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Women: A Neglected Aspect
in Development Programs

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INTRODUCTION

We must first make clear why women in development is viewed as an issue, in itself, and as somehow separable from other development issues. Why are women's concerns distinguished from those that affect men; what factors contribute to this segregation and why do they persist? It is important to clarify what women in development, as a sub discipline, is before talking about development assistance efforts on their behalf, and identify which particular segment of the female population in the developing world is (or should be) of critical concern to programs and policy development.

While technically there should be little reason to separate women "out" as a subject of special concern it is nevertheless true that several factors necessitate women-specific attention. This is because:

- 1) evidence clearly shows that it is the low income rural and urban women in the Third World who have been the most negatively affected by modernization processes; and that women's lack of access to new technologies, in a rapidly technologically changing environment, has decreased their competitiveness and thereby induced a loss of income earning activities among women;
- 2) current program and policy efforts to raise the socioeconomic levels of the poorest sectors - credit facilities, extension agents, training programs, land reform and distribution measures, have been shown to be geared disproportionately to the male segment of the population, and while favoring men as targets for programs, they have, at the same time, had a detrimental effect on the status of women.

Secondly, our interest in women in development is not an extension of western, feminist liberation movements; nor is the issue an ideological one. Our interest in Third World women extends beyond being a purely feminist concern insofar as it is an integral part of the social, economic, political transformation experienced by the Third World.

I. "Situating" Women in Development: Demographic Concerns

Given that women in development is not a feminist nor an ideological issue, but one based on very real economic needs, what then were the original sources of interest? Women first became "situated" in the overall context of development as a demographic concern. By emphasizing the inter-relationship between population growth, per capita income and economic development, demographers singled out women as reproducers to be a major problem in hindering increases in per capita income. As a consequence, policy makers came to view women as a resourceful target group who could - if properly motivated - contribute to development efforts through limiting their fertility.

Thus, initial interest in women was based on one fact alone, their fertility and the belief that this was an impediment to development. While women are no longer viewed only as a means to enhance development through reduced fertility; regard to women as an end has, paradoxically enough, reified women's motherhood roles rather than providing an alternative to them.

II. The "Situation" of Women in Development: The Welfare Approach vs. The Integration Principle.

Two directions are evident in current policy guidelines for women in development assistance programs; policy planning for welfare, and policy planning based on integration of women in development concerns. To some extent, the first approach is an outgrowth of early emphasis on women's as reproducers; the latter approach constitutes a direct effort to address the women in their economic capacities.

The distinction between these approaches is crucial. The former promotes assistance for improving women's physical well being, and that of her children, by providing materials and services. The second advocates programs which maximize women's strengths and economic self-sufficiency.

Programs based on the desire to improve the well being of women have been predominant in addressing women's needs. Several reasons contribute to this overemphasis on women's reproductive roles: a) a lack of knowledge of the economic reality in which many Third World women function, b) the carry-over of Western perceptions of women's primary roles as bearers of children, cooks, housekeepers and farmer's wives. Accordingly, donor agencies have helped establish maternal and child health clinics, family planning and home economics projects,

This has been the trend with some international development organizations such as FAO, WHO, USAID and UNICEF. These have focussed on rural West African women for a number of years and sponsored projects which have attempted to reach out to women. However, these projects have more often than not been guided by Western perceptions of women's needs and wishes. These trends exist despite the fact that information has long been available that women in West Africa play important roles as farmers, traders and business entrepreneurs in their own right. (Simmons, u.d.):)

A breakdown of Women in Development projects carried out by AID shows that one third can be categorized as technical - or hard projects. Two-thirds of all development money for WID projects is devoted to welfare or service programs such as nutrition, health and education. While the AID-WID office has developed a "tracking systems" to determine how many of the projects under "education" can be categorized as technical education programs, AID missions in host countries have been expanding programs under education by applying for support through technical monies, claiming that the programs would be technical training. The fact is that these educational programs are often not technically oriented; but categorized as such by AID missions, and the level of hard programs as opposed to

because they do not directly increase women's income earning capacity. Programs must create the opportunity for women to bring in income as well as to raise children and take care of the home.

In regard to women's potential as a productive resource, economists sympathetic to women's concerns point to the need to assert that productivity gains and increases in income in the Third World can come about by targeting--within target groups--women. To most policy makers these are the measures of success. Such advice is correct. However, the only way to ensure that women's productive value receives recognition by world economists and policy makers is to address the structural factors inhibiting women's competitive participation in the overall economy. This is why programs and policies must be economically viable, why women must be taught marketable skills, and why women must be guaranteed access to new technologies and cooperative and credit systems.

III. Why Does the Welfare Approach Persist in Development Planning?

Welfare-based development assistance continues to be perpetuated because policy makers overemphasize the one dimensional view of Third World women as wives and mothers only. This orientation is at the basis of the notion that investment in women yields low economic returns.

Equating womanhood with motherhood has in the past led to a great deal of ambivalence, hesitancy, awkwardness, and often downright immobility insofar as the articulation and implementation of meaningful policy directed at assisting women to survive economically is concerned. On the rare occasions when income generation has been the programmatic focus, the projects have been based on welfare rather than developmental concerns, involving make-work projects that produce unmarketable items and training in skills

which are sold at subsidized rates. As a consequence, such programs have not helped women to become economically independent.

The notion of women as independent, capable, and productive individuals has clearly not been the focus of concern. Nor is much attention given to the economic needs of women in poverty and the contradiction between this economic necessity and the lack of work employment opportunities open to women.

Women in poverty have particular problems in that the incidence of marital disruption and family fragmentation is higher among them than among women in other socioeconomic groups. The proportion of households headed by women continues to grow significantly in the developing world, due to death, desertion, migration, divorce, or male marginality in the home. The economic situation of poor households headed by women is more critical than that of poor households headed by men. Female heads of household are more likely to be unemployed; if they work, they do so in the informal sector and at correspondingly lower wage rates than male heads of household. There are also fewer secondary workers to bring in additional income in households headed by females than in those headed by males, which increases the burden on women heads of household.

These women have to work, but they are at a disadvantage in the labor market. Work opportunities and wage rates for low-income and landless women have deteriorated more than for males. Female labor, especially in agriculture, construction, and other labor-intensive tasks is assumed to be less productive than male labor. In addition, women's traditional productive roles and income-earning activities or opportunities have been displaced as a by-product of the introduction of technology, export-oriented cash crops and trade, and farm mechanization, as has been amply

documented. As new technology is introduced into traditionally female activities, men replace women in those jobs, which aggravates the situation of poor women particularly, because it cuts down on the employment opportunities available to them.

Once a better understanding of the way women actually spend their time in developing countries is achieved a more rational and informed approach could be made in formulating policy and designing programs which support an integrated rather than marginal role for women in development.

IV. The Influence of Research on Policy

Researchers in the social sciences bear a certain responsibility for the manner in which the focus of their study, the sample selection procedure and their own conceptual/ideological orientation advertently or inadvertently helps to perpetuate a bias in the extension of development assistance efforts. In other words, the manner in which research results are reported and/or the way in which a study is focussed affects the policy maker's process of interpretation and evaluation of findings. Researchers who hope to affect policy makers' decisions must realize that biases held and perhaps overlooked in the academic sphere, may carry over to the policy sphere and there, impact detrimentally.

Four themes in particular come to mind.

- a. Earlier I referred to the pervasive tendency of policy to equate womanhood with motherhood. This selective perception of womanhood is often reified statistically by researchers. The tendency to select as universe of study only women in the reproductive ages, most particularly those women with small children is overwhelming. A life-cycle-specific period is thus disseminated which is not

representative of the entire spectrum of female population; not of single women without children; not of women ages 35-40 and over.

- b. Some researchers interject an aura of sentimentality surrounding the motherhood role which obscures the economic reality of women's daily existence. This aura promotes the notion that encouraging women to work will diminish family welfare, violate the sanctity of the traditional family and deteriorate the nutritional status of children. Policy wise this means that women should not work outside the home.

It must be made clear that such findings are indications of problems that must be considered in developing programs and policies for low income women who have no choice but to work. Unless this is done, efforts to marshal action in support of women's economic needs will continue to be accompanied by feelings of 'guilt'.

Work outside the home will obviously have an impact upon women with small children. However, it is not policies for women per se, but the consequences of development that have caused severe disintegration and dislocation in traditional family structure. Work outside the home adds to the family income, engages women in economic, social and possibly political decision-making activities not possible in a purely domestic work environment. It also introduces the possibility of raising her standard of living, her family's and securing a new future for her children and at the same time, contributes to a new self-concept.

- c. The selection of the household as the unit of analysis, as opposed to individual data on women has negative effects. Primarily because (as was pointed out earlier), women are seen as dependents of the household head, or at best secondary earners. This coupled with a view toward household functions as the primary arena of action, perpetuates an unrealistically narrow and biased perception of women in developing countries.
- d. A recent trend in the development literature is to advocate the cause of women by emphasizing the value of her home (non market) activities. Arguments are made for the need to impute productive value on women's traditional activities (motherhood, child care, health care, nurturance) because, though not monetized, such activities enhance the welfare of society, provide support mechanisms, meet the needs of the family and have a direct bearing on human capital formation.

There is danger that extolling the virtues of traditional home production, and overemphasizing its value by equating it with productive value derived from market activities, may REINFORCE TRADITIONAL VIEWS OF APPROPRIATE ACTIVITIES FOR WOMEN among policy makers, reduce the accepted range of women's legitimate activities to purely supportive roles and thereby undercut the importance of policy development directed to enhancing women's income earning opportunities.

Those of us hoping to inform policy makers of inherent biases and contradictions in policies which aggravate women's marginalization rather than alleviate it, which operate on an overemphasis of women as wives,

mothers and providers rather than potentially productive (economically speaking) individuals, need to be aware of these ethnocentric tendencies in our own research and policy recommendations. This awareness is critical especially since our research is becoming more and more integral in policy formation.