Gender in Civil Society: a driver or an afterthought in the discourse – some reflections from India.

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Gender is often the step child in the discourse of institutional theories: least mentioned and first to be forgotten, either because gender relations are not recognised at all as a significant feature of any social organisation, or that there are no gendered distinctions or practice within the discourse. The same can be said of the civil society discourse: while debates on civil society focus extensively on definitional issues of which institutions in society should be regarded as part of civil society, and whether it is strong or weak in particular context, the gender dimension of civil society is generally overlooked either from a practice stand point or a theoretical one (Howell 2007). While there has been some work on women’s organisations and their place in civil society (Howell and Mulligan 2004; Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies 2006), or women in politics as result of civil society work (Thomas 2002), there has been much less work on the difficult and contested nature of civil society itself and whether ‘civil society’ is to some extent, paradoxically, a term that reinforces normative patriarchal order rather than challenge it. This paper will interrogate the notion of civil society itself and the gendered nature of the key institutions, by using examples from India to assess whether civil society is itself a fundamentally flawed and patriarchal concept, and by its nature relegate gender to being an after-thought in the discourse.

A number of authors e.g. (Howell 2007; Mwambuli 2008) have made the point that feminist have tended not to engage in the civil society debate as they argue the distinction between public and private spheres inherent in the idea of civil society, is by its nature marginalising, with civil society being seen as more about state relations rather than private relations. This argument some extent misses the point, as institutions are gendered by nature and so civil society as an institutional form suffers the same fate, but this does not mean gender should be ignored in debates. In institutions such as civil society it is the role of identity that defines them and therefore the intersectionality of gender, class, ethnicity and in the case of India 'caste', is critical (McDue 2009).

This paper will build on this existing work, and argue that civil society is highly gendered and follows the patriarchal norms of the particular country or context, and its institutional forms such as government, the private sector, family, and the like. In India the women’s movement, as part of civil society, lives on the periphery, with women’s NGOs being noted by their exceptionalism; and even these NGOs generally avoid challenging gender power relations, and the institutions of religion, caste and family that are highly patriarchal. This paper argues that by ignoring gender (and other forms of identity for that matter) the discourse on civil society cannot advance beyond reproducing existing social norms rather than challenging them. It is only by holding the civil society actors accountable to how they recognise gender in their practice, and whether it reproduces existing norms or challenge them, that civil society can be said to be representative in how it engages with the State the market or other Civil society actors.

References


