming addresses issues of discrimination and misperceptions keeping women out of the formal working sector? How widely is the policy implemented?*

Gender mainstreaming has been in effect for the past ten years, but at the moment it seems to be developed at the

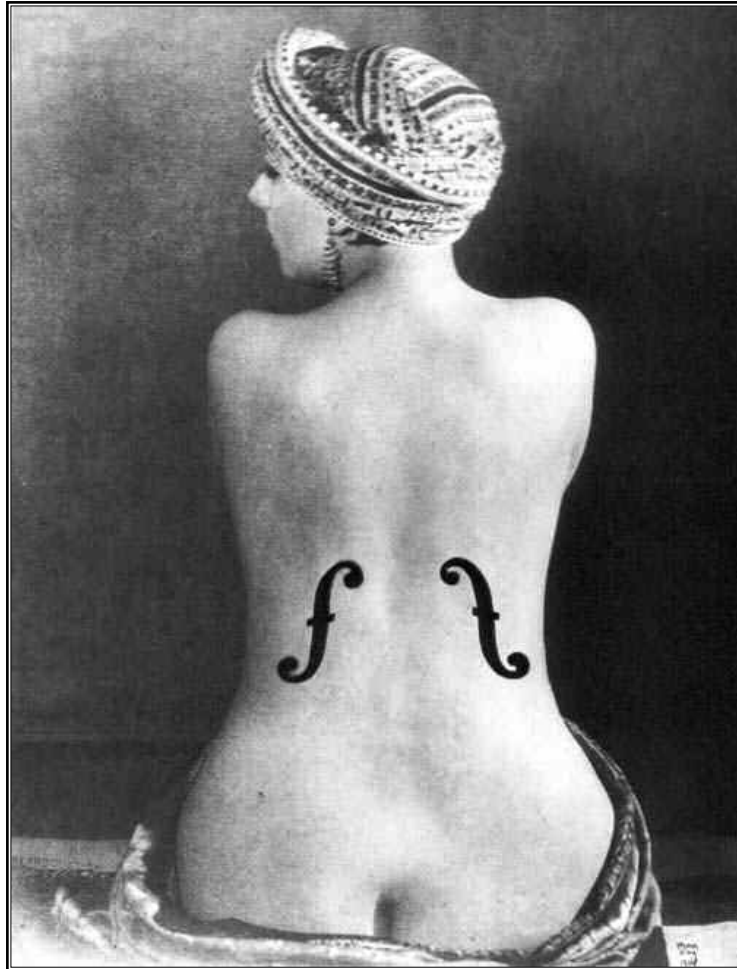
cost of more specific programs aimed at women. It is becoming a sort of excuse not to develop any specific programs aimed at women, an alibi. If a person really wants to improve the situation of women, then it is best to follow both strategies. If everyone is supposed to be taking care of the issue then no one is taking responsibility. That is the danger with gender mainstreaming.

A great example of this lack of specific programming is the funding for AIDS treatment. A lot of major AIDS programs are not targeting women enough. Yet as the ones that get pregnant, they are more likely to develop AIDS than men are and they pass it on to their babies, whether in the womb or through breast

feeding. It has been very difficult to convince certain development NGOs that you specifically need to target young women who are getting pregnant, and not just focus on the migrant male workers who spread the disease.

The AIDS conversation also crosses over with the debate about using condoms and reproductive choice. There are also political reasons against this type of education. For example, the US government, which supplies a lot of money for the AIDS programs, was against spreading condoms because it goes against the Moral Majority, a powerful, religious lobbying group in the United States, so that is another factor that needs to be reckoned with.

*Rwanda has the highest percentage of women in government at 50%. And in general, the rewritten constitutions have provisions to assure more women are involved in the government. Do you think it actually helps the women that live in the country to have more female representatives?*



Man Ray (1890-1976), *Le violon d'Ingres (Kiki)*.



Rwanda is a very specific case: they took the opportunity to make the parliament fifty-fifty, which means that there were women pushing for that, otherwise it would not have happened. But there is always a gap between the people doing the representing and the supporters. This is not a specific problem for women: it is a general problem in any representative democracy.

Having said that, the symbolic importance of seeing women in government is so encouraging for women, and especially for young girls, because it sets an ideal.

Women also make substantive changes. Through research, we see that the more women in the government, especially across political parties, the more likely changes will occur because women are more likely than men to take up women's issues.

One of my colleagues has done research on the membership of an old system of advisory bodies for the government in the Netherlands and sent questionnaires to two thousand members. None of the women surveyed were chosen to participate in the survey because they were women, but they were actually the ones who were gendering the work of the advisory committee. Even though they were not selected for their feminist or gender expertise, once they were in, they were actually gaining expertise and pursuing gender issues. So we thought, "Hey, this is like sort of a Trojan horse." Get them in and it is more likely that the job gets done.

*Do you see any changes in the future for women in the developing world? Why or why not?*



Andy Warhol (1928-1987), *Marilyn Monroe*.  
Photo courtesy of the Warhol Museum,  
Michener Art Museum.

I see huge changes, but one should differentiate between various countries because many have different rates of development. Patriarchy is still very strong in parts of Asia like Cambodia and Vietnam for example. Change there has taken place in the context of an authoritarian state with the patriarchal form of the family very much intact: they could adapt to the new economic situation and retain the old social order.

In other countries economic development has actually taken place in either a weak state or a democratic state and also in the situation where patriarchal power was already falling apart such as in Chile, Argentina and Brazil. That gives much better opportunities to women. On the whole I am inclined to optimism. And I think the momentum of change has become such that it is going to be hard to stop. ■

