

## THE PLACE OF POLICY ADVOCACY IN STRATEGIES FOR WOMEN'S ADVANCEMENT

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This paper considers the place of advocacy as a strategy for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to influence public policy in the area of human rights and democracy. The discussion is based on the author's experience of working within NGOs which have attempted to influence public policy in the area of women's rights in Africa.

In all African countries, to varying degrees, systems for discriminating against women can be found at different levels of government: in the constitution, in statutes, in customary law, in traditions which have no legal sanction, in government policy, and in a government's own administrative practice.

The discussion below is based on my own experience of two NGO campaigns in Zambia:

A campaign to change the law on (intestate) inheritance to protect the widow from the traditional practice of being stripped of all her possessions by her deceased husband's relatives. This campaign achieved some success in the passing of the Intestate Succession Act in 1989. However, the new law retained some discrimination against widows (by comparison with the treatment of widowers). Since the passing of the Act, the government has never put in place the necessary administrative machinery, and the new law is largely overlooked and ineffective (see Longwe, 1990).

More recently, a campaign to push for government formulation of an explicit National Gender Policy, in line with its commitments under the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*. Here too, the campaign achieved some success, in that the cabinet finally approved a policy statement in March 2000. However, this statement is notably lacking in goals, targets or time-scales for closing gender gaps, and does not include any affirmative action for closing the huge gender gaps within both the political and administrative levels of government. It is better understood as paying lip-service to the Beijing principles, rather than a serious intention to pursue Beijing goals (see Zambia Association for Research and Development, 2000).

These are perhaps the most positive Zambian examples of public policy on women's rights being influenced by an NGO strategy of advocacy. But success was partial and disappointing. With these two examples in mind, this paper now turns to consider the place of advocacy as a strategy for influencing public policy on women's advancement.

### Advocacy in an Ideal World

Within an ideal parliamentary democracy, perhaps the ideal form of successful advocacy on public policy may be summarized according to *four aspects*. Advocacy on public policy involves lobbying those in power in order to:

- Present the facts on a particular well-defined problem situation;

- Represent the group of the population who are affected by this problem, and whose interests and rights therefore need to be recognized and protected;
- Make suggestions on the policy change needed to overcome the problem and meet the interests of the group at risk or in special need;
- Argue for policy change within the rules and ideological principles already accepted by those in power.

### **Departures from the Ideal Conditions for Policy Advocacy**

Obviously the pattern of policy advocacy described above can work only within a political system built on principles of consensus and inclusiveness. In particular, there is an assumption that those in power are truly the representatives of all the people. If so, they should be keen to serve the public interest, and to subscribe to principles of human rights and non-discrimination. Given this ideal situation, those in power should be genuinely grateful that the advocates for a particular cause have brought a problem to light, and pleased to take appropriate action to ensure better and fairer provision for the general interest of all citizens.

Within a Western-style democracy, the process of policy advocacy may often approximate the ideal situation described above. Advocacy, however, becomes more difficult to the extent that these ideal conditions do not exist. Advocacy becomes inappropriate or unworkable when the government in power is actually serving sectional electoral interests, rather than working for the benefit of the entire population.

In the case of an entirely undemocratic and dictatorial system, the government by definition is not interested in listening to the demands of the people. On the contrary, a top-down system of government is keen to establish that the people's needs are decided by their rulers. Making demands upon the government may even be regarded as a treasonable challenge to legitimate authority!

Even within a Western-style system of government by consensus, policy advocacy may not be a viable strategy if the advocates subscribe to principles which lie outside the area of consensus. For example, whereas Greenpeace subscribes to long-term principles of conservation of the planet, governments' principles are often more aligned to short-term exploitation of the natural environment for short-term economic and electoral advantage. Where this is the case, other strategies may be called for.

### **Advocating for Women's Rights in the Third World**

Advocating for women's rights in the Third World cannot easily follow the Four Aspects of Advocacy outlined above, because women's rights are not an area for consensus politics. More specifically, feminist principles are seen as a threat which would undermine not only patriarchal government, but the patriarchal order of society itself.

This may be illustrated by revisiting the above Four Aspects of Advocacy, and considering the likely experience of such action when advocating for government action on a particular issue of structural gender discrimination.

- *Present the facts on the particular issue of gender discrimination and its actual effects on women.*

The problem is not that governments are unaware. In fact they are fully aware. The problem is they do not consider that there is anything wrong with such discrimination. They consider the different treatment given to women is entirely 'natural' and justifiable. They consider that it is wrongly being described as discriminatory by women who have picked up 'foreign' or 'Western' ideas on feminism which have no place in the local tradition and culture.

- *Represent the women who are affected by the gender issue, and therefore whose interests and rights need to be protected.*

Patriarchal government is very much of the view that women's interests are supposed to be represented by men, who are considered the 'natural' decision-makers at both household and national levels. A women's pressure group is therefore seen as a threat to the established patriarchal order.

- *Make suggestions on policy change, to close a particular gender gap by ending the discriminatory practice which caused the gap, and by affirmative action to redress the inequalities of the past.*

If government cannot be persuaded that a problem exists, then it cannot be persuaded to take remedial action to solve the problem. More specifically, the discriminatory practice is not seen as such. It is seen as different treatment that is justified by patriarchal belief. The perpetuation of such discrimination is correctly seen as essential for the continuation of male rule and privilege. Patriarchal governments therefore have a vested interest in serving their male constituency by preserving male privilege.

- *Argue for policy change within the rules and ideological principles already accepted by those in power, for instance by quoting from the relevant clauses of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which has been ratified by the government*

Except in Islamic regimes, this is the one area where government may feel challenged. In countries claiming to follow a democratic system, maintenance of patriarchal power is a covert aspect of policy, which contradicts commitments made in international conventions, and may even contradict the ruling party's own manifesto, principles, and promises.

Exposure of such an ideological contradiction may push the government into superficial 'window dressing' or 'lip-service' types of action.

It is this potential ideological contradiction within patriarchal government which reveals some vulnerability to strategies of advocacy. It provides a small window for action, and suggests an entry point strategy. However, public action to expose government hypocrisy is a potentially dangerous activity in a regime with dictatorial tendencies.

The above analysis reveals that advocating government for equal rights for women is not a very appropriate strategy in many Third World countries. It shows that such policy advocacy is a 'head on' strategy which exposes the patriarchal nature of government. By the same token, it

also exposes the lack of democracy by exposing government refusal to represent all of the people, instead representing only the male constituency's interest in their continued domination over women.

Advocacy on women's rights will also serve to reveal that government's lack of adherence to principles of human rights is most pervasive and serious in the area of women's human rights. This reveals the folly of human rights activists regarding a feminist agenda as a separate area of sectional interest. On the contrary, the above analysis suggests the feminist agenda is intrinsic within the struggle for democracy and human rights. By the same token, a feminist agenda threatens the very foundations of a regime which is simultaneously patriarchal and dictatorial.

Civil society's agenda for democracy and human rights is automatically adversarial under a dictatorial government. The problems of advocating for women's rights cannot be adequately understood in terms of 'enabling women's voices to be heard.' A main purpose of patriarchal government is to *ensure that women's voices are not heard!* Policy advocacy, as a strategy, is not designed to address this latter aspect of the problem, but instead proceeds by ignoring it.

Therefore, our strategies need to be better tailored to the problems being addressed, involving a proper analysis of the realities of working in an oppressive political environment.

### Choosing a Strategy

The above analysis would seem to suggest a bleak prospect for advocacy as a strategy for changing public policy in the Third World. But a pessimistic attitude needs to be tempered with two considerations. Firstly, all strategies are difficult when dealing with autocratic governments. By definition, such governments are not much interested in the opinion of the governed!

Secondly, our pessimism may arise largely from a sequence of argument which is not very strategic. The above argument begins by identifying advocacy as a strategy, and then considering its usefulness for changing public policy. But strategic thinking should not begin with strategy. It should rather begin with the problem to be addressed. Let us therefore return to our earlier example of widows being stripped of their possessions, and consider the various strategic responses which might be used to protect the property of widows from marauding in-laws.

Here we notice that advocating for change in public policy is not an end in itself, but rather *one of the means towards the end* of enabling the widow to retain her rightful share of the marriage property. Given the oppressive nature of a typical autocratic and patriarchal police state in the Third World, strategy must surely be based, first and foremost, on collective action by widows and their sisters to mobilize to protect widows' property. In other words, the strategy should be one of people's empowerment. In politics, power is never given. It has to be taken.

Such an empowerment strategy might have the following elements:

#### **Overall Strategy:**

Direct action to protect the property of widows by mobilization of neighborhood committees.

***Subordinate Strategies:***

- Formation of an NGO called Widows' Alliance;
- Formation of Neighborhood Committees of the Widows' Alliance;
- Conscientization workshops for activists on widows' rights;
- National networking with other feminist oriented NGOs;
- Regional networking for strategy development;
- Advocacy to change public attitudes towards widows (public campaign);
- Advocacy for legal reform on women's rights (lobby parliament).

The above list of strategies is not put forward as an implementation sequence, nor as a magic solution to the problem of widows being stripped. It merely suggests the above framework might form the starting point for the discussion of strategy development.

The point of presenting the above strategic framework is to demonstrate that policy advocacy needs to be seen as a contributing strategy integrated within a multi-pronged approach, which is designed to focus on a well-defined issue, bearing in mind the known obstacles to addressing the issue.

In this example, we see policy advocacy for legal reform has its place in the larger picture. This subordinate strategy would target the government's ideological contradiction between explicit human rights commitments on the one hand, and covert patriarchal values on the other. The government is presented with the prospect of a bit of lip-service legislation which, in itself, would remain ineffective. However, such lip-service legislation can nonetheless prove useful to the women's movement by providing the legitimization for all of the other sub-strategies. In other words, the women's movement steps in to ensure the application of a law or policy in which the government and its law enforcement agencies have no interest.

Similarly the strategy to change public attitudes on widows' rights would not be conducted in isolation, but as part of a larger strategy to provide space and justification for the mobilization of Neighborhood Committees formed to protect widows.

### **Choosing an Issue Around Which to Strategize**

The above discussion points to the need to keep policy advocacy in its place, as a component within a larger intervention strategy, to be used in a well-focused and purposeful manner. It is essential to the very nature of strategizing that an intervention must be selected for its appropriateness and potential effectiveness in addressing the issue at hand.

It is not only the strategy which has to be well selected. Prior to that, the issue to be addressed also has to be selected. In the area of women's rights, gender issues are numerous, almost endless. Behind the issue of widows' rights lies the larger question of women's rights. For the women's movement, the larger strategic question is whether the stripping of widows is an issue around which women can easily mobilize, both nationally and globally, with prospects of success

in the face of patriarchal resistance. If not, then another gender issue needs to be selected as the focus for collective action.

### **Conclusion**

As a part of a well-considered overall strategy, policy advocacy has powerful potential. It has the potential for revealing the gap between what men in government say and what they do. The gap between what governments promise and what they deliver. The gap between human rights and human suffering. Within each of these gaps we shall find the gender gap.

### **Bibliography**

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