

# **GENDER EQUALITY: A WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT CASE STUDY**

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## **Summary**

Economic development has impacted unfavorably on women in a number of ways: lower pay, fewer work opportunities, and other distortions and biases leading to a lower quality of life. In the post-colonial era, aid to women in developing countries began as welfare programs focused on mothers; by the early 1970s the need to integrate women into the total development effort had become increasingly apparent. A number of factors

contributed to support a new concept—Women and Development (WID)—that stimulated both an outpouring of scholarly research and a proliferation of action programs committed to greater involvement of women in global economic development. UN women’s conferences as well as the UN meetings on human rights, environmental protection, and population issues drew increasingly large numbers of advocates for an equal public policy role for women worldwide. The interaction between WID and global feminism is exemplified in a case study of the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID). Begun in the US in 1982, AWID became a catalyst for broadening the global constituency of organizations and individuals committed to gender equality, sustainable development, and women’s human rights.

## **1. National Development Impacts on Women**

### **1.1 Major Gender Gaps in Development**

The processes of national economic development and social modernization have different impacts on men and women. Women typically have less access to development programs, such as credit, health, and literacy and are therefore “left behind.” Gaps between women and men may be sustained or even increased as the national profile of income and human development improves. Women may also be left behind by incompletely modernized legal systems that have failed to address historic inequalities in inheritance, asset ownership, family law, and other matters. Often the issue of domestic violence is considered beyond the purview of public action or responsibility.

Many national development policies have unintended consequences that make it more difficult for women to fulfill their obligations in caring for and provisioning the family. Where men are provided with new opportunities in commercial agriculture or trade, rural women’s workload often increases, for they must cope with chores previously shared. When men migrate for new opportunities, women become de facto single heads of household with increased workloads. Conversion of common lands to private ownership deprives women of resources for feeding animals and gathering food supplements. It may also lead to degradation of land available for gardens and food crops, diminution of water supply, and an increase in toxicity.

Women have less access to waged employment than men and are much more likely to work in the informal labor market as self-employed micro-entrepreneurs or contract labor. This labor market has provided important new opportunities for women, particularly when linked to micro-credit programs, but the incomes remain small and workers have little or no legal protection. Lack of affordable childcare, low education, and cultural barriers often constrain women from accessing higher income-producing occupations.

### **1.2 New Forms of Exploitation**

Development has created economic opportunities for women in some areas, notably in export manufacturing. However, these opportunities have created new possibilities for exploitation of women through low wages, denial of rights to organize, and restrictive

and/or poor living conditions. Where access to these opportunities has necessitated moving to cities or living apart from families, the loss of access to rural common property and to family supports may leave them more vulnerable, despite higher cash incomes. The process of globalization that has generated these employment opportunities has also led to even more exploitative employment in sex tourism and overseas domestic service. In some cases, governments have encouraged these exploitative occupations to increase government or private revenues.

The growing conversion of national economies to neo-liberal policy regimes has added to women's burdens. Consolidation or withdrawal of health, education, and other social services as well as increases in fee structures have increased the time and finances required for carrying out family responsibilities. Women spend more time and money to reach more distant health clinics. They may also have to assume community responsibilities for self-help housing, waste removal, and maintaining drinking water sources.

The impact of technological development is mixed. The green revolution in agriculture has in many places increased work opportunities for rural women, albeit in low wage field labor, but the introduction of mechanical transplantation and harvesting has reduced labor requirements for tasks that have historically provided employment for women. Among artisans, machines have eased work but replaced jobs in many areas, with the impact on women depending on the sexual division of labor, the ownership of the technology, and the availability of markets for products. Computer technology has been a boon for many educated women though wages and labor conditions may pose new problems.

### **1.3 Social and Cultural Practices**

Demographic policy has led to new pressures on women and, more extremely, on female babies. The mapping of government pressure for reduced fertility onto continuing cultural preference for sons has led to such high incidence of female infanticide in some societies that the male/female ratio is ominously imbalanced. The availability of techniques to determine the sex of fetuses has led to widespread use of sex-specific abortions. Girl children continue to have higher mortality than boys in these countries, and are more often undernourished.

National cultural policy in response to globalization has often constrained women. Women are commonly expected to be the keepers of cultural integrity while men venture into the new global culture. This response is most marked in the Islamic countries where radical religious groups have placed restrictions on women's dress, schooling, and employment, while instituting harsh punishment of what they consider sexual license. In other countries, social groups have elevated harmful practices, such as female circumcision, to emblems of cultural honor or, in more moderate ways, burdened women with upholding traditional values from which men are excused.

Education has increased though large gaps remain between girls and boys, particularly in access to higher levels of schooling. The perceived linkage between schooling and reduced fertility has increased attention to the schooling of girls, but, without curricular

change and other support for female autonomy, may only prepare them for a traditional marital role.

Overall, the distortions and biases in development result in:

- Over-utilization of women's time
- Under-investment in improvements of women's productivity
- Too little income accruing to women
- Lack of autonomy for women to make decisions about their lives and their communities
- Diminished life span and life quality

## **2. Launching the Field of Women and Development (WID)**

### **2.1 Early Post-Colonial Aid to Women**

Attention to women's needs and experience in the early post-colonial era followed three paths. Following in the tradition of middle and upper class philanthropy, both national and international service-oriented organizations carried out welfare programs for vulnerable women and children. They viewed women as dependents or victims, unable to help themselves, but of great concern because of their role as mothers. These programs provided food, often accompanied by free medical care for infants and/or free contraceptives. International programs responding to famine, such as Food for Peace programs, followed the same approach. From its founding in 1962, the World Food Program of the UN Food and Agricultural Program aimed about 17% of its more than 1000 projects in 110 countries at feeding pregnant and nursing mothers and preschool children.

A second approach followed from the militancy of women's groups during anti-colonial struggles and suffrage movements in industrialized countries. The nationalists' concern for equality prompted women in many countries to extend their goals to encompass equality between men and women, particularly in the arena of political rights. A handful of women at the 1945 San Francisco meetings to draft the United Nations Charter insisted on changing the original draft language from "equality among men" to "equality among men and women." The Charter was the first global document to affirm explicitly the equal rights of men and women and prohibit discrimination by sex. The Charter statement was followed up in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which, due to the advocacy of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, was changed in draft from references to the human rights of men to the rights of human beings (See Chapter *The UN and Human Rights on the Eve of the 21st Century*). Subsequent efforts to draft treaties that would make human rights commitments binding on states failed to give prominence to gender discrimination. Women were not addressed as women but as child-bearers through the special protection of motherhood.

As more newly independent states entered the UN in the 1960s, issues of development became more prominent, leading to the declaration of the First Development Decade in 1961. These countries pressed the Commission the Status of Women to move beyond its exclusive focus on women's rights. Beginning in 1960, the UN General Assembly asked the Commission to look into ways for the UN to assist governments in improving

women's role in economic and social development. The Commission was somewhat reluctant, fearing a diversion from its primary goal of equal rights, but in the late sixties did poll 65 member governments on the role of women. Most governments and NGOs at this time assumed that progress in successful economic and social development would bring progress in improving women's lives. When the Assembly adopted its comprehensive International Development Strategy for the second development decade in the 1970, women's issues were not featured but the strategy did contain the phrase "full integration of women into the total development effort," which was later widely cited.

## **2.2 Integrating Women into Economic Development**

The easy assumption that women would benefit from development along with men was blown away by Ester Boserup's study *Woman's Role in Economic Development*, published in 1970. Her path-breaking work provided a coherent argument backed by historical analysis and comparative data, showing that as agricultural technology advanced from slash and burn to plow agriculture, women were increasingly marginalized. Colonial introduction of cash cropping and new farm techniques exacerbated the problem because women were not trained in new techniques and relegated to the least productive land. In cities, Boserup found that women were often excluded from formal sector jobs by discriminatory practices and low levels of education.

The impact of this book was not only its challenge to development, but also the new argument that it put forward regarding women's claims to development assistance. It combined arguments about equality with evidence of women's productivity. Boserup showed that women in the past had been equally productive as men, and that differential access to technology has made them appear less productive with modernization. She not only rejected the welfare perspective, but also suggested that investment in women would increase the overall efficiency of development.

This argument made women's needs compatible with the central mission of development agencies and generated a spurt of activity. Coinciding with the rise of feminism in the US and Europe, Boserup's analysis was taken up by women staff in development agencies pressing for both professional opportunities and attention to programming for women. After hearing the presentation by women and development (WID) advocates, in 1973 the US State Department women added an amendment to the US Foreign Assistance Act requiring that US AID give "particular attention to programs ... to integrate women into the national economies." Known as the Percy amendment, this initiated a long process of integrating women into USAID development programs that has yet to be fully successful but has generated much research and considerable programming.

## **2.3 WID Concepts Take Hold**

The WID concept was rapidly incorporated into documents of the UN General Assembly and UN agency programs. One of the earliest was the African Training and Research Center for Women (ATRCW), born of a partnership in 1971 with the UN

Economic Commission for Africa, NGOs and government. Regional women's meetings on the continent during the 1960s had provided an African-driven agenda and network that attracted support from the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA), whose women and development program began in 1968.

In the nineteen-seventies, ATRCW challenged home economists in the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to move beyond conventional images of women and focus on their economic activities. Other aid agencies began to incorporate women's components in rural development projects with a few women staff. Norway began its "women oriented" program in 1975 and Canada initiated its interest with a 1977 seminar of aid agencies that eventually led to an official Correspondents' Group for the Office of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Development Assistance Committee (DAC). The OECD/DAC guidelines for WID issued in 1983 were widely influential amongst aid bureaucracies.

### **3. WID Strategies**

#### **3.1 Economic Development Focus**

The original focus of WID was economic development. WID advocates and scholars identified a number of reasons why women had been ignored in economic development programs: (a) the growth orientation of development, which did not recognize the value of human resources; (b) the western bias of development planners who saw women as solely in domestic roles, while men did productive activities; (c) the class background of national leaders which made them unable to understand poverty; and (d) the failure of development programs to empower the recipients to participate in decision-making. The consequence was the lumping together of all "targets" of development into undifferentiated categories without regard to gender roles, class interests, and cultural factors.

WID efforts focused on making visible the productive activities of women, especially those that did not enter the marketplace and therefore were not registered in national income accounts. Because women's production was not counted, they argued, it did not attract support. Women's agricultural production was often undercut by development activities such as commercial agriculture that removed land from women's subsistence cropping. WID advocates sought also to reveal the time pressures and drudgery of women's domestic activities, which often prevented them from taking on new activities proposed in development projects. They showed that women were not an unused labor force, as national planners had frequently assumed, but an overworked and under-productive force that could not become available for alternative work until their existing work was alleviated.

More controversially—because they challenged cultural self-perceptions—WID findings revealed the high incidence of de facto women-headed households, even in countries with strong cultural perceptions of family stability. The poverty of these households, due to women's lack of economic options, was captured in the phrase "feminization of poverty." They also showed how in societies with existing inequality between men and women, development often exacerbated inequality rather than

addressing it. Providing more income to a family without consideration of who controls labor and income may only increase the stress on women.

### **3.2 Support from In-Depth Studies**

One of the first WID strategies was research to document, disaggregate, analyze, and explain these observations. Time budget studies were a very useful tool in disclosing the hours women spent working, the wide variety and simultaneity of their tasks, and the seasonality of their work. Family income studies examined forms of income existing in kind as well as monetary form; on what this income was spent; and by whom. Studies of the informal labor market in cities looked at the sexual division of labor in production and sales, variety and size of enterprise, and integration into larger production systems. Reports of self-help housing, waste management, and community kitchens revealed women's work in sustaining communities.

There were many significant discoveries made here that are subsequently being incorporated into development planning. Among the most important was the documentation of women's significant roles in agricultural production, which meant that women must be included in agricultural extension networks for improvement of production. Most studies revealed that women devote a higher proportion of their income to family needs. In times of economic stress they are more willing to accept a variety of low-paid jobs and are less likely to migrate. Therefore, efforts to improve family well-being require that cash incomes be controlled by women.

Development agencies assumed they could remedy the neglect of women by including them in development projects. These tended to follow one of four approaches, each of which is still pursued in some measure. Continuing the tradition of rights-based feminism, early WID advocates following Boserup sought equity between men and women. They identified patterns of subordination that they sought to change through intervention by state and development agencies. When this equity approach generated resistance from the point of view that it constituted interference with a country's traditions, agencies shifted to a focus on alleviation of poverty: a basic needs strategy. Viewing women's poverty as a problem of underdevelopment rather than subordination, they developed programs to enable poor women to increase their productivity, usually in small-scale income-generating projects. These programs were under-funded and generally marginal to large-scale development activities, so they did not achieve sustained or broad impact.

### **3.3 Mainstreaming Aid to Women**

The focus of WID turned to "mainstreaming"—i.e. moving from women-specific projects to sector-based assistance such as health, family planning, credit, etc.—to integrate WID into all institutional operations. To emphasize the spread of responsibility, they promoted a change in language to the word "gender," downplaying a focus on special needs of women in favor of relations between men and women. Assessments of the difficulties in mainstreaming have shown, however, that the needed transformation involves far more than language change. Gender remains a useful

concept to some WID practitioners, but others see it as diverting critically needed attention from women's distinctive needs.

When the debt crisis in the late nineteen-eighties forced cutbacks in national budgets, national policy-makers turned to an efficiency approach to WID. This sought to make development more efficient by substituting women's time for cutbacks in social services. Women were relied upon to expand the time spent in seeking out health care, doing self-help community projects, etc. By this time, the World Fertility Survey findings regarding the strong linkage between women's schooling and their fertility provided another impetus to the efficiency approach to women's concerns.

Alongside WID, the earlier goals of legal rights, education, and empowerment were also pursued, though often with less emphasis. WID advocates argued that for poor women, economic power would have greater impact than unenforceable laws. The focus on women's literacy was cut back with the failure of many literacy campaigns that required women to interrupt midday economic activities for classes. Empowerment was a difficult goal for international development agencies that needed to work within the mandates of national governments cautious about the intrusion of what they saw to be Western feminism. Thus there arose a distinction between global feminism and women in development. Global feminists have been very critical of the efficiency or instrumental approach to WID because it leads to both distortions in programs, such as health programs that ignore women beyond childbearing age, and to an increase in the burden of women's unpaid work.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Carolyn Elliott** is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Vermont. She is a past president of the Association for Women's Rights in Development and led the AWID delegation to the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. As the founding director of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, she convened the first US academic conference on Women in Development at Wellesley College in 1976 and attended the first UN Conference on Women in Mexico City. She has worked with the Ford Foundation in New Delhi in women's studies and published research on women's education.