

# **Mainstreaming Gender into Development Projects: The Consequence of Leaving Women Out and Practical Requirements for Success**

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## **Introduction**

Since the late 1950s, Western donor governments and development agencies have been employing a project-oriented modality to assist Third World countries improve upon their economies, raise the standard of living of their citizens, and to bridge the development gap between the First and the Third Worlds. Fifteen years after the United Nations Fourth World Conference on women in Beijing, and eleven years after the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals, women in the Third continue to experience unequal levels of participation in development processes. Although it is widely recognized these days that to be successful, development projects must of necessity involve the equal participation of women and men in their design, planning, implementation and evaluation, many Third World governments, external donor agencies and local implementing bodies continue to grapple with just how to achieve that. This paper discusses the consequences of leaving women out of development projects in developing countries, and provides practical requirements for successful gender mainstreaming.

## **Development Discourse and the Recognition of Women**

In the 1950s, scholars and policy makers around the world began to focus more on the issue of development and to discuss its meaning. During that time, the role of the individual in the process of economic and social development, and particularly that of women, was barely addressed and even less understood. With time, it became apparent that for development to be successful and sustainable, it had to include all in society and not just the donor agency and the state. As a result, people whom the development initiatives concerned began to be roped in. But for various reasons women were left out and ignored while men were greatly focused on and

engaged. It was only in the 1970s that some progress began to be made towards rethinking the role of women in development as well as their relations with men in the process. Thanks to the work of Ester Boserup, the activities of the international women's movements, and the United Nations.

### **The Project Approach to Development**

The term "development project" has been variously defined. In this paper, it will refer to a planned temporary endeavor with a well defined set of objectives and activities, undertaken by donor countries or development agencies within clear geographical boundaries, with scarce resources to improve upon a dire situation, which recipient countries or communities could not have handled with their own resources. For more than five decades, the project approach to development has been one of the primary instruments utilized by Western donor governments and multilateral financial institutions to assist with development in the Third World.

In the immediate years after World War II, the poverty and instability of the Third World were not matters of urgent concern to the countries of the industrial core. Although considered unfortunate, the problems of the Third World were viewed as the inevitable result of underdevelopment. So long as Third World countries remained politically docile and continued to exchange raw materials cheaply for finished Western goods, their situation was little cause for alarm and worry. But with the advent of the Cold War, Western complacency towards the Third World swiftly changed. With several communist victories in the Third World including the introduction of communism in China, Fidel Castro's Cuban Revolution, which brought communism to Latin America and provided the then Soviet Union with a military beachhead ninety miles from the United States mainland, and the spread of anti-Western philosophies by Soviet allies, the United States feared the loss of the newly independent states of the Third World

to the East and to communism. Thus, to curb the further spread of communism to these countries, the United States decided to strengthen its relations with friendly regimes of the Third World regardless of how repressive they were, and to provide support to reformist regimes even if they were not pro-West. The perception was that, once the prosperous democracies of the West provided foreign assistance to the Third World and facilitated their economic, social and political development by providing a majority of its citizens with a quality of life comparable to that in the West, they would have no cause to join the communist bloc (Palmer, 1997). This was good while it lasted, for after the Cold War, the United States redefined its interests and reduced its volume of aid to the Third World.

The utilization of the project approach to development has various advantages for donor countries and multilateral financial institutions on the one hand and beneficiary Third World countries on the other hand. For the former, it affords them the opportunity to show the world that they are concerned about the plight and well-being of the world's poor. It also enables them to promote their ideologies and to maintain a position of influence and control over recipient countries. For Third World countries, development projects among other things, supplement national savings and facilitate the implementation and realization of planned development policies. They help political leaders show visible results of their development policies within short periods of time, thus enabling them to secure their political base and maintain their hold on power. When targeted and implemented properly, development projects help to reduce poverty and improve upon the well-being of the poor and disadvantaged in society. What's more, they also provide job opportunities for people in the recipient country.

Notwithstanding their advantages, experience with development projects show that their cumulative effect can sometimes be disadvantageous. Included in his list of disadvantages is the fact that they sometimes lead to the duplication of efforts, the proliferation of semi-autonomous organizational units loosely attached to public sector entities, and the inability of national governments to continue with the provision of goods and services after project completion (Morgan, 1983).

### **Consequences of Leaving Women Out**

The Chinese adage, “women hold up half the sky,” aptly describes the contribution of women to development, and explains why leaving them out of development is often detrimental to project success. Leaving women out of development projects is not only intolerable but also very costly. This is because such actions often end up generating unforeseen circumstances, which in turn inadvertently sabotage project activities and therefore success. The Tuvalu Islands Trochus Shell Rehabilitation Project, a Fisheries Department project initiated to rehabilitate the depleting trochus shell population, is a good example of this scenario. Placing greater premium on men’s participation than on women’s, extension staff from the Department held regular meetings with men and trained only them to distribute and plant new shell seedlings. Women were not involved at any stage of the project. After a while, when extension staff went on their monitoring trips to project sites, they discovered that rather than increase, the shell population was gradually decreasing. Upon investigation, it came to light that the island women had unknowingly been harvesting the shells and preparing them for domestic consumption (Seniloli, 2002), hence jeopardizing the project. Had women been involved in the project, it is most likely that such a situation would not have occurred. It is also very likely that the shell population would have risen to desired levels and yielded financial benefits for the

shell farmers in particular and the Tuvalu government in general. The consequence of leaving women out of this project had financial as well as socio-economic implications.

By excluding women from project planning and implementation, project management and development agencies ignore the needs, interests, experiences and priorities of women, issues which are crucial to project success and sustainability, seeing projects impact women and men differently. As recalled by Caroline Moser, if the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) projects introduced at the end of the first development decade (1960 to 1970) failed, it was primarily because they expressly ignored women in their project plans (Moser, 1993) . As the number of failed rural water supply and sanitation projects increased, and as it became apparent that these projects were unlikely to be successful without the involvement of women from the early stages, USAID and other development agencies began to modify their strategies to involve women (Baden, 1999).

Leaving women out of development has the tendency to increase their workload and further deepen existing inequalities between them and men. Research conducted on a water project in Nepal confirms this. By not involving women in the selection of sites for the installation of tap stands and tube wells, but arbitrarily locating them by roadsides, project surveyors and contractors inadvertently increased the workload of women in Hile village in East Nepal. According to the women in this village, the acquisition of improved water services, rather than reduce, had significantly increased their water collection time to about four times what it used to be. This was because they now had to make several trips to water points to fetch water for bathing and laundry since they lacked the privacy they needed to do so at the new water points (UN, 2005). They pointed out that, had their consent been sought, their work load would have been much lighter and they would have had more time to rest or engage in

productive activities to earn independent income.

By focusing primarily on men and treating women as though they were invisible, project managers waste and underutilize 50 percent of society's available productive human resources (IDS, 1995). Since society comprises both women and men and since the intent of development projects is to benefit all in a targeted community, it is only fair that the consent and participation of all are solicited in project design, implementation and evaluation.

### **Requirements for Mainstreaming Gender into Development Projects**

The governments of Third World countries, donor agencies and local implementing organizations continue insufficiently incorporate a gender perspective into project design, planning, implementation and evaluation. For development projects to be gender-sensitive, the following requirements need to be met at the institutional and programmatic levels.

#### *Gender Policy*

Development projects must have a gender policy from the onset to provide direction, legal backing, and clarification on the incorporation of gender issues into project design and implementation. This policy must be explicit and should draw attention to the different practical and strategic needs of women and men. It should spell out the resources and practical steps needed to involve women and men as equal partners in development interventions.

#### *Support of Men*

Many Third World societies are patriarchal in nature, thus consultation with men to promote positive attitudes towards women's active participation is important. Once men see the benefits of women's new roles in project planning and implementation, and once they see women's participation not as a zero-sum game, but as gain for all, they most likely will lend their support.

### *Empowerment of Women*

The empowerment of women is crucial to gender mainstreaming. Women should be encouraged to hold leadership positions in community-based groups and their opinions taken as seriously as that of men. Through empowerment, women will be better able to articulate and promote their needs and priorities.

### *Organizational Structure and Procedures*

Conscious efforts need to be made to institutionalize gender issues throughout organizational structures. Administrative rules and procedures that create hierarchies and masculine organizational cultures must be transformed and engendered. Women like men should be hired to professional and managerial positions so as to alter power relations in the organization. Staff job descriptions should include a gender component for which they are held accountable and evaluated. Gender Audit Committees headed by senior management also need to be established to monitor on a quarterly basis, gender progress in project implementation.

### *Gender Focal Points*

Gender focal points need to be established within development agencies. Their functions must include, ensuring the routine consideration of gender issues in strategic project planning and reviewing the gender implications of projects. They need to coordinate and organize staff gender training and capacity building activities, monitor and evaluate project implementation to assess consistency with project gender policy, and secure senior management commitment to gender mainstreaming. Gender focal points must be visibly located within development agencies. They must be part of senior management, have access to resources, participate in project decision-making, and facilitate the translation of organizational gender mainstreaming mandates into reality.

### *Training and Capacity Building*

All project staff including senior management needs to be gender sensitive, knowledgeable and able to apply gender sensitive methods to their tasks on a daily basis. The specific gender needs of staff should be identified and tailor-made training commensurate with their function provided on a regular basis.

### *Gender Sensitive Instructional Materials*

All materials used for gender training and capacity building (manuals, guides, handouts) should be gender sensitive. The language used in these documents should reflect equality of the genders. In situations where these materials contain illustrations, they should sufficiently feature women not only in their stereotypical roles but also in their new roles as partners with men in development. These materials should drum up support for women and should be non controversial. They should be culturally specific.

### *Sex-Disaggregated Data and Gender Analysis*

The collection of data by sex is essential for mainstreaming gender issues into development projects. Through this activity, staff will obtain information about the different circumstances and realities of women and men participating in development projects. Without sex-disaggregated data, the gender impact on development projects will to be difficult to assess. Gender analysis should also be conducted as a first step in gender sensitive planning and the promotion of gender equality. This will enable project staff to recognize and re-evaluate patterns of participation disparities between women and men and as a result, work towards eliminating imbalances and inequalities.



### *Gender Budgeting*

For effective gender mainstreaming, the budgets of development projects must incorporate a gender perspective at all levels of the budgetary process. With gender budgets in place, gender units and focal points will have the necessary resources they need to carry out their work and to facilitate the effective implementation of gender equality policies

### *Engendering the Project Cycle*

Project management and staff need to ensure that project plans take cognizance of the different gender needs of their target group. They need to ensure that project activities are equally distributed at the various stages of the project cycle and that, women and men have equal opportunities to participate. Obstacles that hinder the participation of women need to be identified and removed. Specific strategies and indicators to measure gender equality and women's participation need to be in place.

### **Conclusion**

If development projects are to be more successful than they have been in the past, then, donor agencies and Third World governments need to meet the aforementioned requirements in project design and implementation. Third World governments in particular need to eliminate power inequalities between women and men in the development process, include gender equality objectives in national policies and development programs, and foster gender networks and partnerships. They need to reform institutions and traditional customs that restrict women's active participation in the development process, promote a rights-based approach to development with the goal of reducing gender disparity, and match commitment with financial resources to support gender activities.

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