



# Fording the Stream

## Women's Economic Roles

**M**ost development professionals nod in agreement at the straightforward wisdom of the old, often used Chinese proverb, "Give a man a fish and he will eat for one day. Teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime." And yet few stop to question how, and if, this same wisdom applies to women.

Part of the answer to this query lies in the way most development planners and practitioners have tended to view women — as childbearers and mothers, and as educators within the family, roles defined as "traditional" and of obvious importance to the survival of any society. Program and policy responses, therefore, have largely focused on these roles, and ignored the full extent of women's participation as income earners in both the formal and informal sectors of the economy. Invisible in national statistics and to development planners, women have gone about their work largely unnoticed, their economic contribution dismissed as insignificant or merely supplemental to the overall family income.

In the last decade we have come to radically redefine our understanding of how women fit into the socio-economic fabric of developing countries. At least

two factors have contributed to this realignment in our thinking. First, events around the U.N. Decade for Women dramatized women's invisibility in development planning, and mobilized human and financial resources around the issue. Underlying the findings of much of the research that emerged during this decade, is the assertion that women's productive and economic activities are vital to improving the quality of life in the developing world. As producers of goods and services, they contribute directly to national social and economic progress; as farmers and food processors, they perform sometimes up to 80% of agricultural work, including planting, harvesting, hauling water and gathering wood for fuel.

Second, the process of modernization underway in all developing countries has dramatically changed how women live and what they do. Large cities as disparate as Lagos, Sao Paulo and Jakarta act as urban magnets that attract scores of mothers and young, unskilled women, while leaving others behind in care of the rural home, as the men seek better opportunities. In the last decade, more and more women have become the sole providers and caretakers of the household, and have been forced to find ways to earn income to feed and clothe their families. Women as heads of households are beginning to make their way into national statistics, with some large cities recording nearly one third of all households as headed by women.

Current Policy

Approaches

to Income

Generation

and Women

by Maria Otero



## Increasing Access For Women: Integration As A Policy Response

In an effort to respond to the changing demographic and socio-economic landscape, and to act on the heightened awareness of women's economic contribution, many donor organizations have formulated policies and program initiatives to improve women's income earning potential, status and productivity. For example, the policy paper of the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) titled "Women in Development," issued in 1982<sup>1</sup>, is based on the premise that gender roles constitute a key variable in the socio-economic condition of any country, one that can be decisive in the success or failure of development plans. The key issue underlying women's role in development, the AID document argues, is ultimately an economic one: if one ignores or misunderstands the role women play as income earners, then the design and planning of projects will not be as effective, leading to diminished returns on investment.

Like many other organizations, AID, in its current policy, emphasizes the need to "integrate" women as contributors to and beneficiaries of all projects, rather than to design projects specifically geared to women. This general move towards integrating women into overall programming seeks

to correct the shortcomings of the unwritten policy that prevailed in the 1970's, when low-income women participated in small, women-specific projects implemented primarily by local institutions that "specialized" in women's projects. During this period, we witnessed the demise of innumerable income generating projects for women, because they functioned as isolated efforts, seldom connected to broader development plans in the community or region, and because the institutions involved, and the women themselves, were poorly equipped to handle the financial and marketing complexities of successful projects.

The rationale for the policy of integration emphasizes three points:

- in most donor organizations, there are substantially more funds available for overall programming than for targeting specific sub-groups; hence, unless women are considered as equal beneficiaries in all projects, they will remain excluded from having access to the bulk of development resources. Also, "women-only" projects will remain small, with donors asserting that they have "taken care of the problem" through low-budget, often ineffective efforts;
- unless international PVOs and local institutions with technical capacity for reaching low income groups include women as beneficiaries of income generating projects, women will not benefit from this expertise and again will be excluded from the human and financial resources of any project;
- reaching women becomes the responsibility of all planners and practitioners, rather than the domain of a small group perceived as "advocates" or of a few organizations whose special interest lies in assisting women.

## Translating Policy Into Action

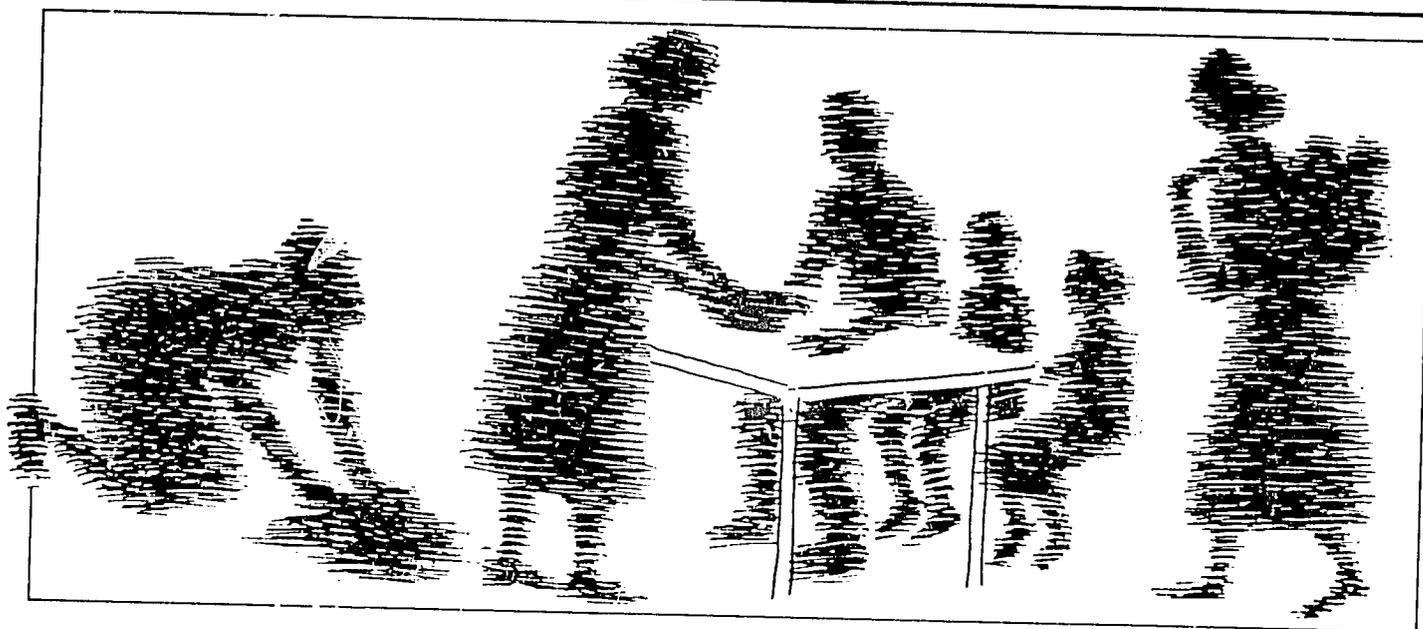
Integrating women into income generating projects requires building into every step of a project — its design, implementation and evaluation — mechanisms to assure that women are not left out. A brief example can illustrate how this approach to reaching women manifests itself in the project.

In the case of a small-scale enterprise project that seeks to reach micro-entrepreneurs with financial and technical resources, the inclusion of women begins at the planning and design stage when collection of gender-related data will provide information crucial for the implementation stage.

The data collected for project design should include, for example, the percentage of women working in the informal sector, and even identify some of the reasons why so many women own or work in micro-enterprises. Data can also help identify the sub-sector of micro-enterprise activity where women predominate — often in food or textile processing, where they utilize skills learned while carrying out the traditional domestic chores — and compare their productivity and income earning potential to that of male entrepreneurs. By talking with women, project designers can also better understand and address the cultural, legal, institutional, educational and other barriers that women confront, which restrict their access to and control of resources, and hence of improved income.

With this information, mechanisms can be put into place which assure that the project reaches women. A credit and technical assistance project might now include:

<sup>1</sup>available free of charge from: Office of Women in Development, Room 3725A, Bureau for Program and Policy Coordination, U.S. Agency for International Development, Washington, DC 20523



- promotion and outreach campaigns through additional channels -- community groups, informal associations, church organizations -- that are particularly accessible to women;
- training sessions scheduled at times that do not conflict with women's other responsibilities, and take into account transportation limitations, especially in countries where women cannot travel alone;
- loan application procedures and requirements that allow for women's limited experience with paperwork, difficulty in meeting collateral, and reluctance to approach formal institutions; and
- disaggregation by sex of data collected during implementation -- whether on project performance, such as payback patterns, number of loans, types of enterprises -- or on project impact -- changes in income, jobs created, money saved or reinvested in the firm -- to enable evaluators to assess the degree to which a project for small-scale enterprises reaches women.

## Barriers To Integrating Women

Experience with integrating women into income generating projects, though limited, is already underway, as various PVOs and local institutions affirm the value of this approach. Even as project results suggest its validity, the integration of women into all income generating projects is still difficult to implement. Four reasons are suggested here:

- There is resistance on the part of planners and practitioners who are still not

convinced that women contribute substantially to a family's income, and who are skeptical about the value of integrating them into income generating projects. This issue is particularly troubling when one considers that women predominate among the poorest sectors of society -- that they head households, are less educated, lack marketable skills, and have less access to resources. Given this reality, efforts to reach the poor through development projects, especially those designed to generate income, should be intrinsically tied with reaching women;

- Few development professionals working in income generating projects have the expertise necessary to address the gender issue. Hence even those who recognize the importance of including women are often at a loss as to how to do it. Training the staff of donor organizations, PVOs and local institutions may be a first step towards integrating women into small-scale enterprise and other income generating projects;
- Reaching women may require a larger initial investment of project funds because additional training or staff time may be required. In times of scarce resources, PVOs and other implementing institutions may be reluctant either to assume the additional expense or to try to justify it to a donor;
- Reaching women may require experimenting with approaches that will fit into their village or urban reality. For example, collective ownership of enterprises, group lending schemes, and other models may prove better suited for working with women. In some cases, women are at the pre-entrepreneurial stage and have no experience with the intricacies of

generating income through enterprise development. Integration may mean building a project component to reach these women.

## Conclusion

Integrating women into the broad range of income generating projects being implemented in developing countries may be one way to increase the number of women that are effectively reached. More importantly, the access women will gain in the process may make us add the following caveat to the often quoted Chinese proverb cited above: "Before a woman can learn to fish, she must first get close enough to the stream." ●

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