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Gender sensitivity in development

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INTRODUCTION

Development and women.

At the conclusion of the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation (IDWSS) Decade (1981-90) it is appropriate to review the progress made in gender-sensitive practice. Since the beginning of the IDWSS decade the crucial role of women has been repeatedly stated. As the WEDC International conferences have spanned both the IDWSS decade and the UN Decade for Women (1976-85), papers presented have inevitably reflected changes in attitudes and ideologies relating to development. This is apparent from both the subject content of papers and the discussions relating to them and to dedicated discussion notes.

Evidence from Conference papers

Prior to, and early in, the IDWSS decade the emphasis was on technologies for the provision of infrastructure to meet decade targets. By mid-decade this had become tempered by the need for 'appropriateness' to the recipient countries and for participation of beneficiaries, especially women and children. The ideology of sustainable, integrated development was also widely supported. It was not until late in the decade that emphasis on management by communities occurred. Associated with this, a small minority of papers discussed the role of women not merely as beneficiaries and motivators (especially in the health sector) but also as major actors with managerial power. These were exceptional.

GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT

The treatment of gender in these conference papers tends to conform to the beliefs and practices of many aid donors and national governments. By way of illustration, five points are mentioned here.

1. Despite a rhetorical commitment to women in development, in the interests of speed and efficiency numerous examples demonstrate how women's participation is frequently appropriated by donors and governments and transformed into cheap labour. Women as the 'chief beneficiaries' are encouraged to provide their labour in installing new facilities while relatively little attention is given to questions of decision-making and control. In the absence of adequate consultation, the energy-saving role of a convenient and reliable handpump may be offset by new physiological problems for women which the design creates.

2. In linking women with welfare, gender is then subject to the analytical and institutional separation which is enshrined in labels like 'women's issues' and 'women's affairs departments' (Lovel and Feuerstein 1985). Domains are constructed which appear to be the sole concern of women. Men are marginalised and their role in decision-making, including expenditure on social services, largely ignored.

3. In appealing to apparently 'natural', biological categories to justify female participation in welfare - their nurturing and caring role - women then become the targets of health education. Women, it is argued, should be encouraged to play influential roles "in both water management and hygiene education" (UNDP 1990 p.2). While this in itself may not be inappropriate, a failure to observe the activities of other group may obscure the importance of men and children, for example, as valid additional targets for education training programmes.

4. The tendency to focus on women's role as domestic actors frequently overlooks the broader range of constraints which shape their lives. Changes in employment opportunities linked to recession, the effects of drought upon agricultural production, family composition and the development cycle of the household all affect the ability of women to manage their lives and those of their families, let alone participate in social service provision. Equally this domestic focus may obscure the fact that many women are economic actors in their own right and require support in rural credit, small-scale enterprise, political representation and the like (Guyer and Peters 1987). Women may, for example, give higher priority to a grain mill than health education.

5. Much 'women and development' literature and practice overlook the fact that the category 'woman' is cut across by many divisions including ethnicity, class and age. A flawed vision of women's apparent homogeneity fails to recognise how these factors come together to shape the experiences of individual women and to influence their authority as decision makers and participants in particular projects (Moser and Peake 1987; Daswani and D'Cruz 1989). The power of married women's groups and mothers-in-law cannot be ignored.

Why this limited vision and what evidence of change?

These mistaken assumptions about women form part of a broader ideology concerning gender roles and relations which shape the actions of many donors and recipient governments and which underpin much development theory. In a comparative study of the World Bank, UNDP and the Ford Foundation, Kardam (1991)

concluded that their flexibility in defining norms, goals, procedures and staff composition influence the willingness and ability of funding agencies to promote innovative approaches to social policy and to 'bring gender in'. Within development theory, since the 1960s the dominance of various political economy perspectives with their emphasis upon class categories, has tended to overlook the significance and complexity of gender divisions which cut across class lines (Millenium 1988).

Recent evidence does, however, suggest that gender-sensitive development theory and practice are becoming more critical and informed. New orthodoxies recognise the constraints upon and the diversities amount women; they also acknowledge that women can be active agents and influential decision-makers and that in the interests of equity and necessity, these roles should be promoted (World Development 1989). Three reasons for these trends are presented here.

First, in theoretical terms, of profound importance is coming together of feminism and development theory which, together with the influence of international women's movements and 'post-structuralist' writers have sought to challenge the often naive assumptions about the place of gender in social, economic and political change.

Second, grass roots women's organisations frequently confound radical feminist images of universal female oppression. Evidence from Nigeria indicates that the opportunity for communication among women is greater than for men because of the variety of networks created and used by them (Braide et al., 1989). As vocal political actors, they may contest official demands for voluntary participation in spheres where they feel 'the state should provide' (Charlton et al. 1989). Equally, in the technical sphere, while the 'efficiency' of a handpump (usually designed by men) is important, women (the major users) can and do usefully contribute to achieving a sound ergonomic design.

Third, paradoxically pressure for change from 'below' has, since the late 1980's, been reinforced from 'above' by the economic constraints which now confront many aid donors and national governments. Faced with a new wave of financial accountability, their recent promotion of community management offers a convenient way of devolving power, authority and control from engineers, planners and bureaucrats to 'other' groups including women and NGOs (McCommon et al. 1990). Nor can we ignore the importance of linking infrastructure projects with other sectors, including income generation.

As these groups now represent the new rationalists at the forefront of the development effort, a central question for development workers is how to conceptualise accurately, communities and gender. Crucially the evidence suggests that we must avoid monolithic and homogeneous categories. While to the 'outsider', communities may display a mask of simplicity, internally they are complex and dynamic, neither homogeneous nor harmonious (Jones and Wiggle 1987). Effective mobilisation may depend upon the initiative and energy of a few key individuals, both women and men (Boydell 1990). Equally, as an arena for conflict, negotiation and compromise, local politics, including

the politics of the household, may distort 'expected' responses to individual projects. Greater realism in interpreting the dynamics of communities needs to be matched by a closer look at the relations between women, men and the state. While outsiders seek to reassert the dignity of women as active decision-makers and informed consumers of social infrastructure, we cannot overlook the expectations they may have of the state as a provider of basic human rights.

EVIDENCE FROM WEDC

In the spirit of gender-sensitive development practice it is of interest to note that the Global Consultation in New Delhi, September 1990, reasserted the importance of recruiting more female staff to ensure "the full participation of women at all levels in sector institutions" (UNDP 1990 p.2). With this in mind, the position of women as professionals was assessed by analysing evidence from WEDC training programmes and conferences. Despite the limited amount of data available and the absence of adjustments for country populations etc., the results are nevertheless of interest.

Applications for in-UK courses have had a female:male ratio of ~1:8 throughout the 1980s. The nationality of female applicants is illustrated in figures 1a (worldwide) and 1b (Africa).

Attendance by women on in-UK courses has remained at 7-8% throughout the decade for most courses. Notable exceptions have been the higher percentage (~35%) attending the Water Analysis and Quality Diploma and the lower percentage (~2.5%) on the Upgrading and Management of Urban Water Supplies course. These variations may be attributable, on the one hand, to the social, cultural and academic acceptability of laboratory-based work for women and, on the other, to the constraints on employment of women as managers.

The region of origin of women participants on three different WEDC programmes is given in figure 2. Figure 2a relates to MSc courses for which a degree plus practical experience is required; participants are more often based in cities and employed by central government ministries. Figure 2b gives data for the Water Analysis and Quality Diploma for which higher education, including specialised training in laboratory techniques, is requested. Participants on courses in 2a and 2b are generally exposed to more sophisticated technologies but are more remote from beneficiaries than those in 2c. Figure 2c relates to the Community Water Supply and Sanitation Diploma for which entry requirements place greater emphasis on practical experience at grassroots level. There is a marked difference in the regional origin of participants on the three types of course. Correlations with specific factors requires a rigorous analysis. However, it is anticipated that the history of formal education within particular countries, female literacy and the gender bias of individual donors and governments in staff training programmes would be significant.

Conferences have, since 1975, consistently had ~12% female participants. Numbers of papers about women in

development and by female authors have shown a tendency to increase since mid-decade, though not in a linear fashion. Overall the numbers remain very small.

WOMEN MANAGERS OF TECHNOLOGY

Philosophy of UK course

Beliefs about women managers, including their tendency to be more concerned with consensus, discussion and people-sensitive leadership than men, are open to dispute. In our opinion, both male and female managers require these skills. A higher proportion of women in technical professions at managerial level should help to improve the practice of policies dealing with gender issues.

Based on this assumption, coupled with the data above, WEDC is offering a new course for women managers of technology. It reflects the established practice at WEDC of encouraging women professionals. The aim of the course is to improve the gender balance at managerial level in what are strongly masculine professions. It is intended to encourage not only the appointment but also the promotion of women by agencies operating in development sectors.

Summary

The continuing economic crisis in many developing countries has a particularly harsh effect on women who have to bear an increasingly heavy share of the burden, as producers, home managers, mothers and community organisers. In the provision, operation and maintenance of infrastructure, the efforts of women are often crucial. Nevertheless, the special needs of women in respect of infrastructure are seldom given due weight, partly because women's contribution to management is limited.

Positive changes in the gender-sensitivity of donor agencies, are occurring. However, until such changes in attitude occur at all levels within developing countries, representation of women at managerial level will continue to be patchy.

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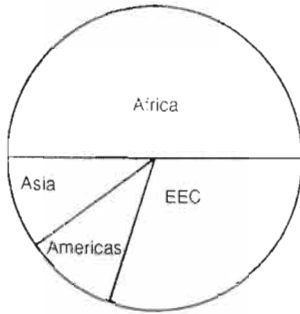
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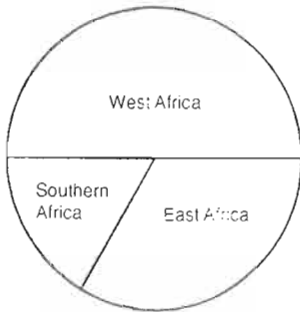
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Figure 1:
Applications by women for WEDC UK programmes

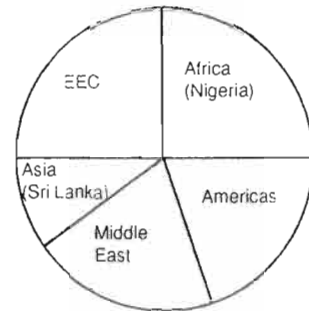


1 a: Countries worldwide

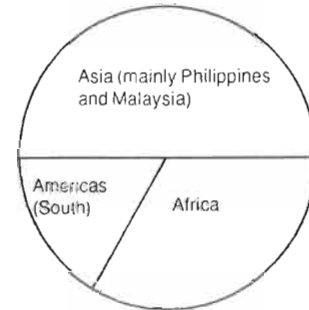


1 b: African countries

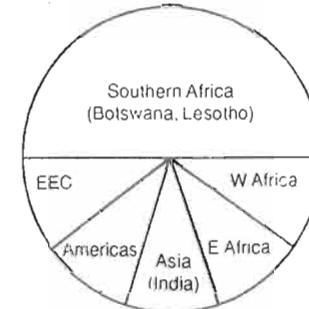
Figure 2:
Female participation in WEDC UK programmes



2 a: MSc programmes (1980 - 91)



2 b: Water Analysis and Quality Diploma (1988 - 91)



2 c: Community Water Supply and Sanitation Diploma (1984 - 91)