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WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT: THE NEED FOR A GRASSROOTS GENDER PLANNING APPROACH

Darcy L. Boellstorff

While the recognition of the roles of women in Third World society is increasing, the adequate operational frameworks for including the concerns of women involved in development planning has not kept pace. Models generally used in planning ignore the importance of gender in social structures. Development in the Third World has historically provided little benefit to women, generally leaving them in a more vulnerable social and economic position. Gender planning holds the key to the implementation of successful development programs in Third World communities by recognizing different social relationships between women and men occur from society to society and are conclusive in development planning. As case studies illustrate, understanding the roles of women in a given community breaks down stereotypical understandings of Third World societies, give planners the sense of what is important at a grassroots level, and promotes successful development for communities as a whole.

Development

planning, in any form or on any scale, endeavors to enhance the well-being of people through programs such as: providing education, technological assistance, satisfaction of basic human needs, and economic development. Such planning in the Third World has historically provided little benefit to women and has generally left women in an even more vulnerable social and economic position than they were at the beginning. Consider for a moment that women, comprising over fifty percent of the world's population and providing one-tenth of the world's formal income, possess only one one-hundredth of the world's land (Hitchcock 1995). Further, women receive only one five-hundredth of

the world's development funding. This imbalance clearly reflects a gender bias. Women have also suffered from standard planning stereotypes in considerations of household family structure and the division of labor. By not involving women at the grassroots level, especially Third World women, these stereotypes endure and serve in many instances as a framework for development planning. Women have been the absolute losers both in failed development projects as well as in undertakings declared as successes by the governments and various agencies that implement them. There is an obvious and crucial need for a planning approach that takes into account the very different roles and needs that women and men have in Third World societies.

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The shift in the 1970s and 1980s towards such an approach is reflective of the need to prevent isolation of women while drawing attention to gender. The focus on *gender* rather than *women* was originally developed by feminists concerned that women's problems were perceived only in terms of their sex, i.e., their biological differences with men, rather than in terms of their gender, i.e., the social relationship between men and women, a relationship in which women have been systematically subordinated (Oakley 1972; Moser 1989).

This paper will focus on the needs of women from a gender perspective, and how these needs are generally overlooked by development officials operating at the grassroots to international levels. The majority of the case material is drawn from a number of African countries. Africa is 70 to 80 percent rural. Thirty out of the world's 40 most impoverished nations are located there (Hitchcock 1995), and it has the lowest economic growth rate in the world. Since Africa has historically been the target of many development projects, this continent provides the conditions needed to illustrate the concept of gender planning and development in the Third World. The importance of gender roles of women in Third World societies will be highlighted, followed by a description of various planning stereotypes that impact women in areas of development. As an alternative, the benefits of grassroots gender planning is presented, supported by evidence from on-going case studies in Africa. This option is expanded into a discussion of viable policy approaches

using gender and gender-based planning in the Third World.

The Importance of Women's Roles

Women's work has often been viewed simply as homemaking and the caring for children, but in most low-income Third World households, women perform reproductive, productive, and community related work (Moser 1988:1801). This "triple role" of women is extremely important to recognize due to the fact that such a small percentage of this work is paid work and therefore often invisible to development policy makers. The overall health and standard of living of a community is dependent upon the roles that the women within it perform. As mothers and the primary caretakers of children, women have a substantial commitment in their productive work. The formal income that a woman earns has a greater effect on the nutritional status of her children and other members of her household than does a man's. An expanding number of studies have shown that there is a greater devotion of a women's income than a man's to everyday subsistence and nutrition (Dwyer and Bruce 1985). This actuality is magnified in the case of women-headed households.

As more and more of the world's households become headed by women, it is increasingly important to realize the differences that the gender of the household head has on food security and the nutritional status of the children in that household. In both Kenya and Malawi the most common, poorest

women-headed households are the ones where the man is absent for extended periods of time due to migratory work. These arrangements are often referred to as "de facto" households (Kennedy and Peters 1992) owing to their being formal households, but astereotypical in structure and income. For the children in these African households, the average weight-for-age is significantly better than in male-headed households. Children from de facto households in Malawi have the lowest incidence of stunting, as compared to households where the man is permanently absent due to death, divorce, or separation, and male-headed household types (Kennedy and Peters 1992).

The on-going shift in household structure is changing gender roles within the household and is giving greater importance to the roles that women play. Community work that women are involved in is often a response to inadequate governmental provisioning of water and health care, such as caring for and training others to care for children with dysentery. Women not only suffer the most in these situations, but they are the ones forced to take responsibility for the allocation of scarce resources to ensure the survival of their households (Moser 1988). It is women who, as a consequence of their economic and household roles, have mobilized for the formation and success of local protest groups. Within their gender-ascribed role of mothers and wives the women struggle to manage their neighborhoods (Moser 1988).

The "triple role" of women, including reproductive, productive and community functions, is a singular role. As demonstrated above, each part is completely contingent upon the others. The failure to investigate and develop plans accountable to this role of women has caused and continues to cause major problems in development schemes.

Planning Stereotypes and Their Impacts on Women

Women all over the world have suffered because of stereotypes projected through planning projects about the presumed roles of women in Third World societies. Development strategies often end in failure because of the inaccurate perceptions developers have about the roles women play within their household, their communities, and their economies. One common stereotype relates to the structure of low-income households. The presumed structure is a unified household made up of a husband, a wife, and two or three children, "with the division of labor within the low-income household being the man of the family as the 'breadwinner' and the woman as the housewife and the 'homemaker'" (Moser 1988:1800). The obvious shortcoming of this stereotypical model is it assumes that all low-income households have the same structure and the same division of labor. In reality the sole breadwinners in one-third of the world's families are women; "this figure reaches fifty percent or more in Latin America and Africa" (Moser 1988:1802). Therefore, it is women who have the sole responsibility for meeting household reproduction

costs, that is, maintaining the household over a long period in nearly one-half of the world's households (Benería and Feldman 1992:1). When this fact is not reflected in planning practice, the health of Third World communities is compromised.

This stereotypical model of a unified household has been a consistently attractive formulation. It is easier for economic planners to deal with a household as a unit instead of looking at individual members and their respective needs. Policy makers responsible for resource distribution demonstrate a preference to view the household as a single unit, assuming that providing benefits to single household members, that is to women, would be extremely complicated. "[T]he assumption that households behave as economically rational units is not only analytically simpler to handle, but suits practical tastes as well." (Dwyer and Bruce 1988:3). Such reasons for the on-going use of a unified household model have to do with the anxieties of the European influenced development officials. Even the most rudimentary local research within a sample of households would discount each one of these presuppositions and shed light on the fact that these models have a disadvantageous effect on development and women by not considering gender dynamics within households. Researching the decision making and social relations within households has the potential to result in explanatory powers far beyond those of the current models. The current model tries to explain outcomes in terms of households when

they can only be explained by gender relations within households.

Development projects have not acknowledged the key roles that women play within their communities in production, community leadership, and reproduction primarily because most of the community leadership roles are held by men. The essential contributions women make to the community as leaders are overlooked by planners because of such narrow-minded views of leadership. Women lead as community managers, roles based on the provisioning of items of collective consumption, and as the organizers and primary actors in local-level political mobilization (Moser 1988:1801). In societies where women and men work side by side within a community, it is women who make up rank and file voluntary membership. Positions of authority, usually paid positions, are held by men.

Defined community roles for men and women are also ascribed by culture. For example, many African populations have various traditional food taboos. Commonly, these food taboos restrict women's access to protein by dictating that women are not to eat meat or eggs. In other cases, women are to eat only after the men have finished eating, limiting the amount and quality of protein that the women receive. Development projects implemented to increase herds of cattle or poultry projects are intended to provide an increased amount of protein to the community. These projects have a differential effect on women (Hitchcock 1995). Generally, women are responsible for tending livestock and food preparation; as a result, increased

livestock increases women's labor time, yet the women receive none of the resources or advantages that livestock production provides. By increasing herds of cattle or implementing poultry projects, men benefit while women are hindered and excluded from the prosperity that development should provide.

Finally, by not including gender dynamics in planning, development programs in many instances have been counterproductive. For instance, development projects intended to increase agricultural productivity can have a negative effect on the well-being of women and their communities. Often tractors and other agricultural implements are used to increase productivity. While increased agricultural output may in some aspects be beneficial, the negative aspects must be assessed. Increased technology in the agricultural sector causes high rates of unemployment among Third World women since the majority of agricultural work is traditionally done by them. If traditional techniques are used, agriculture employs high numbers of women. The unemployment among women that this technology is responsible for leads to a countless number of social and economic problems for them and their communities.

In the instances where international aid is required by a country either stricken by a natural disaster, such as drought, or to attempt to improve the quality of life for its citizens through development, planners must move away from the stereotypical models and narrow views of Third World communities mentioned above. The very people that are to be "aided" or "developed" must

have the major part or role in helping themselves achieve their own development, yet they are often not listened to, observed, or questioned by those who have the money, the power, and intentions of making things better. The involvement needed at the grassroots level means listening to the needs of local women even though they might not be the "head of the household", considering the concerns they have about their community even though they may hold no formal office, and taking their role as economic contributors into account even though they might not be bringing home currency, but life-sustaining resources instead.

Benefits of Grassroots Gender Planning

In Swaziland, a land-locked south African country, women are becoming increasingly recognized as important contributors to the economy and community, and the most active members in rural development. Since the late 1950s, women's organizations known as *Zenzele*, or "do-it-yourself" associations, have increased the standard of living for hundreds of rural women and their communities. *Zenzele* associations have an average membership of 20 persons and number around 200 associations country-wide (Swaziland Manpower Development Project and United States Agency for International Development [SWAMDP and USAID] 1984). They sometimes form in response to a particular need that the women perceive in the community, usually a need that corresponds to the women's gender roles

within the community. For example, at Zombodze, a group of women formed a Zenzele group to construct a pre-school and to address the problem of malnutrition among some of the community's children (Hitchcock 1986).

Since the 1950s these groups have greatly diversified their functions to not only include the needs women have as homemakers and rearers of children, but to enhance the roles that they play in domestic agricultural production and to engage themselves in wage-earning activities. Some Zenzele groups have organized to earn money through communal production and marketing of various handicrafts. Projects undertaken to design and construct storage facilities for crops have been very successful as well.

Other local projects targeted at the needs of local women have made positive contributions to Third World communities and the lives of women. Gambian women, with the help of a Norwegian aid project, have been pooling their labor time to market and raise their vegetables cooperatively (Press 1994). Instead of trying to undercut one another in the market place by selling individually, they have been selling their produce collectively. The women are generally accustomed to sitting long hours in the hot sun on a daily basis, but by taking turns going to the market to sell the collective goods, time is freed up for other activities. The Norwegian development workers have also been helping the women learn bookkeeping skills and ways to save money for a pick-up truck to carry their produce to the market. The development planners have been very

sensitive to the concerns and the needs that the local women express. Both sides are working together in order to make the project self-sufficient and completely in the hands of the women themselves (Press 1994). The benefits of gender planning and grassroots involvement are evident. By addressing the problems and concerns they have in their daily life, women become empowered to make changes that will lift the oppression of their triple role.

Policy Approaches

The important roles of women in Third World society are becoming more widely recognized, yet the lack of adequate operational frameworks for those involved in development planning has been particularly problematic for several reasons. First, many development planners, and even local people, are reluctant to see the importance of gender as a planning issue (Moser 1989). The idea of being gender-aware when making decisions in planning is a relatively new one. In many instances development has taken the gender-aware route, for example "It is important to note that Government of Swaziland (GOS) assistance to and support of rural women's efforts through their Zenzele associations (women's "do-it-yourself" groups) has been included in each of the national development plans since 1968" (SWAMDP and USAID 1988:12). Yet even locally, and within specific communities, there can be reluctance in seeing the needs of women as being important to the community:

According to a Swaziland Government Minister, women were the backbone of rural development in the country. Most of the participants in community-level development projects were women. Yet many women felt that they had difficulty in gaining access to extension advice and training opportunities, particularly ones involving provision of skills that would help generate income and employment. Some of them also felt that they were discriminated against in allocations of land, capital, and resources. (Dludlu and Hitchcock 1987:1)

Much of the academic writing on this topic tends to highlight the complexities of gender divisions rather than simplify the issue and offer viable methods of incorporating gender awareness into practice. Academic writing by nature picks apart issues, dividing even the most modest of proposals into a myriad of complex topics. This approach has its advantage when it is important to weigh out and assess all of the related facts. But as Moser suggests, the solutions proposed and the frameworks provided for gender planning need to direct attention to the ways in which this can be simplified (Moser 1988).

Many involved in planning practice find it difficult to incorporate gender in existing planning disciplines (Moser 1989). As described above, many of the existing planning disciplines are based around stereotypical models of household structure, division of labor, and the roles women play in their communities and economies. It is impossible to associate these existing models with gender-aware approaches to planning. The need for a new planning discipline is in order.

Gender differences between women and men are shaped by many

different determinants, all of which are interrelated. These determinants can be natural, environmental, social, ideological, religious, historical, economic, and cultural. (Moser 1989). These determinants shape gender roles in societies, yet differ from society to society, within societies, and through time. The complexity of these factors draws attention to the fundamental need for ground-level involvement and research from development planners and local people coming from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds. As well, projects need to offer flexibility as roles within communities change. With these two guidelines in mind, planners will be more likely to design successful development projects that will benefit men and women equally - or at least not help one to the hurt or hindrance of the other. By striving to achieve strategies for flexible grassroots development projects, communities as a whole will reap the benefits.

An extremely viable policy approach to women in development is the empowerment approach. "The origins of the empowerment approach are derived from the emergent feminist writings and grassroots organization experiences of many Third World women" (Moser 1988:1815). The empowerment approach questions the fundamental assumptions concerning the interrelationship between power and development. Although the understanding in this approach is to increase women's power, the empowerment approach seeks to identify power in terms other than domination over others (Moser 1988). This approach is also designed to create policies to help

and protect the rights of women without increasing their dependency upon others and recognizes the triple role of women by raising women's consciousness through bottom-up and grassroots women's organizations.

Accurately defining the social relationships between men and women provides the basis for gender planning. This is the level at which planners can make the closest-to-reality assessment of a woman's role in a community and the level on which the women themselves can take direct action in their development. As seen in the Swaziland and Gambian examples, it is clear that gender planning exceeds gender-specific goals by benefiting all members of a community.

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