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# CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

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Writings on Gender and Development



Edited by Tina Wallace with Candida March

# PREFACE

**Tina Wallace**

Oxfam's Gender and Development Unit (GADU) was started in 1985 as a result of lobbying from a number of women employed both in the field and in Oxford. They were concerned about the way that women had been left out of, or actually disadvantaged by, the aid and development process. They stressed the need to focus on the roles of both men and women in society in order to understand women's subordinate positions; and to understand that any changes to improve the lives of women would have to involve changes to the whole society. So the focus of the Unit was gender rather than only women's issues, though much of the work is concerned with redressing the balance for women in development.

GADU has a very wide remit within the Overseas Division of Oxfam, but the primary purpose is 'to promote the integration of a gender perspective into all areas of Oxfam's work and to ensure that women as well as men benefit from Oxfam's programmes'. This involves GADU in working to support Oxfam staff as they seek out and listen to women to find new ways of working with women and men, and in developing new tools and concepts for understanding and improving the gender relations and the situation of women in diverse cultural settings. GADU is involved in project advice, staff training, the development of research and evaluation, sharing information through seminars and a Newspank, and developing written and audio-visual resources for use by staff and project partners.

The purpose of the Newspanks is to share material written by academics for field staff on gender issues; to share the experience of staff in the field; and to learn from the ideas of project partners. Over a four year period the packs have developed into a forum where both theoretical and practical ideas are shared across a wide range of countries, staff and interested academics. The range of writers and material covered is of interest to a wider audience than

the packs can reach, so the decision was made to select a number of key articles and publish them in this book.

The book covers a wide spectrum of issues all relating to gender as a development issue. It is divided into sections for easy use. The first section explores how some of the global issues of the 1980s and early '90s such as debt, structural adjustment, war and environmental degradation directly affect women and the relations between women and men. Many of the articles in this section have been written by academics in a way that is accessible to a wide range of people. Section Two looks at the specifics of women's experiences in different cultures, and how their subordination directly affects their day to day lives. The focus is especially on women's health and the range of factors that limit women's access to health care, and to all other critical resources, in the society. This section has largely drawn on the work of Oxfam staff or project partners.

The third section again primarily uses the work of academics to explore different ways of working with women. What tools and methods can be used to increase understanding of women's needs, responsibilities and rights, and to understand how existing gender relations affect these? Section Four is essentially a practical section, presenting a wide range of case studies which explore different ways of working with women — either in separate groups or in the wider community — to improve their lives. The range of direct experience is exciting and stimulating, and comes from staff and project partners.

The fifth section provides an opportunity for Oxfam staff to express their responses and views on the whole issue of working with women, and looking at gender relations. Gender is an intensely complex area of work which people have conflicting views on and feel very strongly about, and some of the reasons for this are explored here.

The book closes with a call for a wider and more radical vision of the future, where women are enabled to play their proper part. This call comes out of a Third World women's networking group called DAWN, an organisation growing in power and importance.

This is a book which is of interest to a wide range of readers: academics (who rarely have the chance to hear the views and experiences of practitioners); students of development, and development workers. It is a rare attempt to combine theory and practice in a way which illuminates the complexity and diversity of

issues involved in working with gender in development.

I would like to thank all those who made this book possible, especially those who found it so difficult to write, and to those who had the vision to lobby for the Unit in the beginning. This book is dedicated to one of these women, Joan Wright, who was killed so tragically in a car accident in Namibia in October 1990.

I would like to thank those who gave their support to this book especially Candy March, who worked on this project with me for several months, Helen O'Connell, Anne Penny and other colleagues past and present.

In closing it is important to stress that the views presented here are those of the authors, and not necessarily of GADU or Oxfam. This book is intended to provide a forum for open debate, and for exploring a wide range of complex issues.



# INTRODUCTION

## WHY GENDER IS A DEVELOPMENT ISSUE

APRIL BRETT

The issues concerning women and their part (or not) in the development process have been increasingly examined over the years. However, the ways of addressing these issues have varied as understanding of women's position in development, and of gender roles themselves, has grown. Although the principle of equality of men and women was recognised in both the UN Charter in 1945 and the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the majority of development planners and workers did not fully address women's position in the development process. Several researchers have shown that development planners worked on the assumption that what would benefit one section of society (men) would trickle down to the other (women) (Boserup 1970, Rogers 1980, Mazza 1987).

The ways of defining women's position in development has changed through the years:

In the 1950s and 1960s, women's issues in development were subsumed under the question of human rights, and women were viewed as objects to protect or make recommendations for but not necessarily to consult. UN Conventions of particular concern to women included:

1949 Convention for the Suppression of Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others

1951 Equal Remuneration for Men and Women Workers for Work of Equal Value

1952 Convention on the Political Rights of Women

In the 1970s, although women were still not necessarily consulted, their key position in the development process became more widely

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recognised. This was especially so in connection with population and food issues. Women were viewed as useful resources to be integrated into the development process, thus rendering the particular projects more efficient and more successful:

'These are the women (the more than 500 million women illiterates) upon whom the success of our population policies, our food programmes and our total development efforts ultimately rely. The success of these policies depends, in other words, on those who are least equipped to carry them out.' (Helvi Sipilä, *The Times*, 23.4.75)

In 1972 it was decided to declare 1975 'International Women's Year', which led into the UN Decade for Women.

In the 1980s there has been a growing trend towards seeing women as agents and beneficiaries in all sectors and at all levels of the development process. It is partly through an understanding of gender roles that this trend has emerged (Pietla, 1985).

In 1985 the UN decade culminated in a conference in Nairobi which, after a period of intensive discussions involving women from all over the world, resulted in the adoption of the 'Forward-Looking Strategies' (*Forward-Looking Strategies*, 1985).

The Forward-Looking Strategies took the main themes of the Decade for Women (equality, development and peace, with the sub-themes health, education and employment), and set out the obstacles facing women in each of these areas; proposed general strategies for overcoming them, and made recommendations to governments and other bodies for creating greater opportunities for equality for women at all levels.

### **What is gender?**

The conceptual distinction between sex and gender developed by Anne Oakley (Oakley 1972) is a useful analytical tool to clarify ideas and has now been almost universally taken up. According to this distinction sex is connected with biology, whereas the gender identity of men and women in any given society is socially and psychologically (and that means also historically and culturally) determined.

Biological, and certain physical conditions (chromosomes, external and internal genitalia, hormonal states and secondary sex

characteristics), lead to the determination of male or female sex. To determine gender, however, social and cultural perceptions of masculine and feminine traits and roles must be taken into account. There is considerable, but not total, correlation between female sex and feminine gender, and male sex and masculine gender.

Gender is learnt through a process of socialisation and through the culture of the particular society concerned. In many cultures boys are encouraged in the acts considered to display male traits (and girls vice versa) through the toys given to children (guns for boys, dolls for girls), the kind of discipline meted out, the jobs or careers to which they might aspire and the portrayal of men and women in the media. Children learn their gender from birth. They learn how they should behave in order to be perceived by others, and themselves, as either masculine or feminine. Throughout their life this is reinforced by parents, teachers, peers, their culture and society.

Every society uses biological sex as one criterion for describing gender but, beyond that simple starting point, no two cultures would completely agree on what distinguishes one gender from another. Therefore there is considerable variation in gender roles between cultures.

### **Division of labour in society**

The division of labour between the sexes is best explained by gender but because reproduction is based on a universal biological difference between the male and female sex, societies use this as a basis for allotting other tasks. These tasks are allotted according to convenience and precedents in the particular culture, and determine masculine and feminine roles:

Professor George Murdock has surveyed the data for 224 societies (mostly preliterate) and shows that the tendency to segregate economic activities in one way or another according to sex is strong. Taking a list of 46 different activities, he suggests that some are more often masculine than feminine, and vice versa. For example, lumbering is an exclusively masculine activity in 104 of his societies and exclusively feminine in 6: cooking is exclusively feminine in 158 and exclusively masculine in 5. Hunting, fishing, weapon making, boat building and mining tend to be masculine, while grinding grain and carrying water



tend to be feminine. Activities that are less consistently allotted to one sex include preparing the soil, planting, tending and harvesting the crops, 'burden bearing' and body mutilation.' (Oakley 1972, p.128.)

Even in child-rearing men play a substantial role in some societies:

'The Arapesh, for example, consider that the business of bearing and rearing a child belongs to father and mother equally, and equally disqualifies them for other roles. Men as well as women 'make' and 'have' babies, and the verb 'to bear a child' is used indiscriminately of either a man or a woman. Child-bearing is believed to be as debilitating for the man as it is for the woman. The father goes to bed and is described as 'having a baby' when the child is born.... The Trobriand Islanders are renowned for their ignorance of the father's biological role in reproduction, but they stress the need for the father to share with the mother all tasks involved in bringing up children.' (Oakley 1972, p.134-135.)

We see, then, that tasks and the division of labour do not relate to the sex of the individuals concerned, and so are not common to one sex from one culture to another, but are culture specific. Thus gender is culture specific.

Gender not only varies from one culture to another but it also varies within cultures over time; culture is not static but evolves. As societies become more complex, the roles played by men and women are not only determined by culture but by socio-political and economic factors.

### **Why is gender a development issue?**

The roles that women play are different in any given society, and their situation is determined by the legislation, religious norms, economic status or class, cultural values, ethnicity and types of productive activity of their country, community and household. Women are usually responsible for domestic work; the care of children, family health, cooking and providing food and other household services. In most societies they also play a major role in the productive activities of the family; in farming, paid domestic labour, services, industries and income-generating activities. In some societies they also have clear community roles.

In each of these areas — reproduction, production and the community — women have often been adversely affected by the

development process. There is a wide gap between women's high, yet unrecognised, economic participation and their low political and social power, and development strategies have usually taken the needs of the most vocal and politically active as their starting point. To understand gender the activities of men and women need to be addressed separately. The reproductive, productive and social or community roles women are playing must be looked at as well as the roles played economically and socially by men. By examining men's and women's roles a greater understanding of their needs and involvement in power and decision-making around specific tasks and issues will be reached.

Historically, development workers have used notions of gender imported from the North. The majority of projects were — and still are — based on the false assumption that the nuclear household supported by a non-productive wife dependent upon a male head, is universal. This is not the pattern for many cultures. In *The Family Among the Australian Aborigines*, Malinowski wrote:

'A very important point is that the woman's share in labour was of much more vital importance to the maintenance of the household than the man's work ... even the food supply contributed by the women was far more important than the man's share ... food collected by women was the staple food of the natives ... economically [the family] is entirely dependent upon women's work.' (Malinowski 1963 as cited in Oakley 1972, p 139.)

Studies of women's roles in agriculture from a sample of African peoples living in Senegal, Gambia, Uganda and Kenya show that women contribute between 60 per cent and 80 per cent of the total agricultural work done.

## **How to approach gender in development**

It is of vital importance in development work not to use imported notions of gender, nor regard 'the community' and 'the household' as the basic units. One must go beyond the household and break it down into its component parts. By assessing and understanding the gender roles in a given society the specific needs of women (and men) can be ascertained and addressed within projects (Moser and Levy 1986).

The primary practical requirement for incorporating a gender analysis into development is to consult with and listen to women so

that their roles and resulting needs are better understood. How the issues of gender are actually addressed depends upon the policy direction envisaged. (This is discussed more fully in Caroline Moser's and Sarah Longwe's articles later in this book.) One approach is to design projects and programmes to make life 'easier' for women and help them in their given gender tasks. For example, an agricultural project could include provision of support for female agricultural tasks, as well as those carried out by men. Women's needs for better equipment, improved seeds, and advice would be taken into consideration. In health projects the particular concerns of the women would be elicited from them and their priorities addressed in the project. On the domestic front, projects could aim to alleviate the drudgery and heavy physical demands of women's work by providing more efficient grinders or stoves, or improving women's access to water. Whether working with women alone or within the community as a whole the primary objective would be to enable women to perform their existing roles better.

An alternative but complementary approach is to challenge the status quo or address the perceived inequalities between men and women. This could involve, for example, working for change in laws that discriminated against women; increasing women's access to land; giving women decision-making power within projects, etc. The aim is social change and the empowerment of women. For agencies such as Oxfam, which espouse social change, justice and empowerment in their rhetoric, meeting women's needs for more radical change should be within the adopted policy approach to gender.

Why is it that addressing gender inequalities is taboo and yet tackling inequalities in terms of wealth and class is not? It is often argued that by addressing gender the traditions or culture of a society are being tampered with. This is not necessarily the case and the attitudes to gender may be no more 'traditional' than attitudes to class or power. When the traditions and cultural attitudes to gender are clarified, then the actual gender relations can be assessed and addressed within a programme or project. Development is a process that should involve all members of a society to the same extent, according to their individual needs.

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## THE FORWARD-LOOKING STRATEGIES

ANNE PENNY

Did you know that all member governments of the UN have agreed to the forward-looking strategies passed in Nairobi 1985?

The World Conference on the Advancement of Women was held by the UN in 1985 to review the achievements of the UN Decade for Women (1975-85) and to put forward proposals for the future. These proposals are detailed in *'The Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women'* (FLS, 1985). FLS is a critical document since, for the first time, all the member states of the UN have approved strategies to improve the lot of women everywhere. For the first time, women's groups will be able to put pressure on their governments to implement the policies agreed.

FLS was published with a great deal of hope, but few women believe that governments will instrument changes which are often detrimental to them, without pressure. Such far-reaching and radical strategies as those outlined in FLS will only be implemented if non-governmental organisations (NGOs), women's groups and individual women work to keep governments true to their word. To do this, we must all be aware of the principles agreed to by governments.

FLS includes sections on each of the major objectives of the Decade for Women: equality, development and peace. It also stresses the inter-relationship of these objectives with employment, health and education. The latter is seen as being especially important for the achievement of the Decade's aims. We will look, in this summary, at what FLS says about development. It should be remembered, however, that this is only one part of the extensive set of recommendations.

### **Obstacles to development**

The FLS identifies many reasons for the lack of development (it is interesting to note that the USA did not agree with the consensus

over several of these points). Briefly, we can see that most Third World nations are forced into dependence on 'developed' nations through terms of trade, high interest rates, embargoes and the export of inflation; these all cause inequalities. Development has also been hindered by the channelling of funds into the purchase of arms, and by racial and inter-tribal discrimination. The world recession — as with all phases of economic stringency — hits the poorest and the weakest, both in terms of nations and of individuals. Thus unemployment affects women more than men. The high level of indebtedness experienced by Third World countries has further retarded the process of integrating women in development. It is indisputable that the issue of women in development has received a low priority. What, then, is to be done?

### **Basic strategies**

Everyone should participate in formulating development policy. Generally, women are excluded from this process, in part because their status and earning power is low. FLS stresses again and again that women must be included in decision making at every level. This means that special measures must be taken on behalf of women. Initial emphasis should be placed on employment, health and education and this should be done at a grassroots level.

### **Employment**

In the field of employment, governments are encouraged to legislate to improve women's opportunities. Laws should be passed to enforce women's right to paid employment and economic independence; to enable women to choose their work, providing training where necessary; to protect part-time workers; to encourage flexitime; to change tax laws so that married women are not discouraged from working and to enforce equal pay and conditions for equal work.

In addition, facilities at work should be provided to encourage women workers, as should proper occupational health care, and parental leave and supplementary services for women with children. FLS stresses that equal employment opportunities should lead to women attaining economic self-reliance. Supporting this aim, there should be structures giving women access to land, capital and credit.

Attention is drawn to the major roles of women in the informal employment sector and in rural development. Governments are urged, therefore, to give support to women's organisations and, in particular, to women's co-operatives in these areas.

## **Health**

Women are vital providers of health care, free of charge to society and often at the expense of their own health. This should be taken into account by governments, who should promote primary health care for women. Women need better ante- and post-natal care in pregnancy. They also need to be able to control their own fertility. Women should be given a key role in the planning of sanitation and water projects.

Furthermore, health education should be designed to change attitudes towards women and women's health. Through such education and training more women should be involved in the health professions.

## **Education**

Education has a dual role for women. In the first place women need education themselves in order that they may have access to better jobs, particularly in the areas of science and technology; raised standards of women's education benefit the whole community. Therefore, women must have access to education and training at all levels, and this education must be practical and well adapted to women's needs. Particular importance should be given to education in the fields of health, nutrition and legal rights, while training should especially equip women in the field of science and technology.

The second function of education, which is mentioned in all areas discussed by FLS, is to eradicate the stereotyped views of women so prevalent in both developed and developing nations.

The above summarises only a fraction of the far-reaching recommendations contained in FLS. It is clear that such aims are only to be achieved by a major change in the status of women. It is high time for such a change and it is up to women everywhere to put pressure on their governments to fulfil the commitments made to FLS.

We should all keep in mind the spirit in which FLS was written, which is clearly demonstrated by the following excerpt:

'By the year 2000 illiteracy should have been eliminated, life expectancy for all women increased to at least 65 years of good quality life and opportunities for self-supporting employment made available. Above all, laws guaranteeing equality for women in all spheres of life must by then be fully and comprehensively implemented to ensure a truly equitable socio-economic framework within which real development can take place.' (FLS Para 35, 1985.)

*References*

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