GENDER DEBATES

Introduction
Candida March

An individual’s reactions to gender issues are rooted in experiences of, and attitudes towards, power, politics, culture and everyday social interaction. Concepts of gender roles, desirable behaviours and appropriate expectations are learnt from a very early age so that gender becomes an integral part of a person’s identity and gender roles are seen to lie at the centre of people’s cultural and religious heritage.

In consequence, many discussions around the issues of gender are highly contentious and all work in this field needs to be particularly sensitive, both in building awareness of the problems and in proposing strategies for confronting them. The extent to which gender inequalities should be challenged is a recurrent theme throughout the book (see, for example, April Brett’s and Caroline Moser’s articles). Approaches to working with gender issues vary widely.

Oxfam, like most development agencies, has only relatively recently recognised that the needs of women can be separate from those of men, and that they may require different development strategies. The views of Oxfam’s workers vary from those who do not accept that women are a separate or priority concern, and are unaware of the gender implications of their work, to those with a determination to support the improvements of women’s lives and status as a priority. For example, one country programme has a commitment:
'...to ensure that the interests of women are considered explicitly in each and every development programme. All projects and organisations we support must demonstrate their understanding of, and show commitment to, this issue before funding is approved.'

We end this book with some articles written by Oxfam staff members, giving a glimpse of some of the issues that are debated in our offices around the world. All the authors are working in the field, in Africa, Latin America or India (except Liz Gascoigne, who has recently returned to the UK from the Yemen).

The first four articles look at some of the basic beliefs and ‘myths’ that underpin approaches to development work in gender; tradition, the ‘system’, the ‘enemy’, the ‘household unit’, and ‘women as property’. Adelina Ndeto Mwau looks at African women’s existing ‘over-integrated’ role in development, and poses the question: ‘is it enough to integrate women into an already unequal and unjust economic system?’ This same question is at the heart of the analysis by Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), a network of Third World Women. In the challenging and powerful postscript to this book, Peggy Antrobus, a member of DAWN, stresses that women’s contribution has been central to traditional development but in a way that has been deeply exploitative of their time, labour and sexuality. She outlines DAWN’s alternative approach, the potential for change and a vision for the future.

The other articles consider in more detail the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in raising gender issues, and discuss the many dilemmas arising from development workers’ positions within or outside the system of gender roles. All explore ways in which the potential dangers of imposing values from the outside can be minimised. The articles echo to varying degrees Mona Mehta’s argument that the aim of outside interventions is not to ‘tamper’ with existing culture, but by constant dialogue and questioning create a new awareness, so that the people concerned can make their own choices for action.

Mona Mehta asks the fundamental question, also posed by April Brett in the Introductory section: ‘why is it that challenging gender inequalities is taboo, while challenging inequalities in terms of wealth and class is accepted?’ She explores the reasons why gender inequalities have been excluded from a class analysis of society. She
argues that accepting the taboo would mean that Oxfam should only attempt to make life easier for women in their accustomed tasks. But this ‘sticking plaster’ approach has been given up by Oxfam in other areas of development work, because it was seen not to offer real long-term help; the real need was for empowerment.

In exploring outside intervention, Barry Underwood and Abdou Sarr touch on the nature and role of feminists. Both recognise that women from different backgrounds have different perceptions of gender issues. Abdou Sarr calls for a questioning feminism, which discusses issues with both men and women in order to arrive at a resolution which is acceptable to all. Barry Underwood makes the point that ‘the irrelevance of many aspects of the feminist movement in the West to women in the developing countries is often commented on’. The view that all feminist analysis stems from Western feminism is an argument frequently put forward. The indigenous group Women in Nigeria (WIN) have an answer:

'It needs to be stressed that there were indigenous “feminisms” prior to our contact with Europe, just as there were indigenous modes of rebellion and resistance in the mythified African past. Therefore “feminism” or the fight for women’s rights and interests is not the result of “contamination” by the West or a simple imitation... One of the most recurrent charges made to and about Third World women is that of being blind copy-cats of Western European feminists. Many Third World feminists, in awareness of [these] “divide-and-rule” tactics... have replied perceptively that the accusers’ play is consciously conceived and maintained to confuse women, to bind them to their respective men and male systems and to prevent a dangerous comparing of notes and a potentially dangerous unity. The truth is that there has always been, in every culture, indigenous forms of feminism... as in Nigeria.’ (Mohammed and Madunagu, 1984.)

Peggy Antrobus, in her call for ‘an analysis which is feminist in orientation’, quotes DAWN as recognising that feminism has to be responsive to the different needs and concerns of women, as defined by them for themselves.

Abdou Sarr and Barry Underwood go on to look at the various groups that NGOs might support. The problem of finding appropriate ways of working with the ‘poorest of the poor’ is particularly acute when working with women. It is difficult for the
poorest women to organise, because of either cultural or economic constraints or lack of free time (see Betty Wamalwa’s and Linda Mayoux’s articles in Section Four and Eugenia Piza Lopez’s article in Section Two). Liz Gascoigne explores some of these problems, in the context of work in the Yemen. As she explains, ‘the bureaucratic and social aspects... encourage foreign agencies to co-operate with the more mainstream groups which are accessible, articulate and well-connected’. She then goes on to consider the very difficult ethical problems faced by NGOs working with gender issues in conservative, patriarchal societies. She believes that working with women, at whatever level, raises the possibility of a change in the role of women in the society, yet this is rarely explained to project partners; agencies seldom even acknowledge this moral dilemma. She argues that it is incumbent on agencies to open the debate, particularly on the extent to which it is appropriate to attempt to re-shape the social order.

In all societies, a project partner’s degree of gender awareness obviously shapes the role of the NGO. Deborah Eade suggests some types of support that can be given to groups with different attitudes to gender. She concludes by stressing that NGOs should encourage and build on existing levels of concern and analysis, but they cannot determine where the space for social change is going to emerge or what form it will take.

Finally, as Barry Underwood concludes, ‘the gender issue is not a component of development... it is, or should be, an integral part of the whole development process’. All projects should be considered with a gender perspective, though the problems encountered in working in this field should not be underestimated. Women are often ‘hidden’ members of society; barriers of language, culture and religion, and women’s heavy workloads and lack of free time may make direct contact with women impossible. In certain situations, women may be so unused to articulating their needs that they find it very difficult to get together and work on their problems. Men often find it hard to listen to what women are saying.

However, the challenge is there. The challenge to help women take an equal part in the struggle against injustice and poverty; to improve women’s position in every area of life and enable them to make meaningful choices and changes in their lives; to link up with women who are organised, and undergoing radical transformation; to seek out and work with those who are not; to network with
women across the country and the continent; to provide support for development staff involved in this work; and to find ways of improving their knowledge and understanding through different forms of training and information exchange. The challenge must be taken up by men and women; the need and responsibility for change lies with us all and, quoting Peggy Antrobus, 'our work is just beginning'.

References

'INTEGRATING WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT' IS A MYTH

ADELINA NDETO MWAU

In examining women’s role in development we must realise, and appreciate, that women are already over integrated, and ask why their roles are not recognised.

Women perform half of the world’s work (most women in Africa work approximately 17 hours a day) and yet women earn only one-tenth of the world’s income. Women’s share of labour in Africa is:

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<th>Task</th>
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<tr>
<td>Domestic work</td>
<td>95%</td>
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<td>Processing and storing</td>
<td>85%</td>
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<td>Weeding</td>
<td>70%</td>
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<td>Harvesting</td>
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<td>Caring for livestock</td>
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Let us look at the constraints that women face in participating in development. In Ghana women grow half of the food, one-third of cash crops like cocoa, rice, sugar and cotton, and manage two-fifths of coffee; yet 70 per cent of agricultural trainers assigned to work with women train them only in nutrition, food preparation and storage.

In Kenya agricultural workers visited men growing cash crops five times more often than they did women growing the same crop. Ten times more female than male farmers in Kenya have never spoken to an agricultural worker, yet it should be noted that in Kenya 38 per cent of the farms run by women manage to harvest the same yields as men. The facts show that women are farmers in Africa; the planners, policies and extension services treat women as invisible farmers.

The Report on the State of the World’s Women 1985 shows that women do almost all the domestic work, as well as productive work outside the home, which means most women work a ‘double day’. Women are one-third of the world’s official labour force; they are the lowest paid and are more vulnerable to unemployment than
men. Although there are some signs that the wage gap is closing slightly, women earn less than three-quarters of the wage of men doing similar work. Women are known to provide more health services than all other health services put together, and are involved in the new global shift in prevention of diseases.

Women continue to outnumber men among the world's illiterates by three to two. The education gap between girls and boys was closing until the economic crisis and structural adjustment programmes forced cuts in government spending in many countries. While 90 per cent of countries now have organisations promoting the advancement of women, women, because of their lack of confidence and their greater workload, are still not represented in the decision-making bodies of their countries.

The results point, again and again, to the major underlying cause of women's inequality. Woman's domestic role as a wife and mother — which is vital to the well-being of the whole society and consumes around half of her time and her energy — is unpaid and undervalued.

The questions that need to be addressed to demystify the myth of the need to integrate women into development are:

What is the relationship between gender subordination and economic policy formulation?

Who formulates the policies?

How much more should women be integrated into development while the emphasis is focused on women's traditional roles and their productive activities in their societies are ignored?

Is it enough to integrate women into an already unequal and unjust economic system?

Adelina Ndeto Mwau has been a gender project officer in the Oxfam office in Nairobi for two years. Before this she worked for development education in Kenya with the Catholic Church.
Why is it that challenging gender inequalities is seen as tampering with traditions of culture, and thus taboo, while challenging inequalities in terms of wealth and class is not?

What if we accept the taboo? If we accept that challenging gender inequalities is taboo then we can only support projects and programmes aimed at making life easier for women and helping them in their given tasks. Would this approach be acceptable? If we look at Oxfam’s history it can be seen that Oxfam gave up this ‘sticking plaster’ approach to its work many years ago, as it became obvious that it was not providing real, long-term help to the poor. Oxfam now aims to support projects which identify and remove the root causes of poverty and exploitation.

In 1961 we accepted the challenge of the United Nations Freedom From Hunger Campaign: ‘Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.’ Now even this is not enough. The challenge to Oxfam is not just to teach a person to fish but to help him or her get access to the water to fish in.

Our approach to gender development has to be in harmony with Oxfam’s overall aims and ways of working. Thus, to take the ‘easier life’ approach to gender development would be contrary to the rest of our work and quite unacceptable.

If we claim that the taboo is unacceptable, then we have to deal with the concern that challenging gender inequalities is ‘tampering’, while challenging other inequalities of class is not.

I would like first to draw attention to the fact that the existence of gender inequalities is accepted without argument. I have never found, in meetings at the organisation level or village level or in individual discussions, denial by men or women that there are gender inequalities. Thus, the reluctance to challenge this accepted fact of gender inequality is very puzzling. I understand it as arising from two deeply embedded concepts in society: the concept of a ‘household unit’ in class analysis, and the concept of ‘woman as property’ — man’s or family’s.
The first, the concept of a 'household unit', exists in most class analysis. Exploitation and inequalities are seen as inter-unit and not intra-unit, i.e. between households — rich and poor, powerful and powerless. This leads to the concept of a unit as indivisible and sacrosanct. The challenging of gender inequalities is an intra-unit question. It would be seen as potentially dividing the sacrosanct and necessary unit, leading to a collapse of the whole class model. This would make it an unacceptable proposition, and experience shows that most left-wing movements do not accept the idea of challenging gender inequalities, which is seen to be divisive and ultimately a weakening of the class struggle.

The second concept of 'women as property' was, and still is, widely prevalent in many cultures. (The example of the selling of wives in the market place can be found in the 18th century history of England too!) In India, many tribal societies follow a system of 'bride price', where the bride's parents are paid a sum of money and then the girl's work and wages become the property of the husband. Hindu society, too, treats women as goods which are transacted, through the dowry system. Once this concept is accepted in a society, and the woman is seen as property, any attempts to challenge ensuing inequalities are treated as unwarranted interference in matters of 'property'. Certainly none would wish to or have a right to interfere in a man's treatment of his land — it is his property and so he has a right to do what he wishes with it.

This attitude of non-interference is obvious when there are quarrels in the village. If it is between two men, be they brothers even, others will intervene and set up a system to settle it amicably. However, if it is between a man and his wife, it will be considered a personal matter and any interference would be termed unwarranted! Similarly, divorces will come to the community leadership; but whereas in other disputes both parties are present and listened to, in divorce the woman rarely appears; at best, some other men represent her and settlements are made by the men amongst themselves.

The 'easier life' approach to working with women is acceptable to most people concerned, as it does not challenge society's structures and power relations. It is true for all development issues that the challenge of root causes means conflict; and very few, even among the poor, are ready for it. In the case of challenging gender inequalities we are faced with a two-fold problem. Our present partners — mostly men — find it difficult to take this issue up, as it
implicates them, too, as men and thus they find it very threatening. The women, without adequate awareness, are not ready for the challenge and ensuing conflict. However, just as in all development issues we identify the root causes of a problem and support their removal, in this, too, we cannot close our eyes to the truth.

Certainly, in the case of the landless poor demanding their right to land, there will be a challenge to the existing culture of domination. Similarly, if women demand a fairer system of marriage settlement, there will have to be a change in the existing culture. It can be seen as ‘tampering’, in either case, if support is given thoughtlessly, leading to needless conflict which the people are not prepared for.

Tampering can be defined as frivolous, thoughtless and disrespectful interference. Any useful intervention from outside needs adequate knowledge and understanding of the different values and norms of the particular culture. It has to involve a respectful questioning of the existing inequalities in the society. Even then, any outside intervention runs a high risk of tampering through inadequate knowledge and imposition of values.

The way to minimise this is by constant dialogue and exchange of ideas through questioning, which will lead to a new awareness and will bring the people concerned to a position where they can make their own choice of action. For example, a hilly tract of land with poor farming could be improved by terracing — a good idea. But if an outsider went in and carried out the programme, it would be an imposition leading to unknown consequences for the beneficiaries. However, if a dialogue were set up and the idea of terracing introduced, the people concerned might take it up on their own, or adapt it to their own methods, leading to good development.

Women, just as much as poor men, have the right to new ideas and awareness. They can then, through their own awareness, choose to challenge the inequalities if they wish to do so. Oxfam, on its part, has the right and the duty to help poor women to reach this awareness and exercise their choice.

It is high time we buried this bogey of ‘tampering with culture’, and took up the long and difficult task of gender development, which affects half our partners who, till now, have remained silent spectators.
STRATEGY FOR THE LIBERATION OF AFRICAN WOMEN: THE VIEW OF A FEMINIST MAN

ABDOU SARR

Men have the power

It is indisputable that, historically, tradition, religion and the law have given power to men. Therefore the inequality with which we now live is approved by tradition, by religion and also by the law. This has created a sort of mental oppression. A woman may be unable to consider herself as oppressed, because she believes that tradition is the source of her responsibilities and problems. Therefore she is not in conflict with men and does not consider men as her enemy. In the same way, men do not consider women as particularly oppressed because tradition, laws and religion have made the men powerful individuals. We, who want to change the situation, are outside this system and are therefore presented with a delicate problem. This is the case whether we are feminists, governments or NGOs like Oxfam.

If we want to change the existing situation, which is accepted by both men and women, we have to work to raise the level of people's consciousness. We are in the throes of a struggle, almost a revolution: a revolution entails the reversal of an established order, and the current situation is an order, an equilibrium. A revolution must be waged against an enemy whose behaviour we must try to change. If we do not carry on the struggle together with men we risk achieving no victories, or only very short-lived ones, and ultimately we will have no effect. That is why I want to insist that a very hard-line, purist feminism will not resolve the problem.

The need for change

What will resolve the problem is a type of feminism which is well thought out, which is not narrow, which poses problems, which asks questions, and which discusses issues with both men and women to arrive at a resolution which is acceptable to all. It is a revolution which must be carried out subtly. Without men, without
these 'enemies’, success is impossible since the weapons available to women are very light in comparison to those which are available to men. This is not to say that the struggle is impossible but that it must be carried out in an intelligent manner. This leads me to pose several questions which concern us all: What kinds of projects should be undertaken for women? What strategy should be adopted in women’s projects? What are the benefits and for whom?

We must reflect on these questions in order to try to understand the route of the ‘revolution’ in which we are involved.

What projects for women?

Women have always been engaged in a number of activities which can be covered by projects: activities in agriculture, at the household level, income generating activities, productive activities, those concerning children’s education, as well as activities concerning the well-being of the family. Nevertheless, women are currently carrying out these tasks under extremely difficult conditions which include lack of time, of education, of organisation, of physical strength, etc. The resulting image is of women working relentlessly without ever achieving concrete results because they are always very poor, suffering ill-health and constantly tired. Despite all her activities, despite all that she does, the woman still remains the poorest person in the community. She deserves a ‘revolution’ to solve her problems.

Nevertheless, many projects for women have failed. Sometimes this is because the activities that have been undertaken have exceeded the technical knowledge of the women and sometimes because the social organisation which should have underpinned these projects was not sufficiently taken into account when the projects were planned. Unfortunately, the activities which preoccupy women often fall outside the categories which traditionally interest NGOs.

NGOs fund projects in the fields of health, agriculture, training, etc. When women’s activities fall outside these categories NGOs do not directly support such activities. One can cite dozens of projects which NGOs have rejected in favour of activities which do not interest women (or which do not interest them enough); or where women’s projects have not been a priority in comparison to those wanted by men.
Which women to support?

What we have seen since the upsurge of feminism is that all the rare initiatives which have taken place in the rural field have been directed towards women who are already organised; in other words, towards the groups of women we already know. We have ignored many women who are very important in this struggle; for example, young women, peasants and urban women. Young women have not been sufficiently well organised, or have had short-lived organisations which, therefore, cannot be taken into account. Nevertheless, it is wrong to talk of liberation without including young girls, who are the women of tomorrow. The liberation of women is a problem of awareness, so if one does not intervene on behalf of the young, one will always perpetuate the current situation. There is a lack of methodology in the conscientisation of these girls. This gap has never interested NGOs nor even feminists. Oxfam should think about methods of intervention in the education of young women.

Urban women have also been forgotten. They are not as organised as those in the rural situation, and we currently have no method for reaching them. These women, who still maintain links with their villages, could be spokeswomen for them. The rapidly changing urban environment is one which could most easily sustain liberating changes for women.

Urban feminists have also been neglected. I believe that they have a potential which we have not exploited. Thanks to their position, their knowledge and their studies, they can bring women’s plight to the attention of men who have the power of the law. But I maintain that we in NGOs are not trying to support these women, to help them to fight to change things. We have a very narrow point of view, and we risk losing a crucial element if we do not integrate these women into the struggle.

What strategy?

We must consider our strategy. I believe that the struggle for women’s liberation is a struggle at the level of consciousness; the strategy must take that as its starting point. I would like to suggest a number of important points. The first is the integration of men into women’s projects. They should not be integrated so that they become actors, technicians or even beneficiaries, but one must integrate them in order to have their approval and support at the
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outset. The problem of women should be perceived in the context of the community and one must never marginalise women’s activities. All projects which are conceived without men risk being marginalised and not having the approval of men.

Serve women, not ourselves

Secondly, the projects should be projects for women and not projects for donor organisations. We often make projects for ourselves. We pose questions about women and the women respond in the way that we want them to. Then it becomes a project which belongs to an NGO instead of to the women. It is normal for the women not to communicate their aspirations in the beginning. The NGO can arrive with ideas or hypotheses, but on a short visit may not perceive what the women are feeling. So case studies, and days spent in villages, are essential before a project can be funded. One also needs a woman in the team with whom the women can discuss issues.

Thirdly, it is important that women do not do all the work on the projects, or do work which does not benefit them. Take, for example, the case of Federation des ONG au Senegal (FONGS), a NGO uniting men and women for the introduction of a large programme of credit and savings. At the time of the final meeting — at which we had to take decisions — FONGS asked the women to contribute 2,500 francs, while it asked the men for 5,000 francs. When the men explained that the sum would be 2,500 for the women because they were poor, the women accepted it. The problem was that this money serves as a bank guarantee, which allows FONGS to have access to inputs of seeds and pesticides. The women, who have no land, have no need of inputs. Women contributed so that men could have new equipment. The women were exploited; they had stretched their resources to make their contributions, but the money went to finance inputs of no interest to them.

Follow women’s existing knowledge

We must also take into account the strategies developed by women. Women have always been very ingenious in, for example, the area of credit and savings or organisation. However, usually the NGOs arrive and propose a modern kind of management, which kills the systems which have been developed, perhaps over centuries or at
least over decades, and which have been proved in their particular community. The NGOs then create another system which is not appropriate for the society. One can cite as an example the setting up of a cereal bank at Bamachellan. The religion of the people (Muslim) forbade charging interest, yet the bank needed to make a profit on the scheme. The peasants found a solution. They proposed a system which worked like this: in June the bank lent an individual a sack of millet worth, at the time, 8,000 francs. At harvest time the individual paid back the 8,000. Since the grain was cheaper at harvest, the bank could afford to buy more grain and thus make a profit. I believe that such systems, developed by individuals, are very useful. They allow us to listen to people and see what they suggest. On the other hand, as NGOs, we cannot be passive. There are things which we must suggest, because not everything that happens in the rural situation is ideal. We must consider this whether we are foreigners or nationals. To listen only to the peasant and only to do what he or she advises is a very easy attitude, and one that we must suppress, because it does not always work.

Who benefits?
The last question which we should look at is ‘who are the beneficiaries?’ Projects can appear to have many benefits, in monetary terms, in terms of health, and in terms of the alleviation of women’s workloads. One must avoid the ‘mirage’ effect, so that a project does not disappoint women. For example, the first generation of projects on sewing and embroidery have cost a lot in terms of women’s time and have not actually achieved anything in terms of profit for these women. We must, therefore, distance ourselves from this kind of project, which only overburdens women and which discourages women from risking any attempt to gain liberation. We must be cautious about the notion of community development, which has been relied on a good deal theoretically. We have seen, for example, projects where NGOs have bought animals for ‘the community’, but in fact the men have looked after them and benefited, in keeping with their traditional role. One can also cite communal gardens where everyone works together. We must think a lot about such projects, because they are introducing systems which are not traditional systems. Therefore, if we want people really to benefit, we must support the system which is traditional and which has given results.
The last thing that I want to say is that in the hierarchy of benefits, the first benefit should be the alleviation of work. For example, Senegalese women spend 45 per cent of their time pounding and grinding millet. The first thing that an NGO must think of, therefore, is to try and help women in this area. If one does not do so, a woman will not be sufficiently strong or have enough time to reflect on her situation and carry on the struggle of liberation.

(Translated by Anne Penny, GADU.)

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GENDER IN DEVELOPMENT AND FEMINISM: RELATED BUT SEPARATE ISSUES

BARRY UNDERWOOD

Both Mona Mehta’s article ‘Gender, development and culture’ and Abdou Sarr’s ‘Strategy for the liberation of African women’ seem to agree on the need to change society, but here the similarity ends. Mona Mehta proceeds to analyse the conflict that must ensue and states that one must be prepared for this right down to the level of the family. Abdou Sarr, in effect, makes a plea for avoiding conflict at this level. I find the former argument more consistent and convincing.

The answer or the problem?

I would like to challenge Abdou Sarr’s assumption that ‘we are outside the system’ of oppression of women. Where gender is concerned, we are all, both men and women, part of the problem. It is our attitudes that keep the system going. There are countless examples whereby the ‘system’ of law, religion or tradition has been changed because of a change in perception and attitudes. It is our attachment to traditional attitudes that prevents changes from taking place more frequently or faster.

As a survey of gender attitudes among Oxfam staff in the Indian sub-continent showed, we all, men and women of all cultural backgrounds, subtly and not so subtly, hold on to traditional attitudes that keep women oppressed.

Who is the enemy?

In a class analysis of society there has to be an enemy, and in the gender situation Abdou Sarr defines this ‘enemy’ as ‘men’. But Mona Mehta has clearly shown that class analysis does not recognise the problem of intra-class gender inequality, particularly among the downtrodden.

In gender inequality there can be no traditional ‘enemy’ in the Marxist sense of that word. If there is an enemy at all, it is the enemy within each one of us, the attitudes that perpetuate an unjust
system by refusing to challenge it fully. If we encourage women to see men as enemies, then we, and they, are surely headed for conflict of the most unproductive kind.

A gender compartment?
If we carry this idea of the 'enemy' within each one of us further, then it is clear we cannot have a separate development compartment labelled 'gender'. Abdou Sarr seems to be saying this when he says men should be 'integrated' into women's projects. But why should men be integrated in order for the projects to have men's 'approval'? Surely this is a reinforcement of the idea of men having power over women?

Men do need to be integrated into women's projects — but for countless years why have we not been saying that women ought to be integrated into men's projects? The question is not one of seeking approval from either men or women. It is a question of believing in the essential equality of women and men, and we therefore need to ensure that all projects, whether community, men's or women's, are examined from the gender point of view. We should not think of the 'kinds of projects to be undertaken for women', or 'the strategy to be adopted in women's projects' — this is a compartmentalised view of the gender problem. Inappropriate projects and strategies are inappropriate, whether for men, women or the community.

We need to develop our gender perspective so that it is an integral part of all our development work and not a separate compartment on the development 'train'.

The myth of sisterhood
There is a fairly widespread belief that there is a unity among women, a caring for each other. In the feminist movement this belief often holds true. Many people carry this concept through to the development field, believing that 'sisters' will carry their concern for each other through to a caring for poor women. Indeed, it is quite likely that women sensitive to their own plight will also be sensitive to the plight of other classes of women, but it is not necessarily so. The irrelevance of many aspects of the feminist movement in the West to women in developing countries is often commented on. Similarly, there are obvious differences of perception between urban women and rural women in developing countries. Class is, or can be, a barrier between women.
As I have argued, the ideals and aims of the women's movement are to be carried into all aspects of our development work; but class is inherent in the women's movement, as in most things, and so we should be careful to distinguish between the aims of the movement and the movement itself. Class is an important part of our development analysis, and we should not discard it when it comes to development of women.

Who are our funds for?

It is tempting to succumb, as many do, to the concept of 'sisterhood' and say that class does not matter when it comes to gender issues. We hear arguments in favour of support for urban feminists. Urban feminists can be useful, because of their sensitivity to gender issues, in development work for the poor and it is primarily for the relief of the poor from poverty and oppression that our funds are given. Urban feminists can be linked with groups of the poor and be used as consultants and resource people, and can help to disseminate to a wider audience an understanding of gender issues among the poor; but generally, unless they are poor urban feminists, our funds should not be used for their support. Withholding financial support from such groups does not mean we disapprove of them, or that we ignore them. On the contrary, it simply means that we are clear in our priorities.

Tradition — another sacred cow

Just as Mona Mehta correctly pointed out that we shy away from intervening at the family unit level in development, as this is considered a sacrosanct unit, so many people see all outside interventions as inappropriate and say that we should support 'traditional' roles and systems.

There is a certain romantic view of tradition that many adhere to. Carried to its extreme, this view supports the idea of preserving the ethnic purity of groups and cultures, and of encouraging only those technologies and projects that are 'appropriate' to that culture. No doubt there is much that is good about tradition and continuity. But there is also a lot that is wrong with it. As Abdou Sarr says in the opening line of his paper, tradition, along with religion and law, is what has given power to men. And it is usually tradition which keeps women oppressed. We should therefore be careful in falling back on traditional projects and approaches in our work.
But what, anyway, do we mean by the terms 'traditional' and 'appropriate'? In the case of the first generation of women's projects such as sewing and embroidery, Abdou Sarr seems to be saying that introduction of such projects are alien and not traditional. Yet they can equally be seen as very traditional in that they reinforce the idea of women being gentle creatures whose place is in the home only. Both points of view are partially correct, but neither of the analyses is fully correct.

The last word

To sum up then, I believe there is a struggle, and an enemy — but it is within each one of us. The gender issue is not a component of development, like agriculture or income generation; it is, or should be, an integral part of the whole development process. We are not apart from the system of oppression of women — we are a part of the system. In development we should not be primarily concerned with the feminist movement, our priority should be the issues of poor women.

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FINDING WAYS OF WORKING WITH WOMEN IN PATRIARCHAL SOCIETIES

LIZ GASCOIGNE

It is a declared aim of Oxfam that women should be fully involved in all aspects of the development process. The extent to which this ideal is, and can be, attained is determined partly by the gender awareness of the development personnel, and partly by the existing social order in a particular country. In countries whose traditions are patriarchal and where change is strongly resisted, involving women in development may be extremely difficult. The development approach has to be shaped in such a way that it is compatible with the existing culture and social order. In such societies, Oxfam faces many problems in taking a gender perspective and must accept that social change can only be a long-term process.

"Yemen: a case study of cultural and bureaucratic constraints"

Yemen Arab Republic is an example of a strongly patriarchal and conservative society. Men are accorded responsibility for women as part of the traditional set of social norms and an Islamic way of life. The practical manifestation of this is that the majority of women are protected and their social mobility restricted as far as possible, in order to preserve the honour of the family. Women have an extensive reproductive role that includes all activities which contribute to the reproduction of the next generation, such as subsistence food cultivation and making the family’s clothes and other household items. They also play an important productive role in those activities, usually agricultural, which contribute to the household’s income; but their involvement in the social and political domains is extremely limited.

The different roles of women can be categorised according to their levels of social mobility. The activities which constitute their

* This article was written before the unification of Yemen in 1990.
reproductive and productive roles fall into the private sphere and take place within the home and compound of the extended family, and other areas which women frequent while carrying out their household and agricultural duties. The activities which would be associated with a social or a political role would necessitate women's greater involvement in the public sphere of the 'outside world'; for example, would require visits to the market, to government centres and other institutions and services of conurbations, and involve the use of public transport.

In order for women to participate more fully in development activities, their increased involvement in the public sphere is a prerequisite. But there are great problems for women in terms of their access to the public sphere. There are two contradictory trends concerning women's seclusion and social mobility. Most notably in the three main cities, there is a growing acceptance of girls attending school, and women's employment is very gradually becoming a recognised option — and for poorer families it is an economic necessity. While this trend can be found to a lesser extent in rural areas, there is a counter trend developing from the new opportunities arising from the urban and overseas earnings. Higher status or richer rural families may choose to increase women's seclusion through new agricultural practices, for example by hiring labour, sharecropping, or selling land; and by the purchase of fuel for cooking, water, household items and food. Rural women react to this with mixed feelings — on the one hand they are gaining a more relaxed and secure lifestyle in the private sphere but on the other it restricts their level of social interchange and mobility. Ironically the 'modern' lifestyle to which many rural women aspire is one in which they are less active in their productive role and spend their time in domestic and leisurely pursuits.

Yemen has some of the worst social and health indicators in the world, with over 90 per cent of women illiterate (as compared with about 60 per cent of men), an infant mortality rate of 159 per thousand, and 70 per cent of the population having no access to potable water. Given the high correlation between improved family health and women's literacy, Oxfam has concentrated upon these two aspects of development work. Despite the relative acceptability of projects in these two areas, it has still been necessary to take a fairly cautious approach to ensure that credibility with project partners, the community, local leaders and government officials is
Women in patriarchal societies

built up. It is always extremely difficult to recruit women who have any degree of social mobility, but some of the rural health projects supported by Oxfam have shown that it is possible to convince communities of the acceptability of training female health workers on residential courses away from the village.

The Yemeni Government has a top-down approach to development, and all co-operation involving a foreign agency has to be officially approved. In addition to cultural constraints, the nature of Yemeni officialdom effectively deters women from playing an active role in planning and implementing development projects. Although a few women do now hold more influential ministerial positions, the bulk of the bureaucratic procedures associated with development work have to be carried out by men. Thus women rely upon men’s goodwill in facilitating development activities which benefit women. An important role for Oxfam is to assist women in negotiating with officialdom to try to ensure that national programmes are adapted to reflect their demands.

Yemeni official development plans include women in a socially acceptable way by mainly proposing activities linked to their domestic role. Women’s so-called ‘involvement’ in national sector plans usually relegates them to a passive situation of being ‘trained’ or ‘employed’, where they are not adequately consulted on essential decisions. However, Oxfam does co-operate with projects where women are at the very best only ‘included’, on the premise that supporting women entering the public sphere both increases the pool of more active and aware women and makes the community more accustomed to the notion of women having a respectable public life. As might be expected, this pool of women will tend to have limited aspirations about their role in Yemen’s development because they share the values of a patriarchal society. Nevertheless, it is important that, at the very least, women are brought together; there then exists the possibility of interaction with women who have a more progressive vision of women’s position in Yemen. Even where Oxfam is able to identify a Yemeni woman project partner with potentially good ideas, her effectiveness will depend on the extent to which she is able to generate a broad basis of support and understanding amongst other women.

In Yemen, Oxfam aims to work with groups which are marginalised in the development process — that is, the poorest, most disadvantaged and inaccessible groups. However, the bureaucratic
and social aspects of the working context encourage foreign agencies to co-operate with the more mainstream groups which are accessible, articulate and well-connected. While not suggesting that the latter should be totally ruled out as suitable partners, their need in comparison with the marginalised groups is not as great. In both groups, women are systematically excluded from the political and economic sphere which determines their lives, and Oxfam has to concentrate upon finding ways of encouraging women to take a greater role in this sphere. Given the additional constraints upon women from marginalised groups, working with them is expected to be a much slower process.

The question of how Oxfam takes a less stereotyped approach to women's involvement in development brings us back to a recurrent concern in the Yemen programme: how to approach working with female or male grassroots groups in initiatives which do not clearly fall into national sector plans. Foreign agencies are likely initially to find it difficult to contact women from marginalised groups or areas (especially if they are remote) except through official channels. Subsequently there can be problems in arranging official approval for co-operation, particularly if the initiative does not fall into the traditional range of women's projects. There must also be a suitable male representative of the women who is prepared to follow through the administrative procedures, the women being unhappy to spend hours or even days going from one (male) government department to another.

To date, Oxfam has taken a relatively cautious approach in order to build up a basis of confidence with project partners. This has usually involved negotiating with men so that they will allow women to participate. The intention is to demonstrate that women can usefully and honourably be involved; and the hope is that this will in turn facilitate more women to participate.

In Yemen the Oxfam programme needs to have a coherent approach in which the social and institutional constraints upon women's real involvement in development projects are recognised and overcome, as far as this is reasonable. All projects, whether or not they are specifically targeted at women, must be assessed and implemented with full regard for their direct and indirect impact on women. Oxfam's work needs to be based upon a comprehensive understanding of the reality of Yemeni women's lives and the various opportunities that they have for improving their position.
Some implications

This article has taken the Yemen as a case study of a conservative, patriarchal society. Other societies in which Oxfam works, including Sudan, Somalia and Afghanistan, operate in a similar way and the following comments hold for all such societies.

In these societies, due to a combination of cultural and bureaucratic constraints, Oxfam can only expect to proceed cautiously and to work towards a very limited form of social change. Initially, ensuring that women are 'included' is a small step forward. Simply bringing more females into the public sphere (be it by attending classes, training or participating in some form of project activity) in itself signifies an immense social change: it is increasing the acceptability of a new concept that women leaving the private sphere of the extended family can retain family honour. However, it may take another generation or two before there is any more fundamental change in women's position.

The process of social change in a community cannot be easily contained, once the momentum is under way. Girls and women who have glimpsed life in the public sphere often begin to realise how constricted their activities are, how limited is their role in actual decision making and how prescribed their thinking has been. For those who try to become more active, most will meet with resistance and even ridicule from their families; particularly from male relatives but also from conservative female relatives who adhere to social norms. Ultimately, women who attempt to change their lives will probably be frustrated, but that may strengthen their resolve that life for their daughters will be different. A few women will be permitted to pursue a training or occupation outside the normal range; but usually only until they can be persuaded to marry. From then on, their commitment will be to their husband and children. By and large it is still only women who manage to remain single who have any prospect of playing an active role in the public sphere. These women, of course, encounter other limitations from never having married. There are also a few exceptional women who reach positions of prominence by virtue of their husband's connections.

We can make a simple distinction between development agencies whose work with women aims at the provision of basic needs, for example, a primary health care system; and those agencies whose work with women has a more strategic aim, for example, con-
scientisation through projects which aim at the empowerment of women. In the context of a conservative, patriarchal society, a basic needs project for women is far more likely to be accepted by community leaders and government alike; whereas a women's project with a strategic aim would probably be rejected outright. However, even basic needs projects, because they involve females entering the public sphere, may help to bring about a level of change in the long term which accords with a more strategic aim. Of course, agencies are not the only influence; there is a dynamic of change in all societies in response to changing environmental, political and economic conditions as well as contact with neighbouring regions. But agencies are faced with a moral dilemma, which is rarely acknowledged, let alone discussed.

The question that aid agencies working in conservative societies have to face is to what extent should the long-term implications of the involvement of women in development work be addressed as an issue? Should the underlying strategic aim of fundamental social change be disclosed? Should agencies encourage communities to strive for development when the exercise will ultimately lead to a substantial shift in social values? Should agencies assess their role in terms of the degree of cultural interference or social disintegration that is being foisted on communities?

When considering the role of women in development it is important that cultural and ethical concerns are not neglected. Yet agencies do not state their underlying strategic aims when discussing prospective projects with community leaders, government officials and the women concerned; although it is quite common for these long-term aims to be stated in written and verbal reports to the head office. Perhaps the fact that the 'plot' is not usually fully revealed to local participants is because it all seems such a natural sequence of events, and because at the outset it seems too premature. But no doubt another reason is that the agency realises that the project would then become unacceptable to the local leaders and community. Certainly, the agency is not being deliberately deceptive; it just seems to be one of the practices which is accepted under the 'greater good' of targeting women and children.

But people in conservative societies are not so naive that they do not realise what is at stake. The development project under discussion may sound a great idea to the community but in practice
it is very often difficult to get families to offer their girls and women as candidates for the training course. This reflects an unease about respectable women embarking upon any activity which brings them into the public sphere. It will probably be the poorer and lower status families who allow their females to participate because any payments involved will be very useful to the family. The fact that candidates are not from a cross-section of the community can in turn create problems with the project's acceptability and credibility later on. In a society where women are protected and secluded, families recognise that training their girls and women is the thin end of the wedge — at worst, if they are literate they may be suspected of writing love letters and if they are mobile, of adultery.

The intention of this article is not to suggest that agencies take a reactionary stance when working in strongly patriarchal, conservative societies, but rather to outline some of the issues that have to be faced at the outset. An element of subversiveness currently exists when international agencies work in such societies. It is therefore incumbent on agencies, and especially those with a strategic needs approach, to open the debate on the implications of working with women, in particular the extent to which it is appropriate to attempt to reshape the social order. Societies themselves have to accept that development and social change are inextricably linked. It is the role of development workers to ensure that communities and officials are aware of the full implications of the development process. It is not acceptable for the agencies to be aware of them and yet not disclose them.

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HOW FAR SHOULD WE PUSH?

DEBORAH EADE

We do not see our relationship with projects to be one of using financial power to 'push' anything, even were we clear about what Oxfam wanted to push.

Firstly, unless the local counterparts are convinced of the validity, importance and priority of concerning themselves with gender analysis in a self-critical way, then no amount of 'pushing' will give rise to authentic — let alone effective — responses. Rather, one ends up with a plethora of so-called women's projects. These, far from developing an autonomous space for women to use for organisational purposes, are little more than appeasements to 'agency obsessions' and/or fund-raising devices on the one hand; and a means of capitalising on agency money to expand their affiliated membership on the other.

Secondly, the relationship with Oxfam, however rich, forms only a small component of the wide range of stimuli, influences and pressures experienced by our project partners and we would be arrogant to assume that our role is (or should be) the determining factor.

Thirdly, in the specific case of gender, it is not clear what Oxfam would be 'pushing' in any case: ideological convictions? Formal agendas for staff and projects? Standard reporting and data collection methodologies? Or how: by withdrawing funding if projects fail to come up to our idea of what their standards ought to be, and which Oxfam itself certainly does not meet? Obviously not. But the questions themselves do serve to underline that the 'pushing' has to come from the inside, from local people with the strength and authority to assume the challenge, and not from the outsiders with the analysis and the money. Put succinctly by a Nicaraguan participant in the IV Encuentro Feminista Latinoamericano, at Taxco, Mexico in 1987, 'las revoluciones no se exportan; las revoluciones nacen de la necesidad de un pueblo': revolutions are not exportable but grow out of people's needs.

Assuming, then, that we do not see ourselves as having some
How far should we push?

Messianic duty to deliver analytical packages to our counterparts, how do we meet our commitment to raise the issues of gender analysis? (Just as important, though not addressed in this article, how do we document our having done so and to what effect?)

Merely raising the issue can meet with quite different kinds of difficulty in different kinds of group:

the group which does not recognise the issue as a political priority and which will argue its case to this effect;

the group which, for whatever reasons, acknowledges the issue, but in such a fashion as to raise more questions than it resolves;

the group which is self-critically concerned to take the issue on board but which, perhaps for lack of methodological tools, is unable to do so satisfactorily;

the group which is clear and enlightened in its analysis but which represents a sector which would not normally be a priority for Oxfam.

With the first group, the most Oxfam can do in a non-funding sense is to appeal to the intellectual and political integrity of its leadership. Oxfam can provide analytical materials which should stimulate self-questioning. It can also ensure that at least women are not worse off as a result of interventions (or failures to intervene) by Oxfam-funded partners. The last will be difficult precisely because it is unlikely that such a group will differentiate its reports by gender.

In the case of the second group, the question may rather be how to avoid being pushed into funding activities which at best are likely to be ineffective — and at worst may actually be demobilising. In my experience, a rabbit-keeping project, for example, which does not have more profound organisational perspectives from the outset, is unlikely to acquire them en route, as the companeras become absorbed in the everyday problems of its administration. In other words, if there is no capacity to learn from failure, or to build meaningfully on success, we are best keeping our distance. The same is, of course, true for men-exclusive projects.

With the third type of group, it is worth engaging in dialogue (in which we would include provision of materials, project exchange visits and, where appropriate, the services of a consultant) precisely
on the grounds that the process of arriving may well be as sign-
ificant as the final point of destination. Rather than 'pushing', we
should be offering encouragement. We should separate the issue of
support in a general sense from funding as such, so that
counterparts are not made to feel that our money is conditional on
their following a course of action determined both in direction and
speed by outside interests. Needless to say, this process is one from
which Oxfam stands to learn rather than to instruct.

Finally, and of a slightly different order, the fourth group
presents more of a challenge to Oxfam's overall policies, and the
way in which these are interpreted in each regional office, than to
the local counterpart in question. The two following examples from
Mexico and Central America involve the Ford Foundation.

The first, located in Mexico, but with far-reaching consequences,
involved the five-year-long struggle to establish an Inter-
disciplinary Women's Studies Department in the Colegio de México.
This was to serve as a methodological resource and data bank for
academics and non-governmental organisations. At the same time it
was a validation of the academic worthiness of the project. The Ford
Foundation did not 'push', other than to lend its voice to the
arguments put forward by the women academics involved and, of
course, to indicate that it would be prepared to finance the venture.
Without this intervention, however, the struggle to win similar
recognition elsewhere would certainly have been delayed. At the
same time, the space itself can be used to serve interests not
narrowly defined by the explicit terms of the project.

The second example is in Nicaragua, where Ford Foundation
funding provided the guarantee that the research programme on
rural women (and 60 per cent of rural families are headed by
females) being conducted by The Ministry of Agrarian Reform
(MIDINRA) was not cut for lack of resources. This research
programme both provided essential data for any group seriously
interested in working with the rural poor in Nicaragua, and is
crucial in setting out the background against which agrarian policy
has to be defined.

Given that there are conflicts of interest between men and
women, it is important to find ways of funding which neither side-
step nor exacerbate them in an untimely fashion. The struggles are
essentially to be conducted by — and between — our counterparts.
Ultimately, these struggles need to be taken on, in as far as they are
able or willing to do so, by women themselves. Learning how to do this is an essential part of the women's own process of political organisation, and we would not be doing them a favour as a foreign funding agency by doing battle on their behalf.

If we start from the assumption that the personal is political, this opens up a Pandora's box of issues relating especially to fertility control but also to other culturally sanctioned practices and attitudes. Examples among Central American Indians include the idea that women are the repository of cultural values, and so it is good that they do not know how to speak Spanish (needless to say, the Indian women in question are not speaking for themselves on this point); and that contraception is another expression of the plot to exterminate them. In other, non-war, situations in Mexico, opposition by males to the use of contraception has been found to be rooted in fundamentally different attitudes to issues such as sexuality, multiple pregnancy, large families and virility. In such cases, it is probably even more important not to be seen to be 'pushing' a particular line. More subtle approaches can include suggesting ways in which women health workers can be introduced into, or trained by, Oxfam-funded projects, and looking for ways to enable women to meet beyond their immediate community, however indirect this might be.

Finally, Oxfam needs to realise that female and male staff have different types of opportunity presented to them in terms of relating to projects. Female project staff provoke a different set of questions when visiting a group of women peasants than do male colleagues. The choice of whether and how to answer them is a different matter.

In sum, we reject the idea of 'pushing' as an approach to relating to project holders. Encouragement of, and building on, existing interest would form part of our normal dealings anyway; and it seems important to try to raise the level both of concern and of analysis wherever possible. Here, we are hampered by the lack of methodological principles and fall back, to a large extent, on subjective perceptions and personal enthusiasm (or lack thereof). Fundamentally, we believe that the struggle — both for the recognition of the issue and for the will to act on the analytical challenge in a self-critical way — has to be defined and conducted by our local partners. We can assist in terms of providing all kinds of support (documentary, analytical, experiential, material and moral) and in attempting to find and then operate an autonomous
space, within movements, for social change. But we cannot pre-
determine where that space is going to emerge or what form it will
take.

(This paper was delivered at a seminar on gender and development for staff from Latin America and the Caribbean, held in 1987.)

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