

Commentary

Which values are for export?

by Farida Shaikh

In the wake of the Indochinese debacle, one lesson should be abundantly clear: Beware of the palliative that precludes a cure. The magnitude of the mistakes committed in Vietnam and Cambodia makes them memorable, not the fact that there were mistakes. Errors of judgement, the application of short-run solutions to problems whose complexity and interconnectedness have not been properly understood, are not new.

Development assistance is full of such errors.

This is not to suggest however that all aid has been ill-motivated or poorly applied. Merely that, because the approaches used in aid projects and by technical advisors often serve as models in developing countries, donors have a special responsibility to ensure that the impact and costs of their advice are seriously considered before it is offered. The question of women, of their role in the development process and in society, is one in which the biases or lack of interest of policymakers on both sides of the aid barrier may impose high costs on generations to come.

Women are a fashionable topic at the present time. The UN has declared this their year. Speeches are made, articles written and conferences held to discuss the barriers to their full participation in society. The public relations bandwagons roll through developed and developing country alike. But leaving aside the rhetoric, what is being done? Not enough.

In some countries, the majority of women are born and die within the confines of a single compound. Swathed in clothing from head to foot, they are denied the right of choice on any issue—their marriages, jobs, the number of children they produce or even the simple pleasures that come out of exercising curious and energetic minds. The rationale? The notion

that the purity of a woman must be protected both from her own unstable nature and from that of an intruder. This dualistic approach to woman's sexual and moral nature, the concept of simultaneous good and evil, is strongly rooted in all three major monotheistic religions. It is reflected in prejudicial laws and policies that circumscribe the freedom of women in eastern and western countries alike and is rarely challenged by aid dispensing agencies or nations.



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In other regions, women have traditionally played important economic and social roles. Agriculture, marketing and sometimes even politics have been their past provinces. However, instead of reinforcing them in these roles and integrating them into areas where they have previously been excluded, colonial policies, western-

trained specialists and aid projects have frequently had a negative effect. Men, not women, are generally recruited for training and high paying jobs in trade, commerce, management and farming. The reasons? In some cases, it simply does not occur to male advisors to consider women for these jobs. In others, policymakers who believe that women are the physically weaker sex decide that women would be better off if removed from positions that demand hard labour or long hours and were left to tend their homes and children. Individual men or women might well benefit from the removal of back-breaking work that yields a small product. But as a policy precedent for all women this solicitous approach leaves much to be desired.

In still other areas, women possess a considerable amount of social autonomy without enjoying corresponding political and economic privileges. Here, once again, the dispensers of development assistance tend to be silent.

The women who watch pessimistically as International Women's Year rolls on must be forgiven for their cynicism. When a woman's worth is still measured by the number of male offspring she produces; when a victim of rape is still judged to be guilty; when a fully grown female still loses the economic and decision-making privileges upon marriage; when a woman is still paid less than a man for doing the same job; when these and a host of even more basic inequalities are left untouched, how can one be other than pessimistic?

The fault lies not with women nor with those diligent national and international civil servants who are working towards the smooth conduct of this year's conferences. It lies, instead, with those who offer the conferences as an alternative to real change.

International Women's Year was born in cynicism and it will most likely whimper out in the same spirit. The social planners, engineers and agriculturists were not responsible for this year's public relations theme. They simply did not think of it. The credit goes to the demographers and health professionals whose zeal for population control exceeds their disinclination to become involved in the women's struggle for basic rights.

Women produce babies. Educated women, and especially those who play an active part in the economy, produce fewer babies. Therefore, out of World Population Year came the idea of a period of time devoted to raising the status of women. But can the occasional photograph, the appointment of a few female bureaucrats to positions of authority and a series of meetings really succeed in lowering fertility where countless posters, demonstrations and family planning campaigns have failed? And is such a goal valid?

Unfashionable though it is to cite a higher authority on questions of politics and economics, the only valid reason for examining the position of women is one that has the force of a moral law. We have, in this century, proclaimed and accepted as a moral precept the notion that all human beings are equal in their worth and in their right to equality of opportunity. The rights and freedoms of women must be defended because women are as worthy members of the human race as black, white or brown men, not because of their roles as producers of children, wives or cornerstones of the nuclear family.

What is Canada's position in relation to Third World Women? So far, not very strong. Not one of the three major governmental or non-governmental development agencies has seen fit to inform the Canadian delegation to the IWY conference in June of the issues of importance to women in developing countries, of the impact of Canadian programs on their lives and aspirations.

Few projects, other than the ones that have population control as an explicit or implicit goal or that involve handicrafts, address the needs of these women as producers, decision-makers or fully participating members of society. To a limited extent, this lack of concern can be justified. In most developing countries, the gap between the opportunities available to wealthy women and poor men is far greater

than the gap between those available to poor men and women. At the same time, the gap between the economic, social and political positions of men and women does exist and it is almost always to the detriment of women.

Another possible justification for the inertia of Canadian policymakers is that Canada does not consider it valid consciously to impose new cultural norms on other peoples through aid. There are two ways to counter this argument. First, some projects do transfer the Canadian biases of policymakers quite openly. In West Africa, for example, although women traditionally play major roles as agricultural producers and traders, Canadian funded projects frequently help to strip them of these roles. Secondly, most aid, indeed most commercial and non-commercial transactions of every type, transfers culturally rooted values, norms and techniques. The question then becomes which values are for export?

Within its own borders, the Canadian government has recognized the principle of equality between men and women. Canadian women are strug-

gling hard to institutionalize this principle in law as well as in practice.

It is the responsibility of the Canadian government to ensure that its own development agencies and the ones it funds respect this principle in the formulation of projects and policies. Canada cannot, and indeed should not, interfere in the domestic affairs of other countries to the extent of attempting to impose her cultural norms where they are patently unwelcome. It is however possible to support the progress of existing women's movements in other countries. At the very least, Canadian-funded programs should not undercut the favorable economic, social and political positions of women where such situations already exist. To do so would be to transfer the worst of double standards: a policy of equality for Canadian women and one of gross inequality for the women of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

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Sharing the load in Cuba

Cuba's working wives may soon be able to bring the full force of the law to bear when they want their husbands to help around the home. The island's government is proposing a new Family Code which will require the husband of a working woman to perform his full share—at least 50 percent—of the housework and child care so long as his wife holds a full-time job.

The aim of the code is to encourage married women to go out to work, thus increasing the productive proportion of Cuba's population, according to Prof. Barent Landstreet Jr., of Queen's University Department of Sociology, who has made a study of population issues in Cuba. It is one example, he says, of the way in which the Cubans, having rejected the principle of population planning, are attempting to tackle population problems indirectly through economic and social planning.

Cuba has no policy which sets out to maintain a specific population growth rate. Although birth control services are readily available at no cost even in the remotest areas of the country as part of a comprehensive

health service, yet the government expresses no interest in population control. It is, says Prof. Landstreet, "a little island of *laissez faire* policy in an otherwise highly planned society."

Taking a similar line to that adopted by the Soviet Union, Fidel Castro declared in 1968: "The philosophy of imperialism is that people are not to make revolutions and the women are not to give birth." Although there have been signs recently of a slight shift in Cuba's position, the official position is still that birth control programs in isolation are useless—they must be related to structural social and economic changes.

Hence the attempts to increase family labour, control of migration to the cities, the use of "volunteer" and military labour, and the expansion of the work-study system of education, an experiment which began in the high schools and is now moving up to the university level and down to the third grade level. Cuba's unique experiment, says Prof. Landstreet, is in trying to change the employment structure of the country, rather than changing its age structure.