

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

