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Taking the Family Out of the Black Box: Approaches for Integrating the Family System into Development

***Seminar by Jane Jaquette
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In the second of a series of seminars under USAID's Family and Development Initiative, Jane Jaquette, Professor of Political Science at Occidental College, reviewed the development literature's approach to the family. In the 1950's and 60's, the family was viewed as a passive and negative institution. The family was criticized by both mainstream and Marxist theorists as being too traditional and resistant to change. These theorists argued that intra-family loyalties encouraged nepotism and the excessive level of corruption found in many of the newly emerging nations rather than allegiance to the nation-state. Moreover, for women, modernization could only occur if they were permitted to emerge from the family environment, i.e., seek work outside the home.

Jaquette observed that the assumption, implicit in much of the literature, that the family is resistant to change has not been validated. In fact, the family system over time has been found to be very flexible in responding to change. Building on this reality, a recent trend in the development community has been to reevaluate the role of the family as an institution and to attempt to build on its strengths as a more effective basis for development.

A Gender Perspective

Dr. Jaquette suggested that the early women's literature found fault with the family, portraying the family to be patriarchal and exploitative. Western feminism, by advancing women in development (WID) as a discipline which meshed feminist and development theory, introduced a new standard: women were self-sufficient, income-seeking, resourceful individuals whose heavy burden was invisible not only to men, but also to governments and the development agencies. The ground breaking work behind this new paradigm, Esther Boserup's Women's Role in Economic Development, saw women apart from the family, defining the ideal

situation as one in which women were autonomous, men disappeared and children were relegated to the sidelines. A subsequent work, The Domestication of Woman, by Barbara Rogers paralleled women's progress with deliverance from the family. Development programs were identified with reinforcing the exploitative side of the family and its consequent subjugation of women.

Dr. Jaquette questioned the productiveness of this type of thinking. Rarely do individuals have total control over the choices they make, rather they are subject to the constraints of the family and its management of resources i.e., how family income will be spent, who will go to school, at what and where family members will work, etc. Dr. Jaquette

Taking the Family Out of the Black Box (cont.)

hypothesized that since most women live in families they must negotiate with males, be they husbands, fathers, brothers or sons. Therefore, development planning should seek to empower family members to negotiate successfully for access to resources. This approach focuses attention on the role of the family as the ultimate productive, distributive and consumption unit and the need to better understand inter- and intra-household dynamics at work.

New Household Economics

With Gary Becker's groundbreaking work, the New Household Economics ushered in a new approach to looking at the family. Attention was given to the family as an enterprise which pools resources to achieve shared economic goals. The New Household Economics directed attention 'inside the black box', drawing attention to the much neglected and under-rated variables in family decision-making, namely women's time and labor. As a result, household-level analysis has become an integral part of many development programs, especially in family planning, nutrition and farming systems research.

Bargaining Models

Building on Becker, but approaching the household as an arena of conflict and cooperation, rather than altruism, Amartya Sen focused attention on a family member's entitlement to important resources as a basis for intra-household bargaining. In his article, "100 million women are missing", Sen pointed out

that because women consistently occupy an inferior position inside the household, their access to resources is impeded. He suggested that because resources are allocated according to perceived notions of an individual's entitlement to those resources, changing these perceptions through education and consciousness-raising is key. Sen argued that when women work outside the home they become empowered and thus improve their bargaining position inside the home. Jaquette further pointed out that strengthening a woman's bargaining position in the family could help reinforce, rather than weaken, intra-family obligations and thus support the family in the face of development pressures and economic crises.

Conclusion

Dr. Jaquette observed that as USAID implements the Family and Development Initiative, there appears to be a reticence to deal with the family system. Yet, everywhere the State and indirectly donors are active in affecting intra-household dynamics. She suggested that the current disintegration of the family is a consequence of economic crisis, owing much to a break down in the traditional complementarity of male and female roles and the men's exit from the family. Improving women's access to resources may counter this trend. Dr. Jaquette concluded that increasing women's bargaining position may be integral to strengthening the family system as an institution which can benefit all of its members.

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