

CROSSING BORDERS

WOMEN IN THE WORLD In our series of interviews with senior managers from around the world, Pauline Herbst catches up with Rome-based Wendy Harcourt, senior advisor for the Society for International Development, on her recent visit to New Zealand.



After receiving a PhD in history, Australian-born Wendy Harcourt had to decide whether to stay in liberal Adelaide or become a feminist activist in London. She did neither, instead taking a chance on romance in Italy. She's now lived there since 1988, building an impressive reputation in the areas of gender and development research.

It is hard to define an extensive portfolio career spanning 20 years in a single term, but a snippet from Harcourt's biodata describes her focus as: "critical research on and analysis of development policy from a rights and gender perspective with a special interest in sustainable development, globalisation, communication, culture, and sexual and reproductive health and rights". She has taken this research into academic fora, civil society meetings and the United Nations arena as a speaker and organiser of many conferences, workshops and seminars around the world.

As Harcourt explains, growing up with a professor of economics at Cambridge (father) and a psychologist who ran for Parliament and participated in anti-abortion and anti-Vietnam demonstrations (mother) her career choices are hardly surprising.

She says: "Where else can I place myself? I'm in between academia and policy and civil society. My big success is the crossing of borders – talking to academics about work that's not academic and vice versa. If you don't get caught in careers, you can do that a lot."

What brings you to New Zealand for the first time?

I came at the invitation of Dr Yvonne Underhill-Sem [the director of the Centre for Development Studies at the University of Auckland] to talk about my new book *Body politics in development: critical debates in gender and development*, and teach some of her classes. I'm interested in the New Zealand environment in relation to women's rights and potential women's issues.

So what's the book about?

Me trying to explain what I've been doing for 20 years. I've always been involved in issues around human rights whether safety on student campuses, rape in war, domestic violence... all of those issues which were an entry point for women to be more aware. Having a women's body has commonality.

The question I ask is: "How is it that the body is so important but in develop-



ment the body has disappeared – its stats and vignettes. Such an important entry point politically for women, it focuses on women's economic lives with more community-based body politics and looks at the different ways they have interacted.

How do your external expectations of New Zealand relate to the reality?

It is very beautiful with a lifestyle that you couldn't afford in Europe. It is a very wealthy country in that sense, with the environment and lifestyle. I've also noticed it's very multi-cultural, especially on campus.

New Zealand has a neo-liberal reputation from outside so I was interested in seeing the new prime minister. We have been astonished by the media and interested in their openness with the political elite. Even though he's [John Key] conservative, he's talking about social issues.

How have you had to adapt your management style to each of the broad areas you work in?

When you're networking for advocacy, feminist dialogue and others, you're having to deal with power politics and ask yourself "where are your entry points"? With gender, trade and development within the EC you have to be careful not to stomp on people's toes. I was chair of Women in Development Europe (WIDE) from 2004 to 2008 and as chair you have to listen very carefully to people. It's really rewarding but really tough as it's not just about research and networking, but about the politics in a group. Where do you point your energy and impact?

What are some of the management challenges you have been presented with?

It is interesting for me. Working in my organisation, young women and men come on board as part of ISAAC (a network of business management students around the world). At the UN, people have a good salary and it is very prestigious so people

want to stay. They have built up their jobs successfully but lost good people. It's hierarchical so there is a turnover of young people who have left as there is no space for them. I've actually found the organisation very impressive, although I haven't found it as good at team building.

People are very much top down, not bottom up, so they miss out on good people. They're not using the best of their ability which is a shame. There is a big problem there. People who are less good take control as they're willing to play the game. I've been surprised that some people get into those hierarchical bureaucracies and lose the good things they were doing.

WIDE (Women in Development Europe) is more of a collective so in a sense is consensus building. With young people, their decision making is more complex. As chair it was a lot more work than the hierarchical group where we all plan together but I make the decision.

If you get all good people they pull their weight. As soon as someone doesn't there is a problem. You have to do a lot of capacity building, however once you get them up to speed it works. Sometimes you get lost in the management side.

You received the Visiting Fellowship Clare Hall at the University of Cambridge in 2007 and 2008. What were your impressions?

From the little experience I've had at universities, they don't get stuck in hierarchies as much. At Cambridge the college system encouraged you once you were in. In terms of management the college system is fantastic – a multi-disciplinary club of the best minds, with beautiful surroundings, good food and excellent working conditions. They're training the best of the international elite although have really gone to a business model.

Until I became a part of the 'club' I didn't realise what it meant. People can scoff at it and say it's all part of an empire, but it works for the people in there. That's why it produces so many good things. **M**

CURRENT ROLES:

- Editor of the internationally renowned journal *Development*
- Senior advisor at the Society for International Development (SID)
- Managing editor UNDP Report on Women and Governance in the Eastern Europe (EE) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)
- Visiting professor at the European University Institute
- Team member of the European Report on Development

BOARD, ASSOCIATION ACTIVITIES:

- Active board member of key women's networks and journals
- Coordinator of the Feminist Alternative Working Group
- Founding member of the European Feminist Forum
- Member of the European Association for Research Development Institutes (EADI)
- Steering group of the International Feminist Dialogues
- Board member of the International Feminist Journal of Politics

FORMER ROLES:

- Chair of Women in Development Europe (WIDE) from 2004 to 2008
- Director of programmes at the Society for International Development (SID)

BOOKS:

- *Body politics in development: critical debates in gender and development* (2009)
- *Women and the politics of place* (2005 – with Arturo Escobar)
- *Women@Internet: creating new cultures in cyberspace* (1999)
- *Power: Reproduction and Gender: the intergenerational transfer of knowledge* (1997)
- *Feminist Perspectives on Sustainable Development: shifting knowledge boundaries* (1994)
- *European Feminism Today*
- *Women and Political Conflict in South Asia*, Zubaan Books (in production)