

WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT

Women in development is a relatively new idea though individual scholars have been looking at the role and status of women in developing nations for years. Esther Boserup's book, Women's Role in Economic Development, was published in the United States in 1970. It described the disintegration of the traditional division of labour between the sexes brought on by economic and social development. She pointed out in the preface to that book that:

With modernization of agriculture and with migration to the towns, a new sex pattern of productive work must emerge, for better or worse. The obvious danger is, however, that in the course of this transition women will be deprived of their productive functions, and the whole process of growth will thereby be retarded.

Subsistence societies are based on agriculture or food production. All members of the family work to eat. Often the work is broken down into sex-based tasks. In Africa, according to Boserup and others, female farming was the norm. Women did from half to three quarters of the farming, shifting from one piece of tribal land to another. The men cleared the land, hunted, or tended grazing animals, often far from the village. In Asia, where plow culture was common, the men were the farmers, using draught animals to pull the plow. In Asia women helped out with the weeding and harvesting, especially where rice was the major crop, and tended domestic animals.

Another factor Boserup notes is that the shifting cultivation system of Africa depended on tribal or communal ownership of land whereas the Asian system depended on individual ownership of land and a landless labouring class available for field work at low wages. Polygamy flourished where tribal lands and the shifting cultivation system prevailed, especially after colonization when many of the younger men went to work in mines or on large plantations. Older men took on younger, additional wives who supported themselves and their children and contributed to the coffers of the husband through their labor.

Irene Tinker, now a top Peace Corps official, has written of this same phenomena. In an article entitled "Development and the disintegration of the family," Tinker states that too often development experts from the industrialized world bring along their own model of appropriate roles for men and women. They assume that woman's role is in the home caring for the children and the man's role is outside the home earning money. This model is the unconscious but pervasive undergirding for development laid on a system by outsiders. It might well be called "cultural imperialism." (The irony of this is that some development experts call any attempt to look at or question women's role in the development process "cultural imperialism" foisted on developing societies by upper and middle-class white women "who have nothing better to do.")

In fact, development by and for men is another example of the trickle-down theory of development, and it works about as well.

When women are the farmers, responsible for feeding their own children and developers come in with ideas for cash crops, families may end up malnourished and hungry. Men may use the best tribal lands for the cash crop and women are relegated to poorer, distant land on which to raise food for the family. Land reform may be introduced as a productive innovation without looking at the consequences. If men, by law or custom, hold title to the land while women cultivate it the system may work until death, divorce or desertion takes place. Thereafter, the women are left with children to feed and no land or man to provide for them. Also, if women cannot get credit without the signature or assistance of a man, little modern rural technology will be brought into areas dominated by women farmers. When communal, tribal lands are broken up into smaller, individual plots and title passes to men only, women are discouraged from raising cash crops if the results of their labor only go to men and they are still, by tradition, left with the responsibility of feeding the children. Estimates are that women contribute over 40% of the food supply, on a worldwide basis. In Africa, the Economic Commission for Africa maintains that 70% of the agricultural production is carried out by women. Developers must take these facts into account and not impose an irrelevant model on a society in the name of modernization.

Education, or the ability to gain information and knowledge to become economically independent, is a second major issue of

women in development. Currently, education is considered to be of three kinds--informal, non-formal and formal. Informal education is that which one learns from parents, peers or experience; non-formal is that which is organized to inform or teach but which is not part of the formal sequence; formal education is the kindergarten through graduate school system or any part of it.

Women, as mothers, are the first teachers in the informal system. They set the tone and govern the receptivity of youngsters to education. Too often illiterate parents see little need for children's formal education, especially that of girls. Overburdened mothers keep little girls home to help with young siblings or with domestic work, including water carrying. Studies show that literate women have fewer children and more power to earn an independent income. A first child usually means the end of any kind of education or training and, if the woman is quite young at this first birth, she probably has little recourse except to keep on having babies, usually by several different partners.

If one thinks about it, the ability to read is the basic qualification for entrance into the modern, technological world. For women, education is the key to economic independence because manual labor is often too difficult and competition with stronger men impossible in areas of high unemployment. Also, the illiterate is dependent on what someone else tells him or her; the literate person can choose her sources of information and greatly expand her knowledge and capacity for survival.

Yet today, nearly two-thirds of the world's illiterate population is female and the numbers, if not the percentages, are growing. According to Patricia McGrath in The Unfinished Assignment: Equal Education for Women, (Worldwatch Institute, 1976) "between 1960 and 1970, the number of illiterate women increased by 40 million, bringing the total number of women unable to read or write to half a billion." UNICEF has estimated that only one girl out of a hundred in the Yemen Arab Republic ever attends school. Still, some countries have, within a relatively short time, eradicated illiteracy. Russia, China, Cuba, North Vietnam, Korea and Taiwan have all focused on eliminating illiteracy and been successful. Women were frequently the targets for these politically motivated literacy drives because they had a great impact on succeeding generations. On the other hand, Finland, Sweden, Canada and the United States, according to an OECD report in 1975, have traditionally had women achieving higher levels of education than men. Some of this may be because parents, in the more democratic societies, realize that women have to have more education to achieve some form of economic parity. Today, in the U.S., for example, a woman with a college degree earns, on the average, less than a man with a high school education. And yet the woman with the college degree has more social status enabling her to attract a man who has even more potential, a fact not lost on parents of daughters. And certainly advanced education for women is a requisite for women's participation in the top levels of government and society today--anywhere in the

world. If women are to be equal partners in the development process they must have at least equal--or better--education than men.

There is another aspect of the literacy gap between men and women, boys and girls that is increasingly bothering women--and developers. While men may be educated for modernization, women and girls may be held back--deliberately or inadvertently. The men move on and the girls stay back. Picture, for example, the situation of the young man who gets some education in his rural community, migrates to the city looking for work, perhaps learns a little more and then returns home to his village. His sisters, mother and cousins live in another world. He cannot communicate, except on the most basic level, with them or with other women in the community. He--and they--become alienated. If he left a wife in the village he returns less and less often and the world has another female-headed household trying to cope with modernization. Two societies develop--the man who goes to the city and the female who stays in the village with the children. Or, if the uneducated female goes to the city, she has two alternatives: domestic work or prostitution.

Today, in the U.S., about 10% of the foreign students are female. Virtually no studies have been done on those female foreign students. Do they return home more often than male students? If so, do they become the female leaders--or do they marry the top government and business leaders? And do young males educated in

the U.S. agricultural schools go home and try to impose the male-breadwinner, female-dependent model on their society? In Moslem societies if girls are not allowed to attend schools with male teachers after the girls reach puberty where, ultimately, are female teachers going to come from? If, by chance, some girls in these societies get educated enough to enter upper secondary school or college--in order to become teachers--and if there is no place for them to stay in the city while they attend college will there ever be native female teachers or educated women in these societies? What happens to Muslim women when divorce is so easy for men and education, travel and work so difficult for women?

A third, major, worldwide problem is the female-headed household--a growing institution. Some experts contend it is currently 30% and growing. Since nowhere in the world do women earn equal pay and since usually, when a marriage breaks up, a woman is left with the children, a female-headed family is a poor family. Poor families have more problems and contribute less to a nation's total welfare. Educating women to be economically self-sufficient is a worldwide imperative for three reasons: (a) they need to be able to support themselves; (b) they may be left with children to support; and, (c) even in a stable, nuclear family they probably will be required to work outside the home to support or help support their families--few adults can earn enough in a lifetime to support themselves, a spouse, children and retirement.

Women must be active participants in modern, developing societies. Individual and institutional capacity must be built. This requires organization and leadership. Support for women's organizations and organizations which include women is essential. Leadership training and the inclusion of women in training opportunities is a vital and long range investment in development. For nations are organized groups of people run by other more or less organized groups. A nation's ability to function depends on the number and percentage of its people who have the capacity to work within organizations or to lead them. If women cannot leave the home because of tradition or custom, if they cannot join groups to help themselves or their society and if they are not a part of the leadership of the nation--whether that leadership be formal or informal--then that society cannot fully develop.

These concerns have often been discussed by the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women. As the feminist or women's rights movement gained momentum in the U.S. and worldwide, interest in the women in development issue picked up. At the January 1974 meeting of the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women the proposal for a worldwide conference was adopted along with a draft World Plan of Action. 1975 was proposed as International Women's Year with the three-part theme: equality, development, peace. A remarkable symbol of the dove of peace with the women's symbol and equal sign built in became known worldwide. It gave women the same psychological lift that earlier symbols had meant for other

groups. Visitors to faraway places noticed the sign on posters and attention was drawn to it. When other forms of communication were impossible, the symbol often had meaning.

Women who attended the Mexico City World Conference on International Women's Year went home with the World Plan and a new enthusiasm, a sense of sisterhood across cultural and language barriers. Some 100 governments had voiced their approval for the World Plan while they fought bitterly over political resolutions. The non-governmental Tribune, patterned after similar bodies at the Bucharest Population Conference of 1974 and the earlier Environmental Conference, involved over 6,000 women in workshops, plenary sessions and political dialogue.

Some sections of the preamble or introduction to the World Plan of Action for the Decade for Women read like poetry (to a feminist):

"In our times, women's role will increasingly emerge as a powerful revolutionary social force.

There are significant differences in the status of women from country to country

rooted in the cultural framework

or tied to the level of development,

as there are within a given country,

according to the social category of women within it.

Yet basic similarities unite women

in the fight against differences wherever they exist

in the legal, economic, social, political, and cultural status of women and men."

The Plan then sets forth minimum goals for governments which include:

- an increase in literacy and civic education of women
- coeducational technical and vocational training in the industrial and agricultural sectors
- increased employment opportunities
- increased provision of health education, sanitation, nutrition, family education, family planning
- economic recognition of the value of women's work in the home, in domestic food production and marketing
- the promotion of women's organizations
- the development of modern rural technology, cottage industry, pre-school day centres, time-and-energy-saving devices so as to help reduce the heavy work load of women, particularly those living in rural sectors and for the urban poor
- the establishment of ... machinery within the government for accelerating the achievement of equal opportunities for women and their full integration into national life.

Copies of this Plan have been distributed worldwide. The Women in Development Office at AID has a condensed version printed in English, Spanish and French. Other materials on the women in development issue are being published frequently; research is being expanded and results published. An international network of women researchers and development experts is being created. At least a dozen donor nations have some person or office devoted to the women

in development activities in their aid-giving agencies. The United Nations Development Programme, the Food and Agriculture Organization and the UN Fund for Population Activities have all published guidelines for women in development projects in their sphere.

The Women in Development Office at the Agency for International Development, under Sections 113 and 305 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1973 as amended, is concentrating on the following activities:

1. A report to Congress identifying data gaps, projects and activities of the Agency, and an evaluation of progress.
2. Studying the actual economic situation among the sexes in the developing world--who does the work? Who gets paid for what? What work has what value? Who are the powerful? How is change made?
3. Sensitizing AID, especially the regional bureaus and the missions--the "establishment" in AID who deal with the "power elites" in the host countries--about the women in development question.
4. Learning who else in the U.S. and in international organizations is working on women's issues, what they are learning, who are the innovators and the thinkers, who are the activists and the leaders, what organizations are doing what where.

5. Suggesting ideas and people, from the studies and contacts made, to the bureaus and missions for inclusion in AID projects and programs.
6. Dealing with women's and other organizations at home and abroad who are interested in development and especially in women and development.
7. Identifying major problems as well as workable projects, programs and activities.
8. Holding conferences, seminars and meetings; collecting, gathering, publishing and disseminating materials and information.

We understand that development is a long process and that bringing women into the development mainstream will be an even longer process. We realize that discrimination is not always based on ill will or fear but often only on established practice and unthinking behavior. We believe that improvement is possible and that change is essential. We are dedicated to the principles of equal opportunity and the equality of men and women.

That's what women in development is all about.

rafted by Arvonne Fraser
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