

## WHY GENDER IS A DEVELOPMENT ISSUE

April Brett

The issues concerning women and their part (or not) in the development process have been increasingly examined over the years. However, the ways of addressing these issues have varied as understanding of women's position in development, and of gender roles themselves, has grown. Although the principle of equality of men and women was recognized in both the UN Charter in 1945 and the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the majority of development planners and workers did not fully address women's position in the development process. Several researchers have shown that development planners worked on the assumption that what would benefit one section of society (men) would trickle down to the other (women) (Boserup 1970, Rogers 1980, Mazza 1987).

The ways of defining women's position in development has changed through the years.

In the **1950s** and **1960s**, women's issues in development were subsumed under the question of human rights, and women were viewed as objects to protect or make recommendations for but not necessarily to consult. UN Conventions of particular concern to women included:

**1949** Convention for the Suppression of Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others

**1951** Remuneration for Men and Women Workers for Work of Equal Values

**1952** Convention on the Political Rights of Women

In the 1970s, although women were still not necessarily consulted, their key position in the development process became more widely recognized. This was especially so in connection with population and food issues. Women were viewed as useful resources to be integrated into the development process, thus rendering the particular projects more efficient and more successful:

'These are the women (the more than 500 million women illiterates) upon whom the success of our population policies, our food programmes and our total development efforts ultimately rely. The success of these policies

depends, in other words, on those who are least equipped to carry them out.' (Helvi Sipilä, *The Times*, 23,4,75)

In 1972 it was decided to declare 1975 'International Women's Year', which led into the UN Decade for Women.

In the **1980s** there has been a growing trend towards seeing women as agents and beneficiaries in all sectors and at all levels of the development process. It is partly through an understanding of gender roles that this trend has emerged (Pietila, 1985).

In 1985 the UN decade culminated in a conference in Nairobi which, after a period of intensive discussion involving women from all over the world, resulted in the adoption of the 'Forward-Looking Strategies' (*Forward-Looking Strategies*, 1985).

The Forward-Looking Strategies took main themes of the Decade for Women (equality, development and peace, with the sub-themes health, education and employment), and set out the obstacles facing women in each of these areas; proposed general strategies for overcoming them, and made recommendations to governments and other bodies for creating greater opportunities for equality for women at all levels.

### What is gender?

The conceptual distinction between sex and gender developed by Anne Oakley (Oakley 1972) is a useful analytical tool to clarify ideas, and has now been almost universally taken up. According to this distinction, sex is connected with biology, whereas the gender identity of men and women in any given society is socially and psychologically (and that means also historically and culturally) determined.

Biological, and certain physical conditions (chromosomes, external and internal genitalia, hormonal states and secondary sex characteristics), lead to the determination of male or female sex. To determine gender, however, social and cultural perceptions of masculine and feminine traits and roles must be taken into account. There is considerable, but not total, correlation between female sex and

feminine gender, and male sex and masculine gender.

Gender is learnt through a process of socialization and through the culture of the particular society concerned. In many cultures, boys are encouraged in the acts considered to display male traits (and girls vice versa) through the toys given to children (guns for boys, dolls for girls), the kind of discipline meted out, the jobs or careers to which they might aspire and the portrayal of men and women in media. Children learn their gender from birth. They learn how they should behave in order to be perceived by others, and themselves, as either masculine or feminine. Throughout their life this is reinforced by parent, teachers, peers, their culture and society.

Every society uses biological sex as one criterion for describing gender but, beyond that simple starting point, no two cultures would completely agree on what distinguishes one gender from another. Therefore there is considerable variation in gender roles between cultures.

### **Division of labor in society**

The division of labor between the sexes is best explained by gender but because reproduction is based on a universal biological difference between the male and female, sex, societies use this as a basis for allotting other tasks. These tasks are allotted according to convenience and precedents in the particular culture, and determine masculine and feminine roles:

'Professor George Murdock has surveyed the data for 224 societies (mostly preliterate) and shows that the tendency to segregate the economic activities in one way or another according to sex is strong. Taking a list of 46 different activities, he suggests that some are more often masculine than feminine and vice versa. For example, lumbering is an exclusively masculine activity in 104 of his societies and exclusively feminine in 6; cooking is exclusively feminine in 158 and exclusively masculine in 5. Hunting, fishing, weapon making, boat building and mining tend to be masculine, while grinding grain and carrying water tend to be feminine. Activities that are less consistently allotted to one sex include preparing the soil, planting, tending and harvesting the crops, 'burden bearing' and body mutilation.' (Oakley 1972, p. 128)

Even in child-rearing men play a substantial role in some societies:

The Arapesh, for example, consider that the business of bearing and rearing a child belongs to the father and mother equally and equally disqualifies them for other roles. Men as well as women 'make' and 'have' babies, and the verb 'to bear a child' is used indiscriminately of either a man or a woman. Childbearing is believed to be debilitating for the man as it is for the woman. The father goes to bed and is described as 'having a baby' when the child is born... The Trobriand islanders are renowned for their ignorance of the father's biological role in reproduction, but they stress the need for the father to share with the mother all tasks involved in bringing up children," (Oakley 1972, p. 134-135)

We see, then that tasks and the division of labor do not relate to the sex of the individuals concerned, and so are not common on one sex from one culture to another, but are culture specific. Thus gender is culture specific.

Gender not only varies from one culture to another but it also varies within cultures over time; culture is not static but evolves. As societies become more complex, the roles played by men and women are not only determined by culture but by socio-political and economic factors.

### **Why is gender a development issue?**

The roles that women play are different in any given society, and their situation is determined by the legislation, religious norms, economic status or class, cultural values, ethnicity and types of productive activity of their country, community and household. Women are usually responsible for domestic work; the care of children, family, health, cooking and providing food and other household services. In most societies they also play a major role in the productive activities of the family; in farming, paid domestic labor services, industries and income generating activities. In some societies they also have clear community roles.

In each of these areas the development process has often adversely affected – reproduction, production and community – women. There is a wide gap between women's high, yet unrecognized, economic participation and their low political and social power, and development strategies have usually taken the

needs of the most vocal and politically active as their starting point. To understand gender the activities of men and women need to be addressed separately. The reproductive, productive and social or community roles women are playing must be looked at as well as the roles played economically and socially by men. By examining men's and women's roles a greater understanding of their needs and involvement in power and decision-making around specific tasks and issues will be reached.

Historically, development workers have used notions of gender imported from the North. The majority of projects were – and still are – based on the false assumption that the nuclear household supported by a non-productive wife dependent upon a male head, is universal. This is not pattern for many cultures. In *The Family Among the Australian Aborigines*, Malinowski wrote:

"A very important point is that the woman's share in labor was of much more vital importance to the maintenance of the household than the man's work . . . even the food supply contributed by the women was far more important than the man's share . . . food collected by women was the staple food of the native . . . economically [the family] is entirely dependent upon women's work." (Malinowski 1963 as cited in Oakley 1972, p. 139).

Studies of women's roles in agriculture from a sample of African people living in Senegal, Gambia, Uganda and Kenya show that women contribute between 60 percent and 80 percent of the total agricultural work done.

### **How to approach gender in development**

It is of vital importance in development work not to use imported notions of gender, nor regard 'the community' and 'the household' as the basic units. One must go beyond the household and break it down into its component parts. By assessing and understanding the gender roles in a given society the specific needs of women (and men) can be ascertained and addressed within projects (Moser and Levy 1986).

The primary practical requirement for incorporating a gender analysis into development is to consult with and listen to women so that their roles and resulting needs are better understood. How the issue of gender are actually addressed depends upon the policy

direction and envisages . . . one approach is to design projects and programs to make life 'easier' for women and help them in their given gender tasks. For example, an agricultural project could include provision of support for female agricultural tasks, as well as those carried out by men. Women's needs for better equipment, improved seeds and advice would be taken into consideration. In health projects the particular concerns of the women would be elicited from them and their priorities addressed in the project. On the domestic front, projects could aim to alleviate the drudgery and heavy physical demands of women's work by providing more efficient grinders or stoves, or improving women's access to water. Whether working with women alone or within the community as a whole, the primary objective would be enable women to perform their existing roles better.

An alternative but complementary approach is to challenge the status quo or address the perceived inequalities between men and women. This could involve, for example, working for change in laws that discriminate against women; increasing women's access to land; giving women decision-making power within projects, etc. The aim is social change and the empowerment of women. For agencies such as Oxfam, which espouse social change, justice and empowerment in their rhetoric, meeting women's needs for more radical change should be within the adopted policy approach to gender.

Why it is that addressing gender inequality is taboo and yet tackling inequalities in terms of wealth and class is not? It is often argued that by addressing gender the tradition or culture of a society are being tampered with. This is not necessarily the case and the attitudes to gender maybe no more 'traditional' than attitudes to class or power. When the tradition and culture attitudes to gender are clarified, then the actual gender relations can be assessed and addresses within a programme or project. Development is a process that should involve all members of a society to the same extent, according to their individual needs.