In November 1995, a Muslim religious leader in Chad called for the murder of a woman named Zarah Yacoub. Zacoub had made a film denouncing excision, the genital mutilation of women that is practiced by both Muslims and non-Muslims in several African countries. Fearful lest someone act on the imam's execution order, the film-maker went into hiding. The story could have ended bloodily, had it not been for the help of a women's solidarity network that alerted hundreds of women's and human rights groups to Zacoub's death sentence. Their combined protests to the Government of Chad ultimately led the imam to withdraw his edict.

The persecution of a woman who defies the rules established by religious leaders is not an isolated incident. However, it also serves to show that the idea of "crime" does not have the same meaning everywhere. Is it possible that a revision of the laws governing women's lives might help to preserve and strengthen their independence?

That is the challenge facing Women Living Under Muslim Laws, a solidarity, information and research network. The movement was founded in 1985 by nine women who sought an effective way to respond to...
women's rights violations in Muslim countries or communities. Its gestures of solidarity base their appeal, whenever possible, on the recognition of fundamental human rights. Inspired by such movements as Amnesty International, this work is just one facet of Women under Muslim Law.

**Deciphering and reinterpreting Muslim laws**

One of the network's most ambitious activities involves deciphering and reinterpreting Muslim laws. Since the early 1990s, network members have worked on the Women and Laws project, a major research and action program that has received support from IDRC. Under this project, female research teams in 26 countries from Indonesia to Senegal to Uzbekistan are using a common methodology to trace the evolution of laws, identify the contradictions between them, and point out gaps. When publicized, this comparative and minute examination of Muslim laws will help women understand their rights and help them influence legislation that affects them.

"Muslim laws involve interpretations that those in power, who are men by definition, have decided to apply as laws," says the Algerian-born director of the network's international coordination bureau. "We have taken on the challenge of reinterpreting those laws, at last, in favour of women."

**A vast array of rules and codes**

The director, who shuns publicity for reasons of personal safety, says the notion of "Muslim law" covers a vast array of rules and codes, written and unwritten — which vary from one country or context to the next. Some derive from the Koran, but many are relics of custom, tradition, or old colonial laws. For example, at a recent meeting organized by Women under Muslim Law, Malaysian women were astonished to hear their Sudanese counterparts speak of excision — they had never heard of it. "Although these so-called laws sometimes have nothing to do with Islam, they still exert more power over women than does our formal legislation," she explains.

The Women and Laws project is designed to yield an exhaustive inventory of Muslim laws that will receive broad public exposure through stage plays, cassette recordings and other media. "Research is well advanced in several countries," says the director. "But it is not always easy. A lot of women have to do their work in secret."

**Helping women escape their social isolation**

She says the ultimate goal of the network is to help women break out of their social isolation. "In many countries, women's identities are restricted to their roles as Muslims and mothers. They need to move beyond these, and become aware that they are also fully fledged human beings and citizens."

*Michel Groulx is a writer based in Montreal, who is currently on assignment in Africa.*

**Contact:**

**Women Living Under Muslim Laws**, BP 23, 34790 Grabels, France

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**Related IDRC articles and publications**

[Gender and Development: Equity for All](#), by Eileen Conway and Yianna Lambrou

[Women: The Handymen of South Africa](#), by Lucie Pagé
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Gender and Development: Equity for All

by Eileen Conway and Yianna Lambrou

While developing countries struggle to overcome social, economic and political problems within a shifting world order, the pivotal role of gender continues to provoke debate. Can gender analysis help identify useful models and approaches for development? Why is it important to consider gender as a relevant issue for sustainable development? If gender integration into the development process hasn't always worked well, what lessons can be drawn?

These issues will be centre stage at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing this September, when delegates hope to advance the emerging global consensus that gender equity and equality are absolutely key to achieving sustainable development. Since gender is such a broad topic, it may be more fruitful to discuss a specific sector, such as natural resources management, in relation to gender questions and thereby shed light on gender in a wider context.

Women in developing countries work as managers of natural resources, as farmers, water and energy suppliers, and health providers. As the world's most important food producers, women are highly aware of their dependence on a healthy environment. The Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies on Women, issued from the Third World Conference on Women in 1985, was the first document of global significance to call attention to gender's critical importance in balancing the requirements of development and environment. The 1992 Earth Summit again underlined the links between poverty, development, environment and gender.

Equity and Sustainability

Two key issues related to gender and natural resource management and ones that are closely linked - are equity and sustainability. A strong relationship exists between, on the one hand, access to and control of resources, and, on the other hand, motivation, incentives and ability to invest in the long-term maintenance and improvement of those resources.

Rural women in Central Africa ask "why should I plant trees on land that belongs to my husband? In a few years he might take another wife, and kick me off the land. So the trees I plant today will serve to one day benefit another woman ... my competitor no less!" Clearly, without secure access to the land, these women are little motivated to work for its long-term sustainability.

Third World women are often forced for reasons of survival to act in ways that lead to further environmental destruction. They may pollute the environment or take wood from a depleted area simply because they have no other options.

In contrast to other African regions, women in the Machakos region of Kenya have relative security of tenure. Their confidence is clear in the impressive farming infrastructure they have created, which includes
terraces, contour hedges and other features that together combat erosion and improve the water-retention capacity and fertility of the land.

In the Philippines, men and women inherit land equally. They both bring their land into the marriage, and if they should separate, they take their own land with them. In some instances, daughters inherit from their mothers, and sons from their fathers. In such a system where women have equal economic security to men, women also have equal social and political power.

"The Philippines is one of the most gender-equal parts of the world," says Joachim Voss, program director in IDRC's environment and natural resources division.

"Some of the most powerful entrepreneurs are women; over 50% of the bank managers and lawyers are women. This shows the relationship between having that economic security on the one hand, and access to resources on the other. Economic security influences other kinds of social relationships, and affects the possibilities for jobs, employment, and education that women have."

**Natural Resource Managers**

"IDRC funded the wednet [Women, Environment and Development Network] project, which had as its starting point that poor women in rural Africa have valuable knowledge and experience," says Eva Rathgeber, founder of the first women's unit in IDRC in 1987, and now regional director for eastern and southern Africa.

"WEDNET's aim was to catalogue that knowledge of natural resources management such as water, forests, seeds, drylands, and to look at how women use that knowledge to survive within their own environments."

Despite women's vital role in environmental management, they are excluded from most environmental or development decision-making. Too few lines of communication connect international and local organizations, limiting women's ability to influence development planning and implementation.

"Women's voices need to be heard. They must speak for themselves and decide what their needs and aspirations are", says Yianna Lambrou, senior program officer responsible for gender and sustainable development in IDRC's corporate affairs division. "When, for example, all farmers are lumped together, no one recognizes the unique contribution and knowledge of women about issues directly under their control and influence. Then development aid programs are shaped neither for nor by the women toward whom aid is ultimately directed."

**Research Methodology**

Integrating a gender perspective into research methodology is central to improving research quality and results. Gender analysis factors in the social, cultural, political, economic and ecological dimensions of gender relations. It considers the gendered nature of knowledge. Including the knowledge of both men and women helps ensure accuracy and completeness. Statistics are broken down by gender to avoid distorting the knowledge base. But gender methodology is by no means universally applied.

"There is still a serious lack of understanding of gender in society, and its implications for development", says Rathgeber. "Much of the research in water resource management, for example, contains almost no significant mention of gender. Among international donor agencies, gender is mentioned but it is always as a kind of "add-on", not as a basic plank in their thinking. Gender analysis is necessary in order to understand that different actors in every social situation have different imperatives, goals and degrees of power.

"Participatory research methods are increasingly gaining acceptance and respect, and those methods tend to have a more feminist perspective because they tend to value everyone's opinion and give opportunity for
everyone to speak."

A failure to seek women's views from the start can lead to unintended results. Joachim Voss recalls a large, international project in Central Africa aimed at helping women use less fuel in cooking meals in order to protect tree supplies and the local environment.

"Tests, surveys, and experiments were done to figure out the best methods of cooking beans more quickly, as this would lessen the amount of fuel required", says Voss. "What became obvious after several years, was that the time spent cooking the beans in the evening was virtually the only free time the women had all day. The last thing they wanted was to give up those two or three hours at home tending the beans, and instead do other work that was much more backbreaking. The implication is that science can sometimes be misdirected because of a lack of gender analysis."

Taking Action

In the view of Yianna Lambrou, research and discussion must at some point turn to action. "In spite of decades of efforts to recognize and accept the contribution of women, gaps in equity and a serious neglect of their rights persist. International conferences will continue to be held year after year, while the lot of poor women and their communities remains bleak. It is not enough to assemble experts to lament these ills. It is important to act, to become alert, and to deliberate no longer. Change must happen at the local level where people make daily decisions that shape their lives and those of their children.

Can we join forces and focus our energies on women's voices and the wisdom they contain? Is it not time that together we teach our young people to look not at a person's sex and gender but at their accomplishments and their right to control their own lives? Only then, can we stop organizing conferences and sending aid packages, begin to tend our own gardens and help our neighbours tend theirs."

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Women: The Handymen of South Africa

by Lucie Page

In the words of a black woman from northern KwaZulu-Natal, one of the nine provinces of South Africa: I am a worker, an organizer, a director, an administrator, an adviser, a doctor, a nurse, a cleaning woman, a gardener, a painter, a carpenter you name it! I am the handyman, the jack of all trades.

Women are not entitled to make any decisions, but they re the ones who keep things going in this country, says Jean Ngubane, president of the Women’s National Coalition.

The WNC is an umbrella organization for more than 90 women’s groups in South Africa. Women from all milieus, all races, all political movements and parties, women who can meet to negotiate and agree on the road to take towards equality and emancipation for women in South Africa.

The WNC was born in April 1992. idrc had an important role in initiating contact among Coalition members, providing funding and encouraging interest among other donors. The Coalition had a straightforward mandate: to consult women in South Africa and write a charter of women’s rights in accordance with the results of this research. Mission accomplished. The charter, called The Women’s Charter for Effective Equality, represents the voice of millions of women throughout South Africa. Discussion groups, interviews, surveys, letters, questionnaires, every means was used to find out women’s opinions.

The needs of women in every area of society are described in it: principles of equality, legislation and administration of justice, economics, education and training, development, infrastructure and environment, social services, health, media, political and civil life, family life, customs, culture, religion and violence against women.

The charter reflects ideals that are far removed from the reality of the lives of South African women. And what is this reality? Is oppression different here from elsewhere in the world? Has apartheid, so readily blamed for so many ills, made the oppression here worse? Oh! Oh! Oh! exclaims Jean Ngubane, throwing her hands up in the air and letting out a whistle. Jean is black. She comes from KwaZulu-Natal. It’s worse, worse, worse. It’s the worst form of oppression there is, she says.

The father, the tribal chief, the Bantustan chief, the apartheid government of the National Party there were so many levels of oppression. Nearly all of them still exist, she states. And when we get married, it’s worse still.

We need our husband’s permission for absolutely everything everything, even using contraceptives! she cries, still incredulous.

We can’t talk about women in South Africa without talking about poverty, explains Sandra Botha, a farmer’s wife, the mother of five children, who has worked with the WNC from its earliest days. Actually,
poverty is what most characterizes women in this country. Most black women used to become domestics, continues Jean Ngubane. And that’s still true today. But the President of the WNC is an exception then. Why? Because I had access to education.

According to a report by the WNC, rural women, oppressed by the laws arising from habit and custom, often did not go to school beyond grade three. Families saw the roles of women as being defined only in marriage, which increased the family’s wealth by means of the lobola [the practice of selling and purchasing brides, still current in certain regions of South Africa]. An educated woman was seen as a threat to tribal practices, and the accepted stereotype of women was that of childbearer and mother.

In South Africa, to be born a woman and black is to come into the world alone, like a black sheep. This is not to say that white women are not just as oppressed.

Sandra Botha is a white woman, an Afrikaner. Our oppression begins in the home. Fathers are the supreme authority, Sandra says. And then we received a limited and prejudicial education. The white government created people who could go along with its thinking.

Pregs Govender, the former director of the WNC and now member of parliament, explains: In South Africa, we can’t talk about the oppression of women without also talking about the oppression of races and classes. This is what makes oppression unique here, though there are similarities to the rest of the world. This is the reason why the women of South Africa wanted their own charter.

The first mandate of the WNC has been fulfilled. The Coalition finally has its renowned charter. A utopian charter? Our objective wasn’t to produce a useless piece of paper, clarifies Pregs Govender. Yes, this charter is idealistic, but the campaign experience was designed chiefly to mobilize women, to develop their political and social power, and also, she explains, to teach women how to lobby to eventually achieve power, influence the constitution and influence the new government. People can’t ignore us any longer, asserts Sandra Botha. This charter will serve as a guide for the men and women in the government who will be writing the final constitution.

They no longer have any choice, adds Jean Ngubane. They have to consult us. Those who are working on the final constitution have our charter before them.

The WNC has already won some significant victories. The taxation system has been amended since March 15, 1995. Women are no longer taxed differently, depending on whether they are married or single. As married women, they used to be regarded as minors. President Nelson Mandela’s national unity government has eliminated this discrimination even if it is costing the government over one billion dollars. Another victory: a husband can now be charged with raping his wife. They have barely begun talking about marital rape in Germany, Sandra Botha proudly states. This charter may take a decade, even five decades before it’s enforced, says Sandra. But we know now what women want.

"Nearly everything still remains to be done. We ve only dealt with the tip of the iceberg," sighs Pregs Govender.

The WNC has adopted a new mandate to educate women about their rights, their role, their power. The Coalition was supposed to disappear a year ago. But the niche it has carved out for itself has become too crucial. The WNC wants to act as a watchdog where the government and women are concerned. It wants to ensure coordination among the various women’s organizations within South Africa. It wants to go on conducting awareness campaigns. In fact, the WNC is playing a role similar to that of the country’s national unity government. It may not have any legal power, but it has immense social power.

For more information contact:

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