

## 9 **A Tool for Thought and Transformation: Gender-Considerate Global Change Research in Practice**

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Florescia Partenio<sup>5</sup>, and María Inés Fernández Álvarez<sup>6</sup>

### **Abstract**

This contribution illustrates aspects of gender and development research in the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South programme, asking whether the often diagnosed ‘gender ennuí’ has also affected this research network. Based on an overview of gender-considerate research in the programme, the article suggests how the innovative analytical potential of gender concepts in development research can best be explored. The authors follow a classic constructivist definition of gender, adopting it as a powerful corrective to naturalised explanations about social realities. They argue that the claim for gender equality, however, has to be grounded in a detailed understanding of a given society’s social organisation so as to reflect on the cultural framing of gender and on its intersection with other, equally fragile categories such as class, age, or ethnicity. While many of the NCCR North-South contributions examined for this article employ gender as an analytical framework to elicit gender-specific data, only a few explore the potential of using gender as a tool for interrogating basic concepts, let alone joining in a normative or epistemological debate. This is partly due to an unpopular obligation, partly for career considerations. The authors argue that using a gender perspective can help to reinterpret social change – which is at the core of development – in particularly gainful ways. Often reduced to the term “modernisation”, such transformations can be reflected on through gender-considerate scrutiny, providing the development community with a fine-tuned picture of how change is socially negotiated. The overall goal is to make sure that gender approaches support meaningful analyses that integrate complexity while not losing sight of implementation.

**Keywords:** Gender analysis; constructivism; intersectionality; social change; gender roles; gender and development.

## 9.1 Introduction

An estimated 220,000 people died in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Africa in the 2004 tsunami, and another 1.6 million lost their homes. Subsequent analysis of the effects of the catastrophe showed dramatically asymmetric impacts: The ratio of female to male victims was 3:1, and as high as 4:1 in Banda Aceh, Indonesia (Oxfam International 2005). The flood was not only devastating, but it also exposed fundamental structural differences in the places affected and a compelling, if not fundamentally new insight: There is little that is natural about natural disasters. Drawing on their analysis of 141 countries for the period of 1981 to 2002, Neumayer and Plümper (2007, p 561) conclude: “[...] the disaster impact is contingent on the vulnerability of affected people, which can and often does systematically differ across economic class, ethnicity, gender, and other factors.” The gendered aspect of natural disasters is not specific to tidal waves but applies as well to a list of disasters including droughts, epidemics, famines, landslides, wildfires, and volcano eruptions (Neumayer and Plümper 2007). Catastrophic events are extreme disruptions of what is at the heart of geography and development research: the relation between human beings and nature. Thus, it seems appropriate to make use of this knowledge in our quest for pertinent gender approaches in development research. How can a natural disaster be discriminatory? What can we learn from this regarding development research and gender?

This article aims to document some aspects of what has been learned about gender in the context of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South programme. The focus is on theoretical and methodological achievements, parts of which were elaborated based on fieldwork done in this programme. The article examines how gender was conceptualised in particular projects, and whether the often diagnosed ‘gender ennui’ in international cooperation has also affected the NCCR North-South. Results are presented in three steps. The first section on “Counting women and men” outlines different conceptual configurations of gender in development research and feminist theory. It examines the question of what it means for the NCCR North-South to go beyond the often criticised “add women and stir” practice (Harding 1995). Second, an overview of NCCR North-South gender-sensitive research projects is presented. A selection of papers is discussed in the third section, drawing on the gender concepts introduced in the first section. The article concludes with a number of suggestions, condensing the findings to highlight innovative uses of the gender

perspective in development research but also to identify various desiderata. Questions are also raised about future gender research in development studies in general and within the NCCR North-South specifically.<sup>7</sup>

## 9.2 Counting women and men, or: What is gender in development research?

The dramatic disproportion of male and female deaths in the 2004 tsunami catastrophe illustrates that counting men and women is efficient and illuminating. A gender perspective, however, encompasses more than the question of representation. Since the 1970s, ‘gender’ has been used to describe the social situation of individuals – in contrast to their ‘sex’.<sup>8</sup> The concern was to theorise a social identity that was not predetermined by ‘sex’, and was free from the arbitrary naturalisations of a given gender order (Pearson and Jackson 1998, p 5). In this framework, gender is much more than a personal quality. It is inherent in our daily actions; it is something that we do. Beyond this, it is part of a logic that creates power relations according to which societies function. In other words, gender is also something that is done to us.

The classic and still highly relevant reference in this respect is Joan Scott’s 1986 conceptual baseline on gender as a ‘useful category’ of analysis. Scott’s seminal contribution was her plea to study how societies are organised according to *perceived* gender differences (Scott 1986). The usefulness of the analytical category of gender, according to Scott, lies in its focus on the production of gender differences as opposed to conceiving of them as pre- or extra-social facts. Her intention was to deconstruct the logic of the gendered organisation of society. She did so by questioning every attribution of identity, including gender identity, by investigating its premises and exclusions. This strategy directs our attention to the way gender and other identity categories are naturalised.

The major advantage of Scott’s concept lies in the careful distinction between gender as an analytical category and gender as a social configuration. The latter, to complicate things, is often taken as a given, while in fact it is continually being socially constructed. The epistemological challenge, therefore, is to invoke an analytical category (‘woman’/‘man’) while at the same time operationally destabilising it by means of a deconstructionist<sup>9</sup> methodology (Hark 2001, p 362). Gender-considerate research thus requires a clarification as to the end to which gender is introduced. What do

we mean by the categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’? What social realities are encompassed by these words? How can differences within these categories be accounted for? Is an “empty social constructionism” (Pearson and Jackson 1998, p 6) all that remains if essentialist and universal notions of what it means to be a woman or a man are rejected?

Scott’s call to choose between an analytical concept on the one hand and an empirical interest on the other refers to a precaution that Bourdieu addressed to social scientists in general (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2006). Bourdieu argued that it is a common trap to blur the distinction between analytical tools and research objectives. In other words, we should be careful not to mix gender as a methodological and epistemological research focus (gender as *the lens we look at / object of analysis*) and gender as a tool for analysing the social facts of, for instance, gender relations or gender roles (gender as *the lens we look through / tool of analysis*).

This distinction is a key principle for gender-considerate research and its neglect might be an essential reason why gender sensitivity has not been implemented comprehensively within the NCCR North-South. We argue that, while gender as a transversal theme, in the sense of an analytical tool, has been included in a wide range of NCCR North-South research projects, efforts to debate gender as an object of analysis have been less extensive.

Arguments about what the gender lens can and cannot offer in development research are rarely disputed and are often unconvincing. An example is provided by the 2006 volume on *Gender and Sustainable Development*, where the authors call for the inclusion of gender “as a distinct field of research, an element in a conceptual research framework, a methodological component, a focus of data collection, a perspective in analysing and interpreting knowledge production, and a way of generating new insights” (Premchander and Müller 2006, p 7). While the authors are careful not to conflate the politically motivated equality claim with gender analysis, thereby mirroring a widely shared understanding within the NCCR North-South, the question of why they chose this rather broad description remains. Was it to facilitate access to the subject matter or rather to be as inclusive as possible? Or does this statement reflect the editors’ fear of being prescriptive? Of course, gender encompasses all of what is enumerated above, and the case studies in the aforementioned volume illustrate how these aspects play out in research. Nevertheless, such a broad view of gender avoids debate and also carries the risk of arbitrariness.

The definition is more restrictive in a 2003 NCCR North-South working paper (Walter 2003). According to the author, gender shapes an individual's perception and use of, as well as access to, natural resources. But regardless of definitions, how to put gender to work has remained largely unclear within the NCCR North-South programme and beyond. When it comes to research, gender is often seen as a political rather than a scientific necessity. What it means to adopt a gender perspective, other than accounting separately for women and men, is a problem that continues to surface in the everyday business of collecting and analysing empirical data as well as in the effort to interpret and synthesise results. In the words of geographer Sylvia Chant, "the term 'gender perspective' is crucially important in so far as it connotes a form of seeing, thinking about and doing development, thereby moving away from the frequently tokenistic or piecemeal efforts implied by epithets such as 'gender component' or 'gender dimension'" (Chant and McIlwaine 2009, p 227). Counting may be the first step towards a deconstruction of biased premises. But what about development interventions in which sexual difference is less evident? What is the gender dimension of malaria? How does gender inform governance processes or sanitation programmes? What is the value added of a gender perspective on land cover change and natural resource conservation?

The debate on access to and control of natural resources, for instance, connects analytical implementation of the gender perspective to the political question of equality. As pointed out above, adopting a gender perspective is an analytical strategy that clearly differs from the normative position of gender equality. Obviously, such boundaries are blurred in research: Gender in a political sense – as a normative concept to promote equality between women and men – can be negotiated in participatory and action-research settings. However, the claim for gender equality has to be grounded in a detailed understanding of how a given society is organised in terms of gender and, importantly, other social categories. The deconstruction of key institutions (such as the household, public space, or the state) is an integral part of such interrogation. The gender perspective is a powerful corrective to naturalised explanations about social realities, "seeing the relevance of gender as a lens through which to understand the dynamics of social and economic change in societies in transition" (Pearson and Jackson 1998, p 2). This implies that the researcher reflects on his or her own gendered role in the knowledge production system. The position of development scholars is additionally entangled in a colonial context. It is by looking *at* the gender lens that adequate instruments to systematically deconstruct these entanglements are provided. In

other words, in development research, gender is primarily conceived of as a tool for thought, but it is intrinsically also a tool for transformation (Cornwall 2007, p 76). We therefore suggest using a ‘gender perspective’ in line with its following four dimensions:

1. as a lens to look through;
2. as a lens to be looked at;
3. as a tool for thought; and eventually
4. as a tool for transformation.

The potential of a ‘gender perspective’ encompasses these four components. Since it is unlikely to be fully exploited in any single research project, we suggest clarifying the relevant aim in each case.

A further advantage of this approach is the intersection of the analytical and the transformative, which is where gender and development studies meet. Both fields share a political interest in terms of their research impact. Whereas it might be a political decision to adopt a gender perspective in a project – and the NCCR North-South has a record of commitment to enhancing gender research, a commitment that is notably often articulated bottom-up (see Ott and Bieri 2011, in this volume) – such a decision derives, above all, from a specific research interest and the corresponding epistemological position, both of which aim to generate more accurate understanding of a social reality.

### **9.3 Looking through the gender lens: gender in NCCR North-South research as a tool for thought**

A considerable number of researchers in the NCCR North-South network have long-term experience in working with gender. It would exceed the scope of this article to acknowledge all gender contributions and their highly diverse research approaches, theoretical backgrounds, and methodologies. While only a small number of publications place women or gender centre stage (e.g. Kaspar 2005; Schärer 2005; Freytes Frey and Crivelli 2007; Masson 2008a, 2008b), gender constitutes a prominent variable, along with other social categories such as ethnicity, class, caste, or age, in a wide range of projects (e.g. Obrist 2004; Geiser 2006; Zingerli 2007; Thieme 2008). Where gender is included in an overall quantitative study on poverty and inequality, this is mostly done in the form of introducing the categories of women and girls, with

a view to highlighting differences between them and men, or the category of female-headed households (e.g. Schelling 2005; Epprecht et al 2008).

Table 1 refers to studies included in the documentation system of the NCCR North-South. A quick search for NCCR North-South publications using the keywords “gender”, “woman/women”, “femininity”, “man/men”, “masculinity”, “social justice”, “equity”, and “equality” resulted in 43 hits out of the total of 762 items documented until 2009. All of these 43 writings were published after 2003, 12 of them in peer-reviewed journals. The rest consisted of book chapters, working papers, and unpublished Master’s theses. The 43 hits do not include 14 contributions compiled in the NCCR North-South Perspectives volume on *Gender and Sustainable Development* (Premchander and Müller 2006). They were not considered for this overview, since the aim was to highlight demand-driven outputs from the field rather than supply-oriented structures provided by the NCCR North-South programme management. The electronic publication mapping system categorises publications based on self-declaration by the authors. In relation to the total of 762 items, 43 is a small, but still significant portion. Moreover, this search result does not imply that gender is ignored in the remaining publications.<sup>10</sup> A second search was conducted for key messages. The search term “great socio-economic and gender disparities” – one of the 30 core problems of global change defined by the NCCR North-South – yielded 90 results; 15 of them remained when “gender and sustainable development” was chosen as an additional search term. Table 1 gives an overview of the sub-themes covered for each of the two search categories (58 studies in total).

Projects that had adopted a gender perspective were found in almost every thematic node<sup>11</sup> and in many partnership regions of the NCCR North-South programme. Table 1 shows that a relatively high proportion of the gender contributions focused on health issues; this is not surprising given the obvious physiological differences between the sexes and the corresponding differences in therapies. With only 5 contributions, the thematic category of land use, representative of themes covering use of and access to natural resources, had a weaker record of gender references. Clearly missing were fields such as water management and sanitation; however, the latter has become much more concerned with gender since the beginning of Phase 3 of the NCCR North-South programme.<sup>12</sup>

Table 1 does not provide information about the conceptual use of gender or analytical foci. However, the discussion of several studies below sheds light

on how the NCCR North-South community works with the gender concept. The studies were chosen from the results of our search and according to their thematic focus, accessibility, and conceptual use of gender.

While gender is sometimes used as a substitute term for “woman/women” in NCCR North-South work, its use in the sense of “gender roles” is most prominent among the 58 studies listed in Table 1. This applies to Salzman’s (2008) study on Kyrgyz university migrants as well as Syfrig’s (2005) analysis of smallholder livelihoods in the Hindu Kush. While Syfrig mainly discusses gender differences in access to resources, nutrition, and health, Salzman assesses gender-differentiated relations within multi-local households. Both studies investigate the transformation of gender roles and power relations in the context of traditional systems coming under increasing pressure from modernisation. In the Hindu Kush, *purdah*<sup>13</sup> is gradually disappearing as male migration increases. In Kyrgyzstan, sons are expected to support their parents financially while at the same time investing in their own education and training. Female migrants experience conflicting expectations, as their primary goal in life is supposed to be marriage. When they return to their birthplaces, it is difficult for them to find a husband. The years spent far from home lead to a shift in their perceptions of female and male roles, and they begin to criticise the immutability of the traditional gender system.

Table 1

Sub-themes identified for publications and key messages according to NCCR North-South mapping system	Publications search (total of 43)	Key messages search (total of 15)
	Number of articles	Number of articles
Theme		
Health	9	3
Migration	7	3
Livelihoods	5	–
Conflict, peace building	4	1
Land use	3	2
Land tenure	2	–
Poverty	2	–
Social movements	–	3
Other themes	11 (minorities / indigenous peoples, labour, education, methods, microfinance)	3 (environmental conflict, labour, education)

In a study with cultural gender norms in the foreground, Schärer (2005) examines the issue of girls' school enrolment in a rural district in Nepal. Although her approach is qualitative, Schärer's study strongly indicates that firstborn girls are most affected by intra-household inequalities in schooling opportunities. The increased dropout rate for girls as they reach puberty, however, cannot be explained solely by gender roles and division of labour. The cultural framing of femininity, which includes, for example, parents' fear of their daughters' loss of virginity or pre-marital pregnancy, is a crucial factor in the discontinuation of girls' education, usually before they reach secondary school. Schärer's study further underlines the importance of intersecting gender with other social categories, in particular caste and class. She exposes the disadvantages of lower-caste Hindu and Muslim boys with regard to attending secondary school, and confirms the great influence of the level of education of mothers and fathers on decisions relating to school enrolment of their sons and daughters.

Similarly, in his study of birth control, Doumbia (2006) examined gender roles, extending his analysis to the cultural framing of gender. In the urban study area in Côte d'Ivoire, the prevailing gender roles were for men to be breadwinners and for women to be housewives. However, it is only via an appreciation of gender ideology that negotiations and choices concerning contraceptive practices among Ivorian couples can be understood. The male position is particularly interesting, as questions of reproductive health can be interpreted as weapons to be used against male authority in the household (Doumbia 2006, p 210). Family-planning programmes that address women exclusively may thus fail to achieve their objectives. This confirms a finding in gender and development research which indicates that men are insufficiently included. Only a small number of studies so far have considered men and masculinity in the development context (Chant and Gutmann 2002; Cleaver 2002; Laurie 2005; Kabeer 2007).

Locher and Müller-Böker (2007) faced the challenge of addressing men in gender and development research by comparing women-only interventions with integrative, gender-mixed interventions in the Kangchenjunga Conservation Area Project in East Nepal. Drawing on Moser's concept of practical and strategic gender needs<sup>14</sup>, the authors advocate an extended WID approach<sup>15</sup> which includes gender awareness training for the entire staff and gender-disaggregated surveys, while at the same time supporting women's empowerment. Their findings highlight not only an improvement in the status of women but also beneficial aspects of the gender strategy for the

overall project goals. They conclude that the integration of men is crucial in making efforts to empower women more successful and more sustainable.

#### **9.4 Gender as a seismographic device for analysis of social change**

All of the above studies examined current transformations in societies of the global South by scrutinising how changes are influenced by or affect gendered positions in a community. Gender roles are focused on as a kind of seismographic device that projects a high-resolution image of where and how change happens and which groups participate or are excluded. For development research, it is essential to illuminate the conditions under which change happens. It is equally important, however, to identify the social locations of and the reasons for absence of change, or persistence. While the studies cited investigated the gendered nature of social transformation at particular moments, the following example is illuminating with regard to the negotiation of change and persistence in a medium-term perspective. It documents not only the importance of extending the focus beyond women, but also the value added of continuous research. A programme component that is specific to the NCCR North-South is its Partnership Actions for Mitigating Syndromes (PAMS), which combine research and action, thus allowing for direct implementation of research results in development interventions. For example, a study on picketing movements in Argentina (see below) was extended over a number of years, resulting in an enhancement of the gender perspective in the collective organisation which had been the object of the study. This was driven from the bottom up, not least by members of the social movements which were the objects of research; some of these members subsequently engaged in a PAMS.<sup>16</sup>

The case study investigated picketing movements in Argentina. Picketing movements were the main form of collective organisation in the face of socio-economic crisis and increasing unemployment in Argentina at the end of the 1990s (Cross and Freytes Frey 2007). In their study of unemployed workers' movements and worker-recovered factories, the research team scrutinised women's roles and forms of participation. Most members of these movements were women, while the majority of their leaders were men. 'Gender blindness' obscured practices, voices, and conflicts in these social movements. Gender-considerate research revealed that women performed most of the work on-site, which was the basis of the organisations' growth

and collective mobilisation from 1997 to 2004. Their participation in public demonstrations led many women to assume leadership at a neighbourhood level. However, men were over-represented at the regional and national levels. This 'sexual division of labour', which reproduced gender inequalities, was questioned by the women's subdivisions that had been established in several picketing organisations (Cross and Partenio 2005). The exchanges in these spaces challenged gender stereotypes and encouraged women to assume local leadership. Nevertheless, women's demands often ended up contradicting the general political orientation, which focused on the problem of unemployment and poverty. This situation produced internal tensions (Cross and Freytes Frey 2007).

In this case study, the gender perspective provides a more precise view of the potential of picketing movements to question established power relations, referring not only to class but also to patriarchal domination. Furthermore, it reveals the limits of the transforming potential of these social movements. On the one hand, there was a diversification of the workers' daily tasks: New activities, such as management responsibilities, negotiations with governmental officials, and meetings with representatives from other worker-recovered factories, were added. Workers stayed in the factory for long hours in order to 'guard' and 'defend their jobs' against the threat of eviction. This situation implied a re-definition of the frontiers between the 'productive sphere' and the 'reproductive' or 'domestic sphere'. Indeed, one of the main limits mentioned by women regarding their participation concerned their responsibilities in their homes. Some met resistance from their spouses and children concerning their new roles in the committees (Freytes Frey et al 2006; Partenio and Fernández Álvarez 2006). Obviously, the adoption of new roles is costly for women in terms of time, effort, and emotional commitment. As feminist scholars have argued, the question of gendered time use is crucial in development. The consequences in terms of intra-household negotiations and workload can hardly be underestimated (see, for example, Elson 1995; John 2002; Pearson 2007; Budlender 2008). This is a subject of major importance for sustainable development policies that increasingly rely on women's work and leadership. The case study from Argentina further illustrates how transformations in gender roles do not automatically lead to a shift in gender norms.

Thieme's and Siegmann's (2007) critical appraisal of the social capital debate is an example of how gender norms effectively stabilise traditional power relations. The authors introduce mobility as a highly gendered pro-

cess where the crossing of boundaries implies not only different legal but also different cultural gender norms. Drawing on Bourdieu, they argue that investing in the symbolic capital of female honour is seen as crucial for strengthening social and economic capital – and at the same time underpinning male domination. Contrary to current social capital theory, the authors conclude that women become symbolic currency within social networks while remaining bereft of the benefits these networks provide. Their vulnerability increases at the same rate as masculine domination over these networks. In contrast to most studies, Thieme and Siegmann use the gender perspective to question established paradigms of migration research. This potential of the gender perspective has so far been underestimated within the NCCR North-South, as an interview statement suggests: “In my experience, people who try to deconstruct concepts are easily labelled troublemakers or considered as living in the clouds.” In this sense, the interviewee is rather disappointed about the programme: “We often stopped asking questions at the very point where it would have become really exciting.” Another interviewee advocated more “policy-irrelevant research” in order to create space for fundamental reflection. These statements indicate a tension between a desire to pursue sophisticated conceptual approaches to development research and the need to satisfy expectations for results in the form of ready-made recipes.

The common denominator of the studies discussed in sections 9.3 and 9.4 is their aim to assess social change through a gender lens. Adopting a gender perspective requires the researchers to translate highly complex theoretical accounts into practicable operative concepts. In the case of malaria, for instance, this includes assessing healthcare systems with regard to the inclusion and exclusion of particular groups – be it on grounds of gender, race, ethnicity, or class (Corradi 2009). Furthermore, these studies illustrate the importance of targeting the gender perspective at a specific research question and adopting an appropriate framework (Warren 2007). Decisions have to be made about whether the focus should be on gender roles, for example concerning the division of labour, or if gender identity or cultural negotiations of gender norms should be investigated. The above studies also illustrate that such analytical perspectives may shift as the research proceeds.

We conclude that within the NCCR North-South, a number of researchers regularly or occasionally use a gender lens to critically reflect their research approaches, to elicit data, and to interpret their results. Can we therefore assume that the NCCR North-South is immune to the general feeling of wea-

rieness known as ‘gender ennui’ that has been diagnosed elsewhere (Molyneux 2007)? Regular screening of PhD proposals, project reporting, and articles indicates a rather limited engagement with the subject, often involving the same researchers. In interviews and informal conversations, informants drew an ambivalent picture, but they unanimously warned against featuring gender prominently. There seems to be a danger of ‘being cornered’: “It’s crazy how certain words wear off – with the best of intentions!” states one interviewee, while one of his colleagues sees it as an unpopular obligation: “It is mocked, we do it because the SNSF [Swiss National Science Foundation] wants it; engineers, environmental scientists: they all do it because they have to do it but they are not convinced.” Not all informants shared the impression of general gender fatigue in the NCCR North-South programme. Nevertheless, the last quote reflects some unease and suggests that the motives for using a gender lens are more often political than scientific. In the final section of this article, we suggest expanding on the scientific value that the gender perspective offers, while embracing its political dimension.

## **9.5 Gender as a tool for transformation**

The studies discussed in this article share a process of starting with empirically accessible but unstable gender roles that can be advanced to include reflection on the cultural framing of gender or on the intersection of gender with other, equally fragile categories of social organisation, such as class, age, or ethnicity. As some of the above examples indicate, the critical deconstruction of key social institutions illuminates outputs and outcomes of development interventions and underscores the need for more purposeful interventions. According to one of the interviewees, a gender analysis is instructive as it dislodges personal assumptions about a research context.

While many of the contributions examined for this study employ gender as an analytical framework to elicit gender-specific data, only a few explore its potential in terms of interrogating basic concepts, let alone joining in the normative debate gender offers. However, as Maxine Molyneux (2007, p 236) argues: “[...] if gender analysis and mainstreaming are to be more than another policy tool, they need to be accompanied by some strategy for achieving gender justice as part of a broader commitment to greater social and economic equality.” This commitment, as pointed out above, is one of the principles shared by development and gender studies. Most of the authors discuss their examples of gender-considerate research in a context of rapid

social transformation. Such changes go hand in hand with the emergence of new actors, alternative livelihood strategies, redefinition of rules and regulations, and the redistribution of assets, access, control, and choices. For development, which always induces change, these are important times with regard to enhancing or securing equity and empowerment. We argue that by way of a gender perspective, social processes and the concept of ‘change’ can be reinterpreted in particularly gainful ways. Often reduced to the term “modernisation”, such transformations can be reflected on by gender-considerate scrutiny, providing us with a fine-tuned picture of how change and, as a matter of fact, persistence as well are socially negotiated.

We began this article by citing an example of extreme disruption in the human–nature relationship. Instead of asking how a natural disaster can be discriminatory, perhaps the question should be: What can development research contribute to prevent such asymmetries, not only after, but more importantly before dramatic events occur? In the case of the 2004 tsunami, a gender analysis – initiated by a simple body count – generated important questions about social structures and cultural values in the places affected. Women’s and men’s roles and their respective positions in society determined much of their resilience. Many women were not able to swim, nor could they climb trees. Some would not leave their house without a male member of the family. Others were selling their home-made produce alongside the coast roads, as they had always done on Sunday mornings. It is crucial for incoming humanitarian aid to build upon such knowledge in order not to reproduce power asymmetries. In Banda Aceh, the evaluation of the tsunami impacts revealed that women could best be empowered by giving them swimming lessons. The prerequisite, however, was that in a participatory approach these women were encouraged to design adequate swimsuits that met their standards of dignity and bodily integrity.<sup>17</sup> As aid often precedes medium- and long-term interventions, it is important to leverage such programmes.<sup>18</sup>

The challenge of interrogating social relations within transforming societies obviously applies to mitigating syndromes of global change. One of the critical points here is the discrepancy between the real and the felt proximity to the practice of international cooperation. Although gender research is called for by donors, in times of ‘effective aid’<sup>19</sup>, space for complex approaches and conceptual debates is becoming scant. The overall goal is to make sure that gender approaches support meaningful analyses that integrate complexity while not losing sight of implementation.<sup>20</sup> We conclude that the interro-

gation of development from a gender perspective is crucial in order to understand and eventually influence social and economic change in societies – be it in the long run or in the immediate event.

We hope that we have provided some insights into the multifaceted use of gender as a tool for thought within the NCCR North-South. So far, NCCR North-South members have been rather hesitant to explore gender as a tool for transformation. The common epistemological basis of gender and development studies, however, harbours a potential that is yet to be explored and tapped. It involves a re-evaluation of the ‘political’ within development research and a challenge regarding the nature of ‘change’ induced by these studies.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>7</sup> This article is based on a six-year mandate for gender and development research (Transversal Project Mandate “Gender and Development”, 2007–2013) held by the Interdisciplinary Centre for Gender Studies in Bern, Switzerland. The mandate is not research-based; activities such as regular screenings of PhD proposals and specific consulting with respect to research implementation programmes, the so-called Partnership Actions for Mitigating Syndromes (PAMS), provide insights which this contribution draws upon. Furthermore, publications and literature based on research by members of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South and accessible via the NCCR North-South website ([www.north-south.unibe.ch](http://www.north-south.unibe.ch)) were consulted. Three senior members of the NCCR North-South who are in a position to have an overview of the programme offered to take part in informal conversations referred to throughout the article. While we do not claim scientific validity for the interviews, they appear to be illustrative in terms of an internal perspective reflecting different positions within the network.
- <sup>8</sup> John Money and Anke Ehrhardt appear to have been the first scientists to make this distinction in their medical studies on transsexuals (Money and Ehrhardt 1972, in Fausto-Sterling 1988). In the same year, Ann Oakley (1972) introduced the differentiation between sex and gender in her anthropological work. Feminist scholars subsequently quoted primarily the anthropologist Gayle Rubin, who discussed the sex–gender system in her 1975 article on “the traffic in women” (1975).
- <sup>9</sup> De/construction is a neologism created by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004). Referring to Heidegger, Derrida devised a methodology of critical analytical inquiry. Although deconstructionists engage with some of the most influential 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophical movements, namely phenomenology, structuralism, and Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, deconstruction is mainly a critique of these movements. Rejecting the idea of the intrinsic meaning of a text, deconstruction encompasses a particular mode of reading by which ‘accidental’ features of a text can be interpreted as subverting the supposedly main message.
- <sup>10</sup> We assume that gender, being conceived of as a transversal theme, is included in many more publications that do not appear in the mapping system. Weak visibility, however, might also be explained by political or career-specific reasons. Foregrounding gender in one’s work is not appreciated in the scientific community. Informal discussions within the NCCR North-South indicate that there is a risk of negative repercussions.

- <sup>11</sup> NCCR North-South research activities are organised into three Thematic Nodes and an Integrative Node that bridges them all together. Each Thematic Node is supported by at least two Swiss partner institutions, together with their partners abroad, and comprises four to six Research Projects. The individual projects are co-led by post-doctoral researchers from the South and the North who jointly oversee an international team of post-doctoral and senior researchers, as well as PhD and master's students. The teams conduct their research in at least two out of nine established Partnership Regions spread across four continents.
- <sup>12</sup> See the web page of Research Project 9 for the third four-year phase of the NCCR North-South, lasting from 2009 to 2013: <http://www.north-south.unibe.ch/content.php/page/id/284> (accessed on 8 June 2011).
- <sup>13</sup> *Purdah* is a code of conduct specific to Bangladeshi, Indian, and Pakistani Muslim and Hindu cultures. It concerns the seclusion of women from the public, that is, from the gaze of men, by means of veils or other kinds of concealing clothing. Within the home, *purdah* is put into effect by high walls, curtains, or screens which separate women's and men's domestic spheres.
- <sup>14</sup> In her 1995 gender planning framework, Caroline Moser distinguished between practical gender needs and strategic gender interests. According to this framework, practical gender needs are identified by women within the socially defined roles attributed to them and as a response to immediate necessities (i.e. provision of water or fuel for cooking, improvement of health care infrastructure, etc.). Strategic gender interests, in contrast, challenge women's subordinate position in a society and the traditional division of labour. Interventions aiming at strategic gender needs address themes such as equal wages, the right for women to control their own bodies (i.e. abortion or female genital mutilation, etc.).
- <sup>15</sup> WID, short for "Women in Development", stands for an early approach in gender-sensitive development theory and practice which focuses on women. WID was subsequently replaced by GAD, short for "Gender and Development".
- <sup>16</sup> See the final report of this PAMS (CEIL-PIETTE-CONICET 2006).
- <sup>17</sup> This statement was made by Lorena Aguilar, Gender Advisor at the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, in a presentation held at the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) on 26 June 2008.
- <sup>18</sup> Major players have become aware of this, as recent publications indicate (IASC 2006).
- <sup>19</sup> By signing the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, more than 100 states committed themselves to better use of aid by agreeing on 56 partnership commitments to improve the quality of international aid. See [http://www.oecd.org/document/18/0,3343,en\\_2649\\_3236398\\_35401554\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/18/0,3343,en_2649_3236398_35401554_1_1_1_1,00.html) (accessed on 28 June 2011).
- <sup>20</sup> Both complex and simple approaches are needed, as Dietz argues: "Complexity arises in understanding the linkages between the many causes of human deprivation and in understanding the reasons for the success or failure of approaches to the reduction of poverty. Simplification is necessary to catch the eyes and ears of a world community of decision-makers and of public opinion leaders [...]" (Dietz 2001, p 19).

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