

Why do Gender Issues Remain Problematic to Development Agencies?

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Questions of gender remain a difficult issue in the international NGO development community, yet evidence abounds that makes the imperative of addressing these issues whether one approaches the questions from a poverty, human rights or even an efficiency perspective. This article explores the apparent resistance or inability of development NGOs to address the development needs of women adequately. Identifying the complexity of gender issues, it places the questions in the larger context of disabling global economic policy, entrenched social institutions and organisational approaches. Finally, it calls for organisational review and a new gender integrated planning process.

Introduction

Ester Boserup's groundbreaking book, *Women's Role in Economic Development*, was published over 35 years ago (1970). For the first time the vital role women play in the economies of developing countries was clearly laid out. The publication of the book launched the Women in Development (WID) focus in development work. WID, with equality and peace, became one

of the organising issues for the ensuing UN Decade on Women and its four world conferences: Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985) and Beijing (1995).

Women worldwide, as individuals and through the women's movement, have expended enormous personal and professional energy to ensure that the issues of women in development were addressed in major institutions, such as the World Bank, the UN and all its agencies, and in development organisations both governmental and private. And some successes have been achieved. Women and girls have realised some significant changes in their social and economic status. Girls' enrolment in primary and secondary education has increased while declining fertility and improved maternal health care in some countries has reduced the rate of maternal mortality and eased the burden of unpaid work. The presence of women in public life has grown, both in politics and in the workforce.¹ Violence against women, trafficking of women and children and women's human rights have become global issues.

However, despite these advances, gender inequalities persist across all societies and in all institutions and sectors. Progress has been slower than expected and has continued to expose the asymmetries between women and men in all fields. The difficulty of opening the way for women's empowerment and advancement has proved to be much more demanding than initially anticipated. The promising rhetoric of documents to promote women in development has faltered in its implementation at the global, national and non-governmental levels. Gender mainstreaming, endorsed at the Beijing World Conference on Women, has stagnated due to lack of political will and insufficient resources in the public and private development institutions.² Some 35 years after the publication of Ester Boserup's exciting work, a kind of gender fatigue has set in among many advocates and institutions, which prompts the central question of this article: Why has gender remained such a difficult issue in the international NGO development community?

Deeper wells of resistance

The question moves the issue beyond the usual problems of policy, project or programme failure to search for deeper wells of resistance. Even a cursory review of women in development literature and analysis makes the imperative of addressing this issue clear whether one approaches the question from a poverty,

human rights or even an efficiency perspective. In addition the analyses of the dimensions of women's gender subordination have become highly sophisticated over the years moving from a project-focused women in development perspective, to a gender and development (GAD) approach which introduces the power differential between women and men, to a human rights perspective which calls for women's empowerment, to the currently emerging feminist political economy agenda.³ The problem is not lack of information; the problem lies elsewhere.⁴ Three key factors contribute to the difficulty of successfully addressing gender issues in development and in development organisations: the disabling global policy environment, entrenched social institutions and organisational approaches.

Disabling global policy environment

While some of the changes in women's and girls' lives can be attributed to economic development, the global policy environment, on the whole, has remained hostile to greater gender equality. The majority of changes are the result of state reforms and social movements.

The final decades of the last century witnessed a number of government transformations to more democratic rule, as well as a number of government administrations, particularly among industrialised nations, which favoured some elements of the women's agenda. The women's social movements were situated to take advantage of these openings. As a result, not only did national policy become sensitive to women's demands in many countries, but a series of regional and global instruments, such as the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, were developed to address non-discrimination based on sex, elimination of violence against women, the economic, social and cultural rights and civil and political rights of women.⁵

While women and men participants were struggling to articulate and recommend an "enabling environment" for the advancement of women at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995), the power brokers of the world economy were putting in place a "disabling global environment". This is not a new story, but it is a continuing story.

During the 1980s the policy framework of economic neo-liberalism was put in place in indebted countries by the stabilisation and structural adjustment policies of the World Bank

and the IMF. Driven by the dictates of the “Washington Consensus”, these policies launched a new wave of market fundamentalism on the global economy, opening the way for trade and financial liberalisation.⁶ Neo-liberalism was codified into law with the completion of the Uruguay Round of trade agreements and the founding of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995.

The Agreement establishing the WTO promised that the market fundamentalism it was embracing would be conducted with the goal of:

raising standards of living, ensuring full employment and a large and steadily growing volume of real income and effective demand, and expanding the production of and trade in goods and services, while allowing for the optimal use of the world’s resources in accordance with the objective of sustainable development. . . .⁷

Twelve years later these promises have a hollow ring, as the volume of evidence points to many countries experiencing an increase in poverty, the deterioration of rural development, slow or negative growth in employment and a fiscal squeeze from the reduction in trade and finance-related taxes resulting in a reduction in government expenditures on health, education and social services. In the words of the UNRISD study on *Gender Equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World*, “neoliberalism has proved largely unsuccessful, even in its own terms”.⁸ Moreover, neoliberalism is “inherently opposed to policy interventionism” aimed at achieving many of the goals essential to a social development that supports gender equity and human rights.⁹ Despite this growing evidence, the international financial institutions, the WTO and leading industrial nations continue to pursue neo-liberal approaches to development under the banners of “trade not aid,” “trade promotes development” and most recently “aid for trade”.

Due to their social location, role expectations and discrimination, women are on average affected more than men by the policy prescriptions of neo-liberalism, particularly in the areas of paid employment, the costs of economic restructuring and the welfare demands placed on the family unit.

Over the past several decades, women’s participation in paid employment has increased, but that employment is precarious. For example, in a select number of Asian economies only China has increased the employment of women in manufacturing

between 1991-2000 by a positive 4%. In the so-called Asian Tigers, women's participation in paid employment has declined: Hong Kong by 4%; Republic of Korea by 5%; Singapore by 4%; Taiwan by 3%; and Thailand by 1%. In Africa women workers in manufacturing have been hard hit by the flood of imports, particularly in textiles, after tariffs were reduced. In countries such as Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana and South Africa this increase in trade and the phase out of the Multilateral Fibre Agreement have led to significant job losses for women as female-dominated industries closed (textiles, wearing apparel, footwear and leather goods).¹⁰

Worldwide women still face gender inequalities in the workplace relative to quality of the job, wages and working conditions. More women than men are affected by the "flexibilisation" and casualisation of employment through contract labour, homework, part-time labour and other forms of labour that are unregulated and unprotected.¹¹ This trend is most evident in Sub-Saharan Africa with a ratio of 84% women to 63% men and in Latin America where the ratio is 58% women to 48% men.¹²

Women have also carried the majority of costs of economic adjustment in response to the adverse effects of economic dislocation resulting from exposure to the competition of global markets. With weakened governments and diminished resources, the cost of human welfare has shifted to the household. Thus, despite their increased participation in paid employment, women and girls' unpaid work has also increased as women continue to be the primary caregivers of the human family throughout the world.¹³

This reigning neo-liberal framework has demonstrated "the gender and class biases inherent in an economic model that focus(es) on economic growth while apparently ignoring social, cultural and political factors".¹⁴ Understanding the gendered nature of these policies and their impact on those in poverty is essential to development organisations attempting to address the gender dimensions of development. It is equally important to recognise that women cannot be separated from the larger context of class, race/ethnicity and geographic location, so the struggle for women's empowerment demands engagement in the struggles against the sources of women's oppression that extend beyond gender.¹⁵ This disabling environment continues seriously to diminish the outcomes of gender-focused work in development NGOs.

Entrenched social institutions

Probably the most overlooked deterrent to the success of women-focused programmes and projects by development NGOs is the gender context created by social institutions. For the purpose of this paper the term “institutions” means the often implicit rules, customs, traditions, culture and practices that operate to achieve social and economic ends in a society. Analysts identify four levels of social institutions: state, market, community and household.¹⁶ In this topology, the household serves as the model of gender relationships with its enshrined model of the male head of household, the female homemaker and the gender power dynamic it represents. These “familial norms and values are constantly drawn on to construct the terms on which women and men enter, and participate, in public life and in the marketplace”.¹⁷

Institutions operate to define the formal and informal “rules of the game”, the humanly designed parameters for gender behaviour and gender relationships. They codify the traditions, customs and legal constraints that govern social interaction in societies. They provide a predictable pattern for gender relations,¹⁸ establishing gender as the primary field through which power is articulated.¹⁹

Religious traditions are a powerful source in shaping patterns of gender relationships in social institutions. They give an aura of moral grounding to social institutions and increase the difficulty of advancing gender equity in the process of development, both from the point of view of the donor agencies and in the receiving countries. Catholic social teaching (CST) illustrates this reality. CST is grounded in the primary principle of the dignity of the human person which establishes the framework for all development work. This principle is critical to the work for gender equity and the realisation of women’s human rights.

However, a close reading of the social documents of the Church reveals that women are treated as a special category within this framework of human dignity. Consistently, the social teaching documents, while affirming women’s full humanity, define women in terms of their “appropriate role” and their “proper nature”. Such language is never used when referring to men. It raises the question of whether the Church implicitly holds a dual anthropology of human nature: there is human nature for which man’s experience is normative and then there is woman’s proper nature.²⁰

CST explicitly defines the care of the family as women's primary role. The father's role in the family is seen primarily as economic and authoritative. To so emphasise that women are responsible for the quality of family life diminishes the social role and value of fatherhood. It disenfranchises men from the full potential of their fatherhood while it disenfranchises women from the full potential of their personhood.²¹

The following quotes from various Church documents illustrate both the progression and static nature of CST as it tries to grapple with its traditional position on women and men within the changing realities of contemporary life.

It is a most sacred law of nature that the father of a family see that his offspring are provided with all the necessities of life and nature even prompts him to desire to provide and to furnish his children, who, in fact reflect and in a sense continue his person, with the means of decently protecting themselves against harsh fortune in the uncertainties of life. . . . Finally, it is not right to demand of a woman or a child what a strong adult man is capable of doing.²²

Women have the right to working conditions in accordance with their requirements as wives and mothers.²³

Women are now employed in almost every area of life. It is appropriate that they should be able to assume their full proper role in accordance with their own nature.²⁴

Experience confirms that there must be a social re-evaluation of the mother's role, of the toil connected with it and of the need that children have for care, love and affection in order that they may develop into responsible, morally and religiously mature and psychologically stable persons. . . . Having to abandon these tasks in order to take up paid work outside the home is wrong from the point of view of the good of society and of the family when it contradicts or hinders these primary goals of the mission of the mother.²⁵

While recent Vatican documents have tried to appropriate the changing realities of women and men, they try to do so within an essentialist understanding of woman, her role of motherhood and her "feminine values". The fundamental problem with CST on

gender is its almost total focus on women's identity and roles in the family and society with little to offer on men's identity and roles. It has an exalted sense of the "genius of women", and in so doing it diminishes the importance of fathers in the care, love and development of children.

Finally, while CST recognises women's responsibility for the family, it lacks a political-economic analysis of social reproduction work – the care economy – and the role it plays in social structures as well as in women and men's relationships.²⁶

Catholic social documents may illustrate how one religion reinforces the gender roles and relationships enshrined in social institutions, but it is not the only religious tradition that does so. Today women are facing a growing religious fundamentalism worldwide, whose primary target is keeping women "in their place". Progress in promoting women's agency and human rights, however, is dependent upon women moving beyond their traditional place as defined and controlled by social institutions. Diane Elson clearly identifies the relationship between the goals of the WID/GAD movement and social institutions:

Choices for women, especially poor women, cannot be enlarged without a change in relations between women and men as well as in the ideologies and institutions that preserve and reproduce gender inequality. This does not mean reversing positions, so that men become subordinate and women dominant. Rather, it means negotiating new kinds of relationships that are based not on power over others, but on mutual development of creative human energy (power to based on power within and power with). It also means negotiating new kinds of institutions, incorporating new norms and rules that support egalitarian and just relations between women and men.²⁷

One key to "negotiating new kinds of institutions" is through the intervention of organisations. In their work on promoting gender equality and institutional change, Rao and Kelleher identify one clear understanding they have come to: "institutions change (in large part) as a result of the action of organizations".²⁸ A transformative agenda of "negotiating new kinds of institutions" to advance women's equality and human rights would seem to be a natural fit for international development NGOs.

Organisational approaches

Before addressing the question of organisational approaches, it is legitimate to question if institutional change is necessary to achieve some success in addressing gender issues in development. A growing feminist consensus has concluded that it is. After years of development work from a gender perspective, a number of feminist development experts are convinced that the traditional approaches to WID/GAD issues are insufficient.²⁹ Even gender mainstreaming, so heralded at the Beijing World Conference, has not produced the results anticipated mainly because it “has been implemented in organizational contexts of hierarchy and agenda-setting that have not prioritised women’s rights”.³⁰

Current feminist analyses criticise development approaches that may improve women’s material well being but do not increase their personal agency or voice. Too many of these initiatives remain unconnected from the larger context shaping women’s lives, opportunities and threats, “morphing unequal gender relations into new forms without changing the underlying inequality, and eroding gains”.³¹ Gender equality and women’s realisation of their full human rights will never be achieved unless the underlying institutional imperatives that structure gender inequality into all social institutions are challenged and changed.

If one accepts the critique in the above paragraph, what then is creating the problems that make gender such a difficult issue in the international development NGO community? The apparent inertia of many international NGO development institutions and development experts can be traced to several factors: the difficulty of the task, methods of intervention and organisational culture.

The difficulty of the task

The sheer difficulty of the task of transforming long-standing and deeply held cultural and social behaviours has typically been underestimated or generally overlooked in NGO development work. Development organisations have failed to play a significant role in advancing women’s agency and empowerment because “they pay insufficient attention to the importance of social institutions in perpetuating inequality”.³²

The task is multiple and complex and the groundbreaking work of Aruna Rao and David Kelleher in gender at work is in the

earlier stages of development and implementation. It is also not well known among development practitioners.

When the issue of gender is included in programmes and projects the tasks of developing positive interventions to produce change become doubly difficult. For example, to develop a programme on sustainable livelihoods requires analysis of negative economic conditions and preparation of responses. It is also necessary to factor in the institutionalised gender restraints, beginning at the household level, but also including the mesoeconomic restraints and the effects of macroeconomic policy. Many development NGOs do not include these comprehensive contexts in their planning because of the particular methods they employ in women-specific projects.

Methods of intervention

Three shortcomings in commonly used methods of intervention include inadequate gender analysis, segregated agendas and insufficient accountability.

In most development circles an inadequate understanding of the systemic causes of women's inequality and subordination persists despite the extensive body of feminist analyses available. The word feminist is problematic for some, but feminist analysis is key to unmasking the power dynamics in gender relations that is missing in orthodox analyses of social institutions and development projects as well as in development organisations. The subordination of women, women's interests, needs and agendas is rooted in this institutional power dynamic. Until development organisations develop a clear systematic analysis of gender inequality in all social structures – political, economic, social and cultural/religious – relevant to their projects and programming, including within the agency itself, women-focused projects and programmes will not be able to achieve gender equality outcomes despite the good will and resources that go into them. This continuing frustration can be a debilitating factor.

A second problem facing development agencies is the practice of segregating women's projects from the wider economic, political, social and cultural context. Gender needs to be approached as a cross-cutting issue. No contexts are gender-neutral as the section on "Entrenched social institutions" above illustrated. They are all governed by the institutional power dynamics of gender relationships. In practical terms this would

mean, for example, analysing the impact of global economic integration and trade liberalisation on women and women's poverty and integrating a gender component into all economic projects within these organisations.

It would also call for incorporating the analysis of global economic integration and trade liberalisation into all women's projects.

An example of the problematic of isolating women's projects is the growing negative assessment of micro-financing, an approach to women's poverty that has been popular among development organisations for over a decade. The major criticism is that micro-financing has not reduced poverty. It has in effect been too little too late to make a structural difference. It has served more as a palliative measure within the dominant economic system – the macro-level. It has, in too many cases, produced a debt crisis at the personal (micro) level. If a woman cannot repay the loan, peer pressure too often drives her to moneylenders who charge exorbitant interest rates, driving her deeper into debt. There also has been too little attention paid to the problem of the women being able to control the money within the household where men make the financial decisions. Sufficient anecdotes indicate that women have defaulted on loans because their husbands, fathers, brothers or uncles have used the money for their own purposes. The power dynamic has not been addressed at the household, meso or macro level.

Fully including the women who will be engaged and/or effected in the planning of the development project or programme remains the *sine qua non* of creating institutional change. In planning with women, particularly women in poverty, the "key fulcrums and processes" for change that will result in positive outcomes need to be identified.³³ A full planning process will include accountability not only from women partners to the development organisation but also from the organisation to the women partners with the opportunity of recourse, if necessary. Such mutual partnering with women and women's organisations in various cultures is a continuing challenge.

Caroline Moser's distinction between practical and strategic gender needs could be a helpful tool in determining programmatic and project approaches.

Practical gender needs are the needs women identify in their socially accepted roles in society. Practical gender needs do not challenge the gender divisions of labor or women's subordinate position

in society, although rising out of them. Practical gender needs are a response to immediate perceived necessity, identified in a specific context. They are practical in nature and often are concerned with inadequacies in living conditions such as water provisioning, health care and employment.

Strategic gender needs are needs women identify because of their subordinate position to men in their society. Strategic gender needs vary according to particular contexts. They relate to gender divisions of labor, violence, equal wages and women's control over their bodies. Meeting strategic gender needs helps women to achieve greater equality. It also changes existing roles and therefore challenges women's subordinate position.³⁴

Addressing both practical and strategic needs both within women-specific programmes or projects as well as within programming with women as a cross-cutting issue holds promise of bringing about the institutional changes needed to ensure gender equality and women's voice and agency in all dimensions of development.

Organisational culture

Finally, the development NGOs' culture which often remains invisible and taken as a given, cannot be ignored. Organisations are embedded in the institutions that shape their local political, economic, social and cultural/religious environments. They are the water in which they swim. Hence, they unconsciously mirror those institutional values which have put in place gender inequality. For this reason, the organisations themselves are subjects for feminist gender analysis particularly in the areas of decision-making, staffing, resource allocation, reward systems, family-friendly policies for both men and women, evaluation criteria. In other words, what are the political, economic, social and cultural/religious givens of the organisation? Do they give women and men equal voice and agency? Do women have recourse, if their voice and agency are ignored?

Conclusion

Eliminating gender inequality is a very complex and challenging agenda and it is not surprising that development NGOs have difficulty with the issue. Developing adequate analyses and methods for successful intervention has been in process for the past 30 years. However, those emerging insights and methods are not well known and have too often been ghettoised by mainline development experts to a small circle of feminist development experts.

Mainline development NGOs have been more comfortable implementing some form of gender mainstreaming into their programmes, a gender mainstreaming which too often employs an “add women and stir” approach. The deeper institutional barriers to women’s achieving voice and agency in their lives and work had not been addressed.

This article has attempted to identify some of the sources of the difficulties international development NGOs are experiencing. However, it is a general overview and not specific to any particular organisations. Any effective attempt to improve an organisation’s approach to gender issues would begin with an organisational review and the introduction of an integrated gender approach to planning.

Footnotes

- ¹ UNRISD (2005)
- ² See Williams (2004)
- ³ See Miller and Razavi (1995b), Randriamaro (2006) and Riley (2001). The WID approach focuses on integrating women into the development without questioning the kind of development that was being fostered by the donor nations from the industrialised countries. It focuses on women and generally ignores the consequences of different social realities, such as the gendered worlds of women and men. The GAD approach uses gender, rather than women, as an analytic category to understand how economic, political, social and cultural systems affect women and men differently. Gender is understood as the social roles, expectations and responsibilities assigned to women and men because of their biological differences. It is an ideological and cultural construct that shapes women’s and men’s lives. These roles and expectations can change over time.
- ⁴ In researching for this article I discovered an article in *Trócaire Development Review 1992* by Stephen Jackson entitled “Mainstreaming WID: a survey of approaches to women in development”. The main arguments of that article are depressingly similar to the thesis of this article.
- ⁵ UNRISD (2005)
- ⁶ Industrialised economies also initiated their own style of structural adjustment, as for example “Reaganomics” in the US and “Thatcherism” in the UK.

- 7 Agreement Establishing the World Trade Organization, 2004
- 8 UNRISD (2005), p.xxii
- 9 Miller and Razavi (1998)
- 10 UNRISD (2005), p.37
- 11 United Nations (1999); UNRISD (2005)
- 12 UNRISD (2005), p.77
- 13 United Nations (1999); UNRISD (2005)
- 14 Antrobus (2004), p.68
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 This section of the paper on institutions draws from the work of Aruna Rao and David Kelleher, conveners of Gender at Work, founded in 2001, to ensure that organisational structures – and the institutions which guide them – change to benefit women’s interests and are held accountable for their actions to a broad women’s constituency. See www.genderatwork.org.
- 17 Kabeer (1994), p.61
- 18 Miller and Razavi, (1998)
- 19 Rao and Kelleher (2003)
- 20 Riley (2005)
- 21 Riley and Sylvester (1991)
- 22 *Rerum Navarum* (1891), ss.20, 60
- 23 *Pacem in Terris*, (1963), s.19
- 24 *Gaudium et Spes*, (1965), s.60
- 25 *Laborem Exercens* (1981), s.19
- 26 Riley (2005)
- 27 As quoted in Rao and Kelleher (nd)
- 28 Rao and Kelleher (2005), p. 143
- 29 See for example Anne Marie Goetz (1997) *Getting Institutions Right for Women in Development*; Naila Kabeer (1994) *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*; and Miller and Razavi (1998).
- 30 Rao and Kelleher (2003), p.144
- 31 Ibid., p.147
- 32 Ibid., p.142
- 33 Ibid., p.147
- 34 Moser (1993), pp.39-40

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