Sex, Lies, and Global Economics: Counting the 'Invisible' Workforce

by John Eberlee

In many countries, women's contribution to agriculture goes unrecognized in national accounts

(Photo: N. McKee, IDRC)

Women's contribution ignored
Crucial policy questions
Counting unpaid work

In many parts of the world, dung is considered a precious resource. Women spend entire days following herds of animals to scoop up steaming dung in their bare hands and place it in woven baskets, which they hoist on their heads and carry home. The loads are heavy and the work of gathering, transporting, and processing this resource is very tiring, but access to dung is a matter of survival. Dung provides fertilizer, it is a source of cooking fuel, and in some countries, it is a basic building material for use in construction, maintenance, and decoration.

"Milk, skins, meat, and animal byproducts are all included in a nation's livestock production accounts —
but not dung," says Marilyn Waring, senior lecturer in social policy and social work at Massey University, New Zealand. "Nor is it recorded in energy production accounts. We also won't find the hours that women spend gathering, transporting, cooking with, processing, manufacturing, or decorating with it recorded as work."

**Women's contribution ignored**

Indeed, for a variety of logistical and other reasons — none of which excuses this practice — women's contribution to most forms of productive and subsistence agriculture is generally ignored or poorly estimated in official statistics, she stated during a forum at the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) earlier this year.

For example, a 1994 labour force survey conducted in an Asian country reported that 92% of women over 10 years of age were "inactive." The survey also claimed that only 0.5% of the female population participated in agriculture. In a conversation with Dr Waring, the deputy government statistician responsible for this survey said: "They expect me to count women who collect fodder, fuel, and water. That's just about every woman in [the country]. They must be crazy if they think I'm going to do that!"

**Crucial policy questions**

Dr Waring stressed, however, that the exclusion of women's unpaid work from national accounts "raises crucial policy questions which have seldom if ever been contemplated by the arbiters of what does and what does not count. Much of the rhetoric used to ensure continuing exclusion of these activities," she said, "is made on the basis that all this has little or no effect on most micro- and all macro-economic activity."

"But the consequences are immense," warned Dr Waring. In Nepal, for example, the World Bank has estimated that 8 million tonnes of dung are burned as a fuel each year. "The use of dung as a fuel [instead of a fertilizer] is a major instance of import substitution, and represents a national saving in terms of debt that would be incurred through the importation of commercial fuels if resourceful women had not processed the alternative."

**Counting unpaid work**

Dr Waring added that the way in which unpaid work is counted can have significant policy implications. In Bangladesh, for example, the 1984 population census reported that 90% of the active age rural female labour force were housewives (a category which was excluded from the survey's definition of economic activity), although a questionnaire conducted the previous year found that the vast majority of rural "housewives" were involved in food processing and other agricultural duties. The 1992 Bangladesh labour force survey continued to exclude housework from its revised definition, although it did include unpaid agricultural work.

"Now, it is not terribly clear that being counted in 1992 guarantees the rural women of Bangladesh access to credit facilities, agricultural extension classes, and the range of inputs available at agricultural development projects," she concluded. "What is clear is that when women were not counted, there would have been no recognition at all."

*John Eberlee is the editor of IDRC Reports online.*

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Octubre 2003
Biography of Marilyn Waring

Dr Marilyn Waring is currently a farmer, a national and international consultant, and a senior lecturer in social policy and social work at the Albany Campus in New Zealand. At the age of 22, Marilyn Waring was elected MP in the New Zealand Parliament, a position she kept between 1975 and 1984. During that period, she served as Chair of the Public Expenditures Committee, Senior Government Member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, and on the Disarmament and Arms Control Committee.

Between 1991 and 1994, Dr Waring served as Senior Lecturer in Public Policy and the Politics of Human Rights with the Department of Politics at the University of Waikato, New Zealand. In 1990, she was awarded the University of Waikato Research Council Grant to continue work on "female human rights." She has worked as a consultant for organizations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the Yukon Territorial Government, the Ford Foundation, and the Ontario Provincial Government.


Dr Waring received an Honours BA in Political Science and International Politics from Victoria University of Wellington in 1973. In 1989, she was awarded a Doctorate of Philosophy in Political Economy.
Manure: the Perfect Hostess Gift

I bought my farm in a dry, hot New Zealand summer. City friends who vicariously enjoyed the pioneer experience of rural life would come to stay; how long they stayed depended largely on the facility with which they acquired useful skills and how hard they worked. But the time of year, and their habituated need for an urban social life (plus our desire to wash in something a little bigger than a bucket of boiled water taken from the stock trough, and to eat other than from the barbecue), saw us making a trip back to town for Christmas/New Year parties.

Now, the tradition of these events is that you 'take something' — generally food or drink to be consumed on the occasion, sometimes a frivolous or impractical little item which has already come your way in a season of good cheer ... This particular year, no such items had come my way. I had no cash to spare for seasonal gifts, no garden yet established and productive, no hens laying fresh free-range eggs. But everywhere I was invited that summer was to a city home with a garden ravaged and cracking from the combination of heat, wind, and water restrictions. So, to the horror of the transient pioneers who were with me, I would take myself, a shovel, and some stout rubbish bags down to the wintering barn that came with the property, and fill them with stinking, rotting, worm-infested cow dung. And then, slinging them on the back of the old utility, we would head off to town.

Now, my companions would tell me that I could not take my cow dung to the party. They would threaten not to come with me, and would insist on stopping en route to buy their version of the appropriate, socially acceptable gift. And on arrival, they would leave the utility very quickly to distance themselves from the shimmering, exotic-smelling goodies on the back of the truck.

My hosts, on the other hand, were beside themselves with joy. Steaming towards their compost bins, or into buckets to make liquid manure, or directly onto their desperate plants came the gift likely to rescue their beloved gardens. Much to the chagrin of my companions, they then told everyone else how superb my present was — superior indeed to the customary offerings that had also arrived that day.

Nine years later, cow dung is still the first choice of my visitors. Recycled containers carry away the droppings from under the ribbed floors of now the goat sheds as well as the wintering barns. This cleans my shed environs. It gets rid of contributors to foot scold. It helps in general hygiene. It clears the paddocks. And, the production is immensely satisfying. We all enjoy the exercise. It seems ecologically sound. It makes for tidy farming. It enhances further production, especially in nutrition and food security.

The Dung Economy

As a result of forest depletion, women increasingly need dung to burn as an alternative to wood fuel. After collection, they mix it with straw and water and make it into flat cakes. Then it is dried, usually in the sun, and the women need to turn each cake several times during this process before it is dry enough for storing. Making dung cakes can take up to two hours per day and, when the cakes are stacked, there is the further process of fetching and sealing the pile to keep out the rain.

To me, making dung cakes to be used as a fuel appears to be an entire manufacturing process, with clear inputs and outputs of an economic nature. In mining or gas extraction, for example, paid workers harvest a primary resource. Machines transport it to processing plants. The raw material is refined, the product manufactured. It is sold, then consumed. The traditional economic model is followed: workers process raw materials for the market. This counts as work. But when dung, a [so-called] 'non-product,' is carried personally as a 'service' by 'housewives' to sustain land, dwellings, and households, then, according to the economic model, nothing happens. There is no economic activity. There is no manufacturing. There is no production. And there is no consumption. The dung work is only 'women's work,' so it's a safe assumption that in all the official definitions everything will be invisible.

All over the planet and for centuries, organic manure has been recycled and frequently returned to the soil to increase productivity. But environmental degradation has increased the value of dung as an alternate fuel, and the lack of available manure has translated directly into declining soil fertility and declining crop yields.

Dung and the United Nations System of National Accounts

Following calls made by women at our successive UN conferences in Mexico City, Copenhagen, Nairobi, and Beijing, there has been a constant repetition of the need to count — and remunerate — the contributions of women to economic statistics, and to find some way of measuring it. The words that have been used each time suggest to me that all of the work done with dung, whether as a fertilizer, a cooking fuel, or a building material, should be quantified.

But in 1993, the UN published the latest edition of a system of national accounts. And the rolls make very interesting reading. Of particular importance is paragraph 122, describing the system of national accounts as: "a multipurpose system designed to meet a wide range of analytical and policy needs." It states that "a balance has to be struck between the desire for the accounts to be as comprehensive as possible and their being swamped with non-monetary values."

The revised system excludes "production of services for own final consumption within households. The location of the production boundary is a compromise, but a deliberate one that takes account of most uses." It continues:

"If the production boundary were extended to include the production of personal and domestic services by members of households for their own final consumption, all persons engaged in such activity would become self-employed, making unemployment virtually impossible, by definition."

That's the reason they give for leaving out what half of the world does most of the time. But I would have thought that's a reflection on the inappropriateness of the definition of unemployment, rather than an excuse to leave most of the work done by most women out of the equation. In fact, the more that [the accounting system] squirms to find containment definitions in which to straitjacket women's work, the more the system becomes nonsense.

(Source: IDRC Development Forum, February 1997)
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
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."
Laying the Foundations of a Democratic Palestine: The Women's Studies Program at Birzeit University

by Roula el-Raifī

Skills training program in Hebron:
This woman is learning to design and build shoes,
a profession currently dominated by men
(Photo: Roula el-Raifī)

Filling the research void
Obstacles to policy development
Alternative perspective on Palestinian society
Project targets: social security and education
Solid reputation for policy work

As Palestinians begin to create the foundations of a state, a group of female academics at Birzeit University in the West Bank is striving to ensure that gender equity is one of its building blocks.

With financial assistance from IDRC, the Birzeit team has started laying the groundwork needed to influence and create policy that promotes gender equity. "We are part of the democratic forces in society," says Lisa Taraki, coordinator of the university's Women's Studies Program and a professor of sociology. "We are working towards a democratic society that respects the rights of women and men on an equal basis and we believe in a strong public sector that will provide support to people who are left out of the
market, particularly women."

**Filling the research void**

The Women's Studies Program was established in late 1993 to provide teaching, training, research and community outreach. The program, which is unique for the Arab world, includes a research initiative, *Palestinian Women in Society*, whose initial goal was to fill the existing void with respect to research on women's conditions by evaluating existing material from a gender perspective and identifying further research and policy implications.

"When we reviewed the literature and the state of research relevant to Palestinian women in four areas — social support and entitlements, economy, education, and culture and society — we found that either women were not mentioned or were marginalized," says Eileen Kuttab, one of the program's founders and a sociology lecturer. "There was a wealth of data on political positions, on women in liberation struggles, but it was not real socioeconomic research."

**Obstacles to policy development**

The researchers soon concluded that the neglect of social issues in most policy documents — combined with the narrow definition of economic and productive activity in key developmental plans, which made women "invisible" — were major obstacles to the development of gender-responsive policies. Their findings were published in four working papers, including a critique of the PLO's Social Welfare Plan and the World Bank's Emergency Assistance Program.

This work evolved in collaboration with Carleton University in Ottawa. Nahla Abdo, a professor of sociology at Carleton, says both institutions gained: Carleton contributed knowledge on theoretical issues particular to the West, such as the welfare state, while benefiting from theoretical work conducted at Birzeit, which is grounded in practical, real life situations.

**Alternative perspective on Palestinian society**

After completing their research, the Birzeit team decided to go further. "We felt it was important to propose an alternative perspective for understanding Palestinian society, particularly for understanding gender relations," says Taraki. As a result, she and her colleagues produced the Status Report on Palestinian Women, which presents research on fertility and demography, law, economy, gender and development, politics and education in both Arabic and English. The Report is scheduled for release in April 1997.

In June 1996, the Women's Studies program launched a second initiative to aid the development of gender-responsive social policy. This project, which is also supported by IDRC, places priority on research that has direct relevance to emerging policy issues of the Palestinian National Authority. It aims to develop methodologies and tools for policy analysis, and promote a debate on policy issues through community outreach activities.

**Project targets: social security and education**

The project targets two policy areas — social security and education — and involves research on poverty alleviation, social and income security, and reform of educational curricula. It also seeks to assess the current levels of formal and informal social support, analyse the economics of social policy reform, and investigate ways of financing social policies. In one study, for example, the Birzeit team hopes to find out why for many women, increased access to education does not always translate into more life opportunities or participation in the formal labour force.

Next summer, the researchers plan to conduct field work in the West Bank. However, the political and
security situation poses many challenges. One problem is the frequent closure of the West Bank by the Israeli authorities, says Kuttab. Another problem is the arrest of a translator by the Israelis last year. The translator was helping them in the difficult tasks of translating literature into Arabic and developing a gender terminology in Arabic. In January, they attempted, through his lawyer, to provide a computer so he can continue to do his work in jail.

**Solid reputation for policy work**

Already, team members have built a solid reputation for policy work and are regularly consulted on development projects dealing with policy issues. For example, they assisted the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in efforts to prepare a profile on Palestine and provided help in the development of gender-based indicators. They also contributed a chapter on gender for a report co-produced by the Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS) and the World Bank.

"The knowledge and experience that we have gained really made it possible for us to participate in these kinds of activities," says Dr. Taraki. Where there was once a research vacuum on women and gender, there is now a program playing an instrumental role in making social policy.

*Roula el-Raifi is a freelance journalist and development consultant based in Ottawa.*

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**Sidebars:**

- The Rights of Palestinian Women
- Current Activities

**Resource Persons:**

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- Peace-Building in the West Bank and Gaza, by Jennifer Pepall
- Women Living Under Muslim Laws: A Solidarity, Information and Research Network, by Michel Groulx
- Women: The Handymen of South Africa, by Lucie Pagé

**Additional resources**

- Emergency Assistance Program for the Occupied Territories
- Palestinian Development InfoNet
The West Bank and Gaza

United Nations Development Fund for Women

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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."

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