4 Beyond the business case for gender

A feminist political ecologist in the FAO*

*By Rebecca Elmhirst and Bernadette P. Resurrección
In conversation with Clara Mi Young Park*

Introduction

A recurring thread that weaves through critiques of gender mainstreaming in international development organisations has been the charge that those tasked with ‘doing gender’ have been complicit in its bureaucratisation, thus inadvertently stripping out the possibility of transformative change (Cornwall et al., 2007; Fraser, 2009). Within environment and development contexts, the suggestion that the exercise of gender expertise may have turned feminist strategies from a model of resistance to an instrument of power is contrasted with the transformative environmental feminism explored in academic and activist feminist political ecology (Çağlar et al., 2013: 6; Arora-Jonsson, 2014; Collins, 2018). Effectively, the claim is that gender experts have been vulnerable to co-optation by privileging certain kinds of gender equality within their work, of the sort that effectively supports neoliberal capitalism, whilst constraining more progressive agendas. In this reading, so-called ‘femocrats’ have sold out the women’s movement and are profiting from women’s disadvantage (Chappell, 2002; Miller & Razavi, 1998; Cornwall et al., 2007). However, others have suggested that this vision of gender expertise is too narrow. Whilst a simple binary distinction between the femocrat and the feminist may hold when observed from a clear ‘outsider’ academic position (Ferguson, 2019), the picture painted in the personal accounts of feminist gender experts is more complex, pointing instead to the fine details of compromise and negotiation that make up gender mainstreaming and equality practice (Ferguson, 2019; Eyben & Turquet, 2013). The figure of the femocrat or bureaucratic mandarin that has been the focus of critique dissolves as gender advisors move between feminist and bureaucratic subject positions across time and in different spaces, in ways that perhaps accord more closely with Sandler’s argument that femocrats are ‘the warriors within’ (Sandler, 2015).

In this chapter, we reflect alongside Clara Mi Young Park who, at the time of our discussion, was working as regional gender officer in the Asia-Pacific office of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Alongside her terms of reference and responsibilities in this role, she was also writing her doctorate in

* The views expressed in this chapter are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.”

Feminist Political Ecology, based on research on the gendered impacts of large-scale land deals. Combining these related but very different aspects of gender work have led her to observe that she was ‘wearing a double hat’. Our discussions focus on the work Clara does around supporting gender equality within the specific context of the FAO, an institutional environment that on the one hand is dominated by technical fields and engagement with sometimes conservative country ministries, but on the other, is part of the UN, and thus influenced by the latter’s function in developing and steering the international governance of gender, sustainable development and human rights (Sandler and Rao, 2012; UN Women, 2018). As Ferguson (2019: 383) argues, the application of gender expertise in complex multilateral contexts (such as the FAO) and on the ground may involve negotiating definitions of what is ‘okay’ and ‘not okay’ to say about gender (Eyben, 2010: 65), or selling gender through ‘tactical slogans’, which has included making the business case for gender (Chant, 2012: 201). In our discussion, we ask Clara to reflect on the steps she is making to advance gender equality within the FAO. Amidst inevitable bureaucratic compromises that arise when working in a complex multilateral and multidisciplinary organisation based in technical environmental science disciplines, are there breakthroughs from which more transformative change can be leveraged? How do these sit alongside the engagements she is making with academic feminist political ecology through her PhD research and publications? In other words, what advantage can be achieved from wearing her ‘two hats’ as she sets her sights beyond the business case for gender in the FAO?

The chapter is organised around three themes that emerged when we explored the latitude and openings Clara has been able to identify for inching towards transformative change, within the context of FAO policy on gender, and through the constraints and opportunities of working with key decision makers within national governments. The first of these is her approach to working alongside the ‘business case for gender’ that threads through the FAO’s gender policy. In the section that follows, she shares her perspective on the difference the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have made for pressing this case in new directions and the structural changes that are needed to enable this on the ground. Finally, Clara shares her thoughts on the soft skills that are necessary for effective feminist work within and through an organisation like FAO which involves collaboration with colleagues and partners coming from technical science disciplines. We begin by asking Clara to explain her work with FAO as a researcher with a background in feminist political ecology and women’s rights, and what this means in terms of wearing her ‘two hats’.

Working as a regional gender advisor in the FAO

As a specialised agency of the United Nations, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has placed gender equality centrally within its mandate to achieve global food security for all by raising levels of nutrition, improving agricultural productivity and natural resource management, and improving the lives of

rural populations (FAO, 2018). In its own words, the goal of empowering women and girls underpins its approach to reducing gender inequalities, through its work on norms and standards, data and information, capacity development, knowledge and technologies, partnerships, advocacy and communication. As a specialised agency of the United Nations, the incorporation of gender within FAO's mandate shares a history with the UN more broadly. Skard (2009) notes that although the original 1945 UN charter made reference to women's rights, this was not the case for the FAO, and no mention was made at its first conference in 1949. Since then, however, the influence of the UN's women's rights agenda has been felt within the FAO, particularly through the UN Decade for Women (1976–1980), the intergovernmental Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Change had gathered pace thanks to landmark studies (e.g. Boserup, 1970), and through the UN's global women's conferences through the 1980s and 1990s, as the FAO itself shifted from gender-blind development to approaches emphasising women's inclusion (women in development), the structural issues underpinning gender equality (gender and development) and empowerment (Skard, 2009). The Beijing Platform for Action, agreed multilaterally at the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, galvanised gender equality as one of the FAO's priority areas for interdisciplinary action, creating bureaucratic spaces in which to advance the gender agenda by mainstreaming gender equality within the organisation and by bringing gender equality into its technical work.

The main context for our discussions in this chapter has been the implementation of the FAO's (2013) *Policy on Gender Equality*, which followed its publication, the *State of Food and Agriculture 2010–2011* on women in agriculture (FAO 2011). The policy on gender equality sets out a framework for guiding FAO efforts to achieve gender equality, with the objective of closing the gender gap, including a commitment that 30% of total agricultural aid would be committed to projects related to women and gender equality. The FAO describes its gender policy as prioritising 'the equal participation and decision-making of women and men in rural institutions and in shaping laws, policies and programmes; the equal access to and control over productive resources, services, income, markets and decent employment; and the reduction of women's work burden' (FAO, 2018: 4), and sets out accountability measures for achieving this. At the time of our discussions, this policy was being updated to align with the SDGs to strengthen efforts at accountability.

The mechanism for implementing FAO's gender policy is through its Gender Network system, a network of officers and Gender Focal Points at headquarters and decentralised offices who devote their work or a percentage of their time (about 20%) to promoting gender equality in their technical areas of work. At the time of our discussion, Clara was working in the Asia Pacific Regional Office, as regional gender officer. With a background in gender and human rights advocacy working in non-governmental organisations, Clara began her work with the FAO as a consultant, specifically on the gender equality implications of large-scale land investments at the time when rising food prices had created a spike in so-called

'land grabs'. When the FAO's gender strategy was rolled out and the gender positions in the regions were reinstated, she was hired as regional gender officer. We began our discussion by inviting Clara to describe what her work involves.

Clara: I'm here as the regional focal point for gender, following the audit of gender work that FAO did between 2011 and 2012. When the corporate policy on gender equality was published, one of the recommendations picked up was that there should be gender advisors in all the regional offices. Some of the positions were already there, but vacant or not filled, some positions were not there at all. This also was part of a broader effort to strengthen gender work: the institutional capacity and the gender mechanism within FAO.

In parallel with FAO headquarters, Clara's work is divided into two main areas, first relating to mainstreaming and the institutionalisation of gender within the FAO's work in the Asia Pacific region and secondly gender work – research, advocacy and policy – within specific thematic areas.

Clara: We have a network on gender focal points in all the country offices, this was one of the recommendations of the FAO's gender policy that we have a network of people that could support at country level. These people are not doing only gender work but have other responsibilities. The change [brought by the new policy] was that there were Terms of Reference formulated for people appointed as focal points, and that these be professional staff at the P4 level or above, so not just the most junior staff or the secretary of the boss but people who were engaging in programming. In practice, this is not always the case, and not always possible, but at least on paper the intention was there. Gender work is also monitored in that they are accountable for giving 20% of time for gender. My work is also about coordinating with them, facilitating dialogue amongst them and to support them.

This type of coordination brings challenges with it, as Clara explains.

Clara: The support could be anything and everything. It could be related to a project, it could be on specific requirements that all country officers are supposed to meet as part of the gender policy, for instance. The network, as you can imagine, is made of a diversity of people and interests, expertise and backgrounds. There are people who are more committed and interested, others not as active or proactive. I'm also doing the same thing in the regional office, which means that we have teams working on natural resources and climate change, and on the agricultural side, nutrition and subsistence, and I'm supposed to do my mainstreaming work with them. I have to say that in a way I find it more challenging to work with my own colleagues in Bangkok than I do in the countries: there is some expectation that because I'm here, gender work is something that I do, not what they should do! There are of course exceptions to that. As part of this function there are also monitoring

and reporting tasks which are partly linked to the implementation of the [FAO gender] policy, we also have a regional strategy and action plan which I'm also monitoring as well as other institutional requirements such as to review all the projects that go through the project review committee here at the regional level.

Alongside this mainstreaming activity, the second part of Clara's work is undertaken in specific thematic areas, including some normative work, publications, research collaborations, and training in specific technical areas, for example, value chains, climate change or forestry. Projects that she undertakes are categorised in two different groups, those focusing on gender or women's empowerment, and projects that are within any of the areas that fall within the FAO's mandate, that have a gender component or strategy. Some of the work in this second area is triggered by emerging issues, regional priorities, or triggered by opportunities, including collaborations with others such as research institutes or UN agencies, as the FAO is part of the UN-wide coordination mechanism working on gender equality. Clara notes the distinction between these two areas of her work is somewhat hierarchical.

Clara: There is a division even in HQ between people who work on mainstreaming or 'more technical work'. There is a subtle kind of discrimination as mainstreaming is seen as not technical enough, unlike those people working on land, fisheries, value chains, the specific sectors. Here, I do both!

As a regional gender advisor with a coordinating role, much of Clara's work involves her engagement at other levels, including country and international level. At an international level, her work is embedded in the implementation of the FAO Gender Policy which feeds into the UN system wide action plan (SWAP) for gender mainstreaming. This means she reports to colleagues in headquarters, providing information tracking how many trainings or country gender assessments have been completed, for example. At a regional level, she is part of the project review committee, where projects uploaded onto the FAO system are reviewed before implementation starts. Her work also involves taking stock of gender work, including through a web-based monitoring system of gender markers that is used to track, monitor and report on the extent to which a project addresses gender equality, ranging from this being a main focus to gender equality not being addressed. At country level, she works with UN country-level gender advisors and others, and their counterparts within national government departments and ministries.

The use of instruments and tools to mainstream gender described above feels distant from the academic literatures and practices of academic feminist political ecology that Clara has deployed in her research outside the FAO. Her personal research has centred on gender and generational dynamics in relation to large-scale land deals in Southeast Asia and beyond, working in collaboration with activists and advocacy groups (e.g. Park et al., 2015; Park, 2019). We were

interested in exploring the conundrums raised when a feminist political ecology activist academic works within mainstream environment and development work, given this is a path taken by many of the new crop of gender experts (Arora-Jonsson and Sijapati Basnett, 2017). Partly to answer this conundrum, Clara has adopted a strategy of separating her academic-activist world and her professional work at FAO, to give herself freedom in her academic research. The separation also reflects the difficulty of reconciling the different logics of mainstream gender programming in the FAO and academic-activist research, where the latter has depended on building long-term relationships of trust with communities impacted by and contesting large-scale land deals. Tacking between her largely ethnographic and critical discourse-related feminist political ecology work and her role as a feminist in a bureaucracy has meant confronting and embodying several points of tension that mark out the challenges of being a ‘warrior within’ (Sandler, 2015). However, what emerges in our discussion is how these tensions also crack open small fissures in which opportunities for small transformative gains may be found (Bergeron, 2016; Arora-Jonsson and Sijapati Basnett, 2017) and Clara’s story has very much one of persevering towards feminist change. As she puts it, ‘I don’t want to give up on something that I’m doing just because I feel frustrated and we often feel frustrated doing this kind of work. So we also have to resist the temptation to just give up’.

Working with the business case for gender

An important theme that we explored in our discussions concerned the issues raised by the dominance of what has been termed the ‘efficiency’ approach to gender equality within gender, environment and development debates (Resurrección, 2017). Since 2010, the work of gender advisors at FAO has gained traction within the organisation and beyond, influenced by the view that gender equality makes smart economics (World Bank, 2006; World Bank, 2011). This was further endorsed by major development donors through the Busan Joint Action Plan on Gender during the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) meeting in 2011 (Eyben, 2015). As a form of neoliberalised feminism (Prügl, 2015), this approach has drawn much criticism from feminists (Chant and Sweetman, 2012; Çağlar et al., 2013; Parpart, 2014) and from within feminist political ecology (Harcourt and Nelson, 2015; Resurrección, 2017). Critics have focused on how so-called efficiency arguments for improving women’s access to employment and to markets has dislodged an agenda of gender justice and ethics based on an analysis of structural and institutional drivers of gender inequality (Calkin, 2015). Instead, priority is given to the incorporation of women within existing neoliberal economic orthodoxies, with contrary and potentially damaging results (Cullen & Murphy, 2018). As Davids and van Eerdewijk put it, ‘ironically, these win-win and efficiency gender narratives have opened up space for a celebration of women as change agents, either as gender experts in bureaucracies, NGOs, or grassroots organizations or as girls and women in their own families and communities. It is assumed that the disempowered will empower themselves, and meanwhile the

power holders in the status quo are left off the hook' (2016: 89). They suggest that this interrupts the relationship between feminism and gender. This was likewise demonstrated by Cullen and Murphy (2018) through cases in the European Union pointing to the potential of the business case for gender equality to support the inclusion of women in governance structures, yet in the end these have led to perilous outcomes.

Despite these critiques, the business case for gender equality keeps being made over and again, perhaps with a less instrumentalist emphasis but centred around claims concerning the efficiencies afforded by tapping into women's and girls' potential. In our discussion, we were all aware that making a business case for gender equality softens otherwise stony ground for gender mainstreaming and the inclusion of gender analysis in technical programming. The challenges of bringing gender from the pages of corporate strategic plans and into everyday practice at FAO underpins why such discursive tools might be needed and how these become part of the bureaucratic compromise. Clara notes that, whilst work on gender equality is mainstreamed at the level of discourse, tools and knowledge products at FAO, the culture around doing gender has not completely changed.

Clara: I'm not sure to what extent people have really internalised [gender equality] and made it also their priority. I'm talking about colleagues and people working in the different technical disciplines [at FAO]. To what extent people have really bought into the importance of doing gender, and that it is not just the responsibility of a few people but is everybody's responsibility.

For feminists working within technical institutions where the gender agenda is a harder 'sell', this has presented a particular dilemma, and one where framing gender equality as efficiency takes hold. Not long after the World Bank made its business case for gender equality (World Bank, 2006), the FAO's flagship report *State of Food and Agriculture* (SoFA) (2010) was published, focusing on *Women in Agriculture*, with a framing that echoed the World Bank's 'efficiency' approach. This landmark publication has been identified by many in this sector, including other contributors to this book, as having helped change the landscape for gender-inclusive agricultural research for development, by providing leverage for integrating gender into their work. Was this a view that Clara shared?

Clara: To this day, some of the messages that came out of that report are the ones that we keep referring to. Really, because there was a business case for doing gender. From a feminist perspective, we don't like to say it is a business case. But it has really resonated with different people and different stakeholders. It was a message that was very easy to pick up and very easy to sell. From a feminist perspective, we want to really see the rise and the full empowerment of gender come to the fore. But then we're also stuck in a place where if you don't give these kinds of arguments – we keep seeing this repeated in other institutional reports, the World Economic Forum – if you don't keep this

economic rationale, it seems like we are not able to push strongly, especially in specialised technical agencies.

Clara notes that this discourse has provided a very good way of making the case and selling the point of gender equality to partners, governments and donors, as well as internally within the FAO. The immediate reaction to this has been to use the tools and accountability mechanisms to ensure that the gender policy is adhered to. For example, one way was increasing the number of women beneficiaries in the context of ensuring that with more women in agriculture, productivity is made more efficient and increases the prospects of overall economic growth. Is Clara satisfied with this approach?

Clara: I think we are always going back to the same conundrum, between having achieved so much as in terms of institutionalising gender mainstreaming, having this package of tools, using these to make people accountable, which are useful in a way. But then not following through to take the extra step, to go beyond the mechanical collection of data and information. At the end of the day, I think especially in organisations like FAO, we are still at the point where we think we have made a lot of progress, and we have in many ways, but we are still not there in terms of seeing gender as a political issue, as something that needs to be addressed at different levels, rather than just the number of people attending a workshop or the number of beneficiaries. I recognise the value of what we have done, the usefulness of using these instruments for highlighting things we have done and what could be done in a different way and to raise a flag when things could be done better. I am certain that what we are doing is not enough.

So what would be enough? What additional steps is she able to take to move beyond the limitations of a business case for gender and the quantitative dimensions of gender mainstreaming, and towards transformative change? Although Clara notes that she does not have solutions, there are some key points that she identifies as having given her the space to shape the work she is doing more effectively.

Making a social sustainability case for gender equality

We were interested in hearing what other entry points Clara had found for making the case for gender equality in her work at FAO, and with the partners she works with at country level, and the ways these could help press the case being made in new directions. There has long been a recognition of the existential pain that feminists experience in technical and bureaucratic organisations where instrumentalist arguments are used to justify the inclusion of gender issues (Miller & Razavi, 1998; Eyben, 2010). Clara's exposure to realities on the ground as a field researcher in feminist political ecology deepens this concern. On the one hand, she has traced the adverse inroads of the capitalist economy on women's and

men's lives in rural communities through land grabbing, whilst on the other, her role at FAO has involved her leaning on economic justifications such as the 'business case' for gender mainstreaming, prompting much reflection for her. Are there ways that she has been able to work around the downsides of the 'business case' in order to respond to some of the criticisms which, as a feminist political ecologist, she is acutely aware?

Clara: The Sustainable Development Goals have been helpful so I don't necessarily use the business case as much as I use the social sustainability case. It has provided a very good way of making the case and selling the points with governments and donors, as well as internally.

According to the FAO's documentation, which is key in norm-building, the principle of 'leaving no one behind' guides the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and FAO's Policy on Gender Equality, which prioritises the equal participation and decision-making of women and men in rural institutions and in shaping laws, policies and programs; the equal access to and control over productive resources, services, income, markets and decent employment; and the reduction of women's work burden (FAO, 2018). This policy is currently being updated to align more closely with the SDGs. Why has this alignment been important for her in moving beyond the business case with its emphasis on women's economic empowerment? Clara suggests this is because the SDGs have enabled her to encourage partners to look behind the numbers of women beneficiaries, for example, and instead look at the quality of what is being delivered.

Clara: I would say a case in point is about creating more work for women without looking at what the constraints they face. Because these easy-to-sell points [on increasing numbers of women employed, for example] are not always well explored, the risk is that we end up doing something that is not really transformative of social norms and entrenched gender inequalities. So, I will say that using the sustainability argument is helpful because it gives us leverage to look at other dimensions, it is not just about the number of men or women beneficiaries, but it is about ensuring long-term benefits and changing mind-sets. It's really looking at what it means in terms of the people who are affected, who are we targeting. In that sense, it can help our projects to be better in terms of gender. It is not enough to create employment for women if it doesn't come with a whole set of other things.

Given the FAO's mandate and its position as a technical organisation within the UN, how much is possible to achieve and what kinds of structural issues need to be addressed for widening the approach to gender equality beyond the business case?

Clara: The problem is that if we look at the kinds of projects that FAO does, it's about creating livelihood opportunities and access to value chains and

markets, or it could be about improving access to land and other resources. But then, it hardly ever goes into issues like care work or sexual and reproductive rights. And it's hard to expect that an agency like FAO would do that, although we are improving now on the issue of care work and work burden in general. But in terms of the actual project, it's not that easy to embrace a more holistic approach to women's empowerment for different reasons. Sometimes it could be funding constraints, budget lines, the kinds of projects. But it could also be simply because the counterpart is only the ministry of agriculture. So in that sense, I think it's good to use opportunities [such as the discursive leverage provided by the SDGs] to really highlight that it's not just about providing more employment opportunities or access to services, there needs to be consideration of women's work burden and the rights to their physical integrity, for instance. And I think that at the country level, these things are not always seen in a very holistic way. But not only at the country level, even at the level of FAO, so it's good to use these opportunities to remind ourselves of that. And that, for instance, FAO doesn't talk enough about women's rights in general because everything that we do should also be grounded on a human rights-based approach. It's good to put the rights agenda in there, and to use all the opportunities we have to highlight that.

Within the Asia Pacific region, Clara had been able to widen the FAO agenda by calling upon the SDGs, and also by making reference to the UN's Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), which in 2018 focused on the empowerment of rural women and girls.

Clara: That also provided an opportunity, for instance, we organised the Asia Pacific high-level meeting in preparation of CSW. So, we brought together ministries of agriculture, rural development, and gender machineries. Because the struggle is still also very much at the level of the countries similarly to what we see in our own organisations. That is, different ministries have different agendas, they don't always speak to each other, they're often in competition with each other also. And gender machineries are not that strong, to be honest. So that was another opportunity that was useful in terms of bringing different people together. And, again, in those cases, because of the SDGs and because of the background of CSW, we could actually bring together different perspectives on empowerment which is not just about economic empowerment, but it's more broadly about advancing women and girl's rights in different areas. So that was good.

Clara points out that organisations like FAO are not well equipped for this kind of thinking and approach if they work alone.

Clara: This is why it's really important when we develop projects to have on board experts who can guide in this sense, and can help project implementors and different stakeholders to look beyond what is immediately evident, and to

do a proper gender analysis and stakeholder analysis, to look at power dimensions, culture dimensions and all that. And this is something that we preach a lot. I'm not sure it is always taken up. Sometimes it is, but it is not systematic yet, and this is what is needed. It is more difficult for specialised or technical agencies like FAO. I see the value of trying to work together with others, including women's organisations, or to bridge the gaps where these exist. In practice, it's not always so simple – there's also fierce competition between agencies over very limited resources.

Where she has been able to make a difference is when she moves from providing feedback on projects that have already been designed and is instead involved from the start.

Clara: I'm not always designing the project myself, I'm providing feedback on something that has already been designed, when it comes to me it is at the final stage so there is only so much you can do. The other thing is that when I'm also trying to design something myself, again I have to balance my 'ask' between what I think should be done, and what I then can do. The end result is always a compromise. But having said that, I'm not saying that I've given up or that I take a hands-off kind of attitude on whatever work or projects are ongoing in FAO. I do try and I think one of the suggestions is always to have first of all a gender specialist to do a proper analysis of whatever projects we are designing, and to have a budget for that, because otherwise we know it will not happen. And then when I do have the opportunity to be engaged from the start then I try as much as possible to use whatever additional insights I might have coming from different sources and bring them to bear on the project.

As a practical example, we are formulating a big project in Papua New Guinea with the European Union. I went there for a pre-assessment of the situation. We went to several communities in the province where the project is supposed to happen and did interviews with women's groups and civil society organisations and the big problem there is gender-based violence (GBV) and very unequal distribution of roles, so women doing most of the heavy lifting and not getting any benefits out of that. It is quite obvious that the projects will not be able to do anything directly to address GBV but the level of awareness on the problem in the country, there are some women's groups that have been active in the rural areas. One of the suggestions is to collaborate with this kind of grassroots women's organisation and also to put in the project one item that looks at women's safe access to markets and women's time poverty and work burden. So, these are obviously not going to be fully transformative kinds of interventions because the overarching goal of the project is to increase the productivity of smallholder farmers through better engagement in selected cash crops. But at least we can do some good gender analysis on how women are engaging in production and marketing, what are the constraints they face, and what could be the space for them to

organise themselves in groups. Sound gender analysis has the potential to make our project so much better. The project also plans to engage other UN agencies to each contribute from their angle to the overarching project objective as well as to gender equality. So in the constraints that we have there are still opportunities for us to at least ensure the project does not harm, and that it actually benefits and empowers women. The problem is that we (gender specialists) are not always engaged from the start. This is one good example, but against this there could be dozens or hundreds that I'm not involved in. That's one of the constraints that we have.

The example Clara gives is indicative of the ways projects framed and envisioned through approaches highlight the technical management of gender equality through their integration into capitalist markets (and all which accompanies this). It shows how taking a holistic approach to knowledge, working collaboratively with relevant partners and centering social sustainability helps her identify opportunities for appropriate, if not always transformative change. The example also shows how projects are sites of ethical negotiation (Bergeron, 2016). Such negotiations 'on the ground' potentially exploit fissures in the business case for gender (improving efficiencies of women smallholders) and begin to edge towards the feminist terrain of care and solidarity (e.g. linking women farmers with GBV civil society organisations in Papua New Guinea), thus repairing the dissonance between gender as professional enterprise and feminist political ecology in practice.

Soft skills and compromise in making changes on the ground

The final theme that emerged in our discussions with Clara centred on the soft skills that must be used to bring partners and colleagues on board with gender equality, in order to deepen their engagement and avoid the limitations of box-ticking that more quantitative measures of gender mainstreaming have been accused of. The context in which Clara works throws up particular challenges are: working in a technical organisation such as FAO and its government-level counterparts where the principal disciplines of her colleagues relate to agricultural and environmental sciences, and working in a region where conservative and often authoritarian governments give limited latitude for transformative gender work.

Central to Clara's work is the building of relationships with colleagues and counterparts that she identifies as sympathetic and engaged with gender equality work, a strategy which has been identified as important within the literature on gender experts more broadly (Bustelo et al., 2016; Eyben & Turquet, 2013).

Clara: It is about finding champions, or identifying people who have really bought into the cause and working through them. So every time that I find a colleague who's more open or who's already supportive, I try as much as possible to work with them and to support what they are doing. It really has to do with talking to people.

At country level, whilst it is possible to find champions within civil society organisations and sometimes in government ministries, this kind of work requires considerable agility, and highlights a contrast between her academic research as a feminist political ecologist with a critical perspective on gender and land rights in Southeast Asia, and the care with which she must tread in her work with FAO. The subject matter of Clara's work on the gender equality implications of large-scale land deals (Park et al., 2015; Park and Maffii, 2017; Park, 2019) is well within the remit of FAO. However, at country level, the FAO's international discourse and norm-building around gender equality within agriculture and food security often confronts narrow political limits in terms of what can be said or done. What role is there here for reconciling her work in feminist political ecology, with its emphasis on gender justice, with the work of the regional gender advisor?

Clara: When I think about the work we do in the FAO, I am very much influenced by my own research. Maybe I cannot express myself as I would when I'm writing a research paper or journal article, but then I think the influence [of having to work within certain bureaucratic constraints] is not necessarily bad because it gives me a reality check of what we are doing. It also prompts me to question what I'm doing in my capacity as a gender person at country level vis-à-vis the government being the key counterpart. So, in countries in the region that creates a lot of pressures as to what I feel I should do, could do, could say.

Does this mean that issues such as the gender equality implications of large-scale land investments which have been so central to activist-academic feminist political ecology in Southeast Asia are off the agenda for her work with the FAO?

Clara: That's not what I'm saying. I'm just saying that maybe while we would say if it had to be in a report or a project document it would not be bluntly criticising the government but again there are different levels and different ways in which things can be presented and pitched. For example a global FAO report where there has been research done on the gender implications of land deals, of course, we didn't call them land-grabbing but land-based investments and agriculture investments for instance. And then it's useful always to refer to policy instruments like the voluntary guidelines or the responsible agricultural investments and to talk about the – to use the human rights language. At the country level, it's a bit more difficult. I can perhaps use a country example. FAO every four years negotiates this country program framework with the government and specifically, in some countries, it's often with the Ministry of Agriculture. In 2017 we started a process in one country and because it's supposed to be a consultative process there were several workshops and back and forth with the government and they were constantly trying to remove or to block or contest anything that was related to problems with land issues or a specific reference to things that are not properly addressed in the legislation. So it's okay to say that the legal and policy framework could be improved

and that FAO can provide support in that, but it's not okay to say that the current policy framework is inadequate. It's okay to say that FAO can support in advancing gender equality but it's not okay to say that there's gender discrimination. That would not get the green light! So these kinds of things do happen quite a lot at the country level.

Thus, rather than the feminist political ecology critiques of large-scale land investments being set aside entirely, Clara brings them in, using her positioning within the FAO to give her some political space to air these issues in ways that would be denied to academics or activists in authoritarian or conservative contexts. She notes the advantage provided through the adjacency of other organisations within the UN that can be drawn on to navigate political sensitivities, whilst keeping her feminist political ecology transformative objectives at least partially in view.

Clara: In broad terms and thematic focus, my research interests could fit within FAO's work, but then it is an intentional decision that I made to try to keep the two as separate as possible to give myself some freedom to express myself, to experiment and stretch the boundaries, so that I don't feel strait-jacketed by my role here. Of course, it is easier said than done! We are talking about one person and this is why I have a periodic crisis with myself and my positionality! I am also doing research under FAO that will be published as an FAO product on indigenous people's land tenure systems in Cambodia for instance, we are designing a project together with ILO [UN International Labour Organization], but the language is obviously very different – some things can still be there, but somehow because of the comments you get, the sensitivities there are with the government, we have to tame so much, so at the end, it is half as powerful as it could be.

Whilst debate around gender experts has focused on the ways feminists can effect change within their organisations (as 'trojan horses' or 'warriors within') (Eyben & Turquet 2013; Sandler, 2015; Kunz & Prügl, 2019), Clara's 'double hat' shows how she is able to weave some of the objectives of transformative change (in this instance, addressing women's disempowerment and gender inequalities around access to resources) into her outward-facing work as well, navigating this by operating with agility, and by working strategically with other organisations (in this case, the ILO) that enable her to keep gender transformation and rights-based agendas in the frame.

Conclusion

By sharing her thoughts on her experiences, Clara poses difficult questions regarding conventional notions about the femocrat as a de-politicised subject by the bureaucracy and the establishment. Her reflections are illustrative of the reflexivity she deploys, which is shaped through her attachment to feminist political ecology, her experiences in the field, and her work in solidarity with activist-academics. In

this, Clara is attentive to the exercises of power that she herself wields as a gender professional, and the agency provided by her professional affiliation with the FAO. At the same time, she is conscious that lurking wider powers define her latitudes for manoeuvre, compelling her to adopt useful institutional resources such as the SDGs to steer the boat onto a more transformative course. The discomfort and frustrations sometimes felt when navigating between feminist political ecology theory and her work as a gender professional are resolved in a desire not to give up, to use the tools her position gives her to make a difference. ‘The question is...not how feminist scholars and activists can avoid co-optation by powerful institutions, but whether we can afford not to engage with such institutions’ (True in Eyben & Turquet, 2013: 3). Former UNIFEM regional director Nyaradzai Gumbonzvanda once remarked: ‘You need to be clear on the transformation that you seek to bring into this space. It’s more than a job. It’s a calling’ (Sandler, 2015: 12, 13). When gender experts employ skilful ways to create transformative spaces through the politics of negotiation that make up gender mainstreaming and equality practice, they become the ‘warriors within’.

References

- Arora-Jonsson, S. (2014). Forty years of gender research and environmental policy: Where do we stand? *Women's Studies International Forum*, 47, 295–308.
- Arora-Jonsson, S., & Sijapati Basnet B. (2017). Disciplining gender in environmental organizations: The texts and practices of gender mainstreaming. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 25(3), 309–325. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12195>
- Bergeron, S. (2016). Transgressing gender and development: Rethinking economy beyond ‘Smart Economics’ In Dinerstein, A. C. (Ed.) *Social Sciences for an Other Politics: Women Theorizing without Parachutes* (pp. 65–77). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Boserup, Ester (1970). *Woman's Role in Economic Development*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Bustelo, M., Ferguson, L., & Forest, M. (Eds.) (2016). *The Politics of Feminist Knowledge Transfer: Gender Training and Gender Expertise*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Çağlar, G., Prügl, E., & Zwingel, S. (2013). Introducing feminist strategies in international governance. In G. Çağlar, E. Prügl, & S. Zwingel (Eds.), *Feminist Strategies in International Governance* (pp. 1–18). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Calkin, S. (2015). Feminism, interrupted? Gender and development in the era of ‘Smart Economics’. *Progress in Development Studies*, 15(4), 295–307.
- Chant, S. (2012). The disappearing of ‘Smart Economics’? The World Development Report 2012 on gender equality: Some concerns about the preparatory process and the prospects for paradigm change. *Global Social Policy*, 12(2), 198–218.
- Chant, S., & Sweetman, C. (2012). Fixing women or fixing the world? ‘Smart Economics’, efficiency approaches, and gender equality in development. *Gender & Development*, 20(3), 517–529. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2012.731812>
- Chappell, L. (2002). The ‘femocrat’ strategy: expanding the repertoire of feminist activists. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 55(1), 85–98. <https://doi.org/10.1093/parlij/55.1.85>
- Collins, A. (2018). Saying all the right things? Gendered discourse in climate-smart agriculture. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 45(1), 175–191. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2017.1377187>

- Cornwall, A., Harrison, E., & Whitehead, A. (2007). Introduction. Feminisms in development: Contradictions, contestations and challenges. In A. Cornwall, E. Harrison, & A. Whitehead (Eds.), *Feminisms in Development: Contradictions, Contestations and Challenges* (pp. 1–20). London: Zed Books.
- Cullen, P., & Murphy, M. P. (2018). Leading the debate for the business case for gender equality: Perilous for whom? *Gender, Work & Organization*, 25(2), 110–126. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12199>
- Davids, T., & van Eerdewijk, A. (2016). The smothering of feminist knowledge: Gender mainstreaming articulated through neoliberal governmentalities. In *The Politics of Feminist Knowledge Transfer Gender Training and Gender Expertise* (pp. 80–96). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Eyben, R. (2007). Battles over booklets: Gender myths in the British aid programme. In A. Cornwall, E. Harrison, and A. Whitehead (Eds.), *Feminisms in Development: Contradictions, Contestations and Challenges* (pp. 65–78). London: Zed Books.
- Eyben, R. (2010). Subversively accommodating: Feminist bureaucrats and gender mainstreaming. *IDS Bulletin*, 41(2). <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2010.00123.x>
- Eyben, R. (2015). Promoting gender equality in the changing global landscape on international development cooperation. In A. Coles, L. C. Gray, & J. H. Momsen (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Gender and Development* (pp. 515–526). Routledge.
- Eyben, R., & Turquet, L. (Eds.) (2013). *Feminists in Development Organizations: Change from the Margins*. Practical Action Publishing.
- FAO. (2011). *Women in Agriculture: Closing the Gender Gap for Development. The State of Food and Agriculture 2010–11*. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. <http://www.fao.org/publications/sofa/2010-11/en/>
- FAO (2013). *FAO Policy on Gender Equality: Attaining Food Security Goals in Agriculture and Rural Development*. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations. www.fao.org/docrep/017/i3205e/i3205e.pdf
- FAO (2018). *Empowering Women, Powering Agriculture. The FAO's Work on Gender*. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations. <http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/CA2678EN>
- Ferguson, L. (2019). *Gender Training: A Transformative Tool for Gender Equality*. Springer Berlin Heidelberg.
- Forsyth, T. (2003). *Critical political ecology: The politics of environmental science*. Routledge.
- Fraser, N. (2009). Feminism, capitalism and the cunning of history. *New Left Review*, 56, 97–117.
- Harcourt, W., & Nelson, I. L. (2015). *Practicing Feminist Political Ecologies: Moving Beyond the 'Green Economy'*. Zed Books.
- Kunz, R., & Prügl, E. (2019). Introduction: Gender experts and gender expertise. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 2(1), 3–21. <https://doi.org/10.1332/251510819X15471289106077>
- Miller, C., & Razavi, S. (1998). *Missionaries and Mandarins : Feminist Engagement with Development Institutions*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications in association with the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.
- Park, C. M. Y. (2019). 'Our lands are our lives': Gendered experiences of resistance to land grabbing in rural Cambodia. *Feminist Economics*, 25(4), 21–44.
- Park, C. M. Y., & Maffii, M. (2017). 'We are not afraid to die': Gender dynamics of agrarian change in Ratanakiri province, Cambodia. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 44(6), 1235–1254.

- Park, C. M. Y., White, B., & Julia, J. (2015). We are not all the same: Taking gender seriously in food sovereignty discourse. *Third World Quarterly*, 36(3), 584–599.
- Parpart, J. L. (2014). Exploring the transformative potential of gender mainstreaming in international development institutions. *Journal of International Development*, 26(3), 382–395. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.2948>
- Prügl, E. (2015). Neoliberalising feminism. *New Political Economy*, 20(4), 614–631. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2014.951614>
- Resurrección, B. P. (2017). From ‘women, environment, and development’ to feminist political ecology. In S. MacGregor (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Environment* (pp. 71–85). Oxon: Routledge.
- Sandler, J. (2015). The ‘warriors within’: How feminists change bureaucracies and bureaucracies change feminists. In R. Baksh & W. Harcourt (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Transnational Feminist Movements* (pp. 188–214). Oxon: Routledge.
- Sandler, J., & Rao, A. (2012). *Strategies of Feminist Bureaucrats: United Nations Experiences* (Working Paper No. 397). Sussex, UK: Institute of Development Studies.
- Skard, T. (2009). Gender in the malestream—Acceptance of women and gender equality in different United Nations Organisations. *Forum for Development Studies*, 36(1), 155–197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08039410.2009.9666429>
- UN Women (2018). *Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. New York: United Nations. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/2/gender-equality-in-the-2030-agenda-for-sustainable-development-2018#view>
- World Bank (2006). Gender action plan: Gender equality as smart economics. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/295371468315572899/Gender-equality-as-smart-economics-a-World-Bank-Group-gender-action-plan-fiscal-years-2007-10>
- World Bank (2011). *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development*. Washington DC: World Bank. Retrieved from: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/492221468136792185/Main-report>