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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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