

WITNESS: WE HAVE MADE PROGRESS BUT SERIOUS CHALLENGES TO GENDER EQUALITY REMAIN



The reports presented during the last meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women in March this year regarding the Review and Appraisal of the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform shows that overall progress in gender equality in the last 20 years has been unacceptably slow, with stagnation and even regression in some contexts. It is argued that change towards gender equality has not been deep enough, nor has it been irreversible. While discussing some of the factors that hold gender equality back, Laeticia noted the slow change in the attitudes of men - the main implementers of gender mainstreaming and its implications to gender equality; the tendency to conflate “gender” with “women” and to ignore the “men” part of the gender equation; misconception and limited understanding over what feminism and feminists are about and the way many organizations structure gender for organizational inequality and position staff members at the coal face of pro-equality policy implementation for ineffectiveness. This week she examines how “gender” is treated and women visualized in many development projects thus leading to female disadvantage and posing serious challenges to gender equality.

It is estimated that women comprise 60 per cent of informal sector operators, contribute about 70 per cent of total agricultural labour and produce 90 per cent of the continent’s food. However, they own less than 1 per cent of the African continent’s landmass, receive less than 10 per cent of the credit to small farmers and 1 per cent of the total credit to agriculture. The question is why gender inequality persists in spite of concerted development interventions and why do women continue to lag behind men in every development sector for which data is available?

In today’s column I intend to discuss, based on my own work experience in the last 20 years as well as findings from numerous reports, the way gender is treated and women as a gender category visualized in project design. I will then discuss how development projects can induce bureaucratic imposed female disadvantage.

Development projects are important for two reasons. First, they constitute important mechanisms through which considerable financial investments are channeled with the objective of effecting changes in particular sectors or area. Secondly, project activities impact on gender equality. The question is how have women and men been structured as participants and beneficiaries of development projects?

The evidence available suggests that the design of many projects tend to ignore gender analysis. Gender Analysis is the systematic assessment of the project impact on women and men respectively. It entails the application of a gender perspective to a development issue including the

gender division of labour; the needs and priorities of women and men and opportunities and constraints to the achievement of development objectives. In many project documents, women appear to come in by accident or as an afterthought. It is not uncommon that in a 50-100 project document, the so called gender analysis is enclaved in one token paragraph which, as discussed in an earlier column, is normally devoted to simply describing the problems confronting women. Lacking, however, is a corresponding analysis of the situation, position and responsibility of men vis-à-vis the identified problems. When gender analysis is not carried out, gender-difference is not captured and project documents do not reflect real experience women and men. It follows that there is little possibility for these issues to be addressed during project implementation. Since the human dimension is central to development, the lack of gender analysis not only jeopardizes putting in place measures that would lead to gender equality but the development effectiveness of projects is also compromised.

Experience also shows gender disaggregated baseline data is not always available. Baseline information is important for clarifying assumptions about social structure, gender relations, culture, the sector or the project area. Gender is contextual and the gender aspects of particular communities cannot be assumed. Without proper diagnosis of gender relations and how these impact or are impacted by project activities, the basis for investment decisions can only be shaky. Many projects fail to generate the requisite development impact because they are based on assumptions and stereotypes and not on real experiences of men and women. The lack of gender disaggregated data undermines the project's relevance, strategic importance and weakens its capacity for policy advocacy. In any event, unless base line studies are conducted prior to project implementation, it is impossible progress cannot be established or comparisons made between the pre- and post-project situation - the results. Thus baseline information is again a strong foundation on which the effectiveness of the project can be gauged.

The absence of Gender Analysis and gender disaggregated data often result in projects that have little bearing on women's and men's needs, priorities and livelihood strategies. For example, it is well known that women in rural Africa are the major producers of food and significant contributors to cash crop production. In addition to production, women shoulder the work burden of unpaid labour. They cook, clean, wash clothes, provide care to sick children and elderly relatives, provide homecare of the chronically sick members of the household, perform sanitation activities, grind food and fetch water and firewood. However, their portrayal in many project documents is usually not that of vibrant economic actors, movers and shakers in the rural scene. Nor is it of women as powerful, resourceful, industrious, entrepreneurial and innovative. Rather, the imagery that prevails is of women as the oppressed, battered, vulnerable, victims, dispossessed, poor, wards or dependants of men and passive beneficiaries of development assistance. It is very difficult for any rational investor to squander his resources on such a pathetic or tragic group. While women may in some contexts also be responsible for paying for some household expenditure such as school fees and kerosene, resources targeted to women are usually minuscule and executed in pilot projects. The most important role for women that endures is that of mothers with child rearing depicted as the most effective contribution women make to economic development. Many of the projects with sizeable resources focus on family planning services, health measures against malnutrition and lately education with minimal resources targeted towards economic sectors.

Development projects can therefore be tools for imposing what is termed as bureaucratic imposed gender disadvantage, defined as forms of disadvantage that have nothing to do with the actual reality of women and men's lives but are a product of biases, prejudices or ignorance of officials delivering development resources.

Regrettably, the conceptualization of women in most projects is changing only very slowly in the post-Beijing era. Rarely do projects mention the redistribution of power and resources between women and men as the main goal or objective. The understanding of gender mainstreaming as an agenda setting strategy in which a women's perspective is required to be integral part of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all activities is only permeating very slowly. As such women and women issues continue to be handled within the existing male biased paradigms. Gender mainstreaming has not in the last 20 years significantly impacted on the way the development interventions are conceived, planned and executed. Projects by their very nature focus on a limited number of activities aimed at bringing about clearly specified objectives within a defined time-period and with defined material, financial and human resources. Women's work tends to be multi-dimensional and the needs arising thereof are not best addressed from a conventional project perspective. To benefit women, the design of a project to promote food security, for example, would require taking into account that women's work burdens and that their time is not elastic. It should address the complexity of women's lives arising out of their multiple activities in production, reproduction and community management. Important activities such as gender sensitization of men to adopt a more equitable division of labour, appointment of culturally appropriate extension personnel, day-care facilities, time-saving technology, appropriate infrastructure such as feeder roads and footpaths as well as marketing structures would have to be taken on board. Thus promoting gender equality requires a more creative way of developing projects. It cannot be business as usual.

The failure to put such measures in place results in projects that strain an already overloaded capacity on the part of women. This has been identified as instrumentalization of women. It depicts a situation where in the interest of development women have to contort themselves to fit into stereotypical and unequal life positions. This is often to the detriment of their health and well-being. In her article, "***Does Aid Work? Can it Work Better? Crucial Questions on the Road to Accra and Doha***", Molly Kane narrates her experience of her first visit to West Africa a little over ten years ago and comments on how women perceive their instrumentalization for development:

"I was with a colleague from Canada visiting projects for women in northern Mali. One afternoon, we were touring a market garden run by the local women's association. The community leaders explained the benefits of the project, how the women had some additional income to look after family needs and family nutrition had improved. After admiring the vegetable plots, I asked one of the women what the project meant to her. She said, with a somewhat ironic smile, "We are working an even longer day now. We don't need any more of these gender and development projects. We women need a break."

Next week I will conclude the section on the visualization of women in development projects and how development projects lead to female disadvantage. I will then move on to examine the centrality of the state and its laws and policies as force for and as posing a challenge to gender equality.

Laetitia Mukurasi gained recognition as the first woman to fight and win the first labour case against discrimination in Tanzania. From 1993 to 1998 she worked as the Assistant Resident Representative in charge of Gender/Women issues in UNDP Tanzania Country Office. She attended the Beijing Conference and later joined the African Development Bank and attained the position of Chief Gender Specialist. She is now retired but actively working with the women's movement in Tanzania and recently sponsored two meetings to discuss the future of gender