

## 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 show that overall progress in gender equality in the last 20 years has been unacceptably slow, with stagnation and even regression in some contexts. 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 attitudinal barriers on the part of men - the main implementers of the gender mainstreaming strategy; 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. In this column she concludes last week’s discussion on how “gender” is treated and women rendered invisible in many development projects thus leading to gender disadvantage and posing serious challenges to gender equality.

The tendency to ignore women as part of the stakeholders often leads to the design of projects that fail to promote gender equality. The participation of all stakeholders is crucial because it promotes ownership, contributes to the monitoring and sustainability of projects and is a means to development effectiveness. Participation provides a strategic vehicle through which both women and men can address issues relevant to their needs and interests. However, many times, evidence of issues raised by women and how these have shaped the project concept and approach are not manifest. Standard references are usually made of consultations with “stakeholders” without reference to the genders/sexes of the persons involved. The word “stakeholder” does not necessarily connote automatic inclusion of women’s views and interests. In any event it would still hold even if the persons consulted are only men or only women. The so called stakeholders may, in some cases, be urban based NGOs and CSOs who may not necessarily represent the interests of rural women or men in the project area.

And this brings us to the choice of concepts or language used in project design. In the name of gender mainstreaming, some project documents are simply peppered with the words “men and women”, “engendered” or “gender” without substantive gender analysis or gender strategies. There is also a tendency to frame the language in generic or non-specific gender categories with projects purportedly designed to address “the poor”, “the household” “the farmers”, “the communities” “the consumers ”or “the beneficiaries” without describing gender/sex. The underlying assumption is that when men are central to the project it will, *ipso facto*, benefit women and children or that the lives of women and children will not be adversely affected when the design of a project does not explicitly address them. The use of generic categories conceals the different

realities of men and women's lives and invisibilizes the different roles, needs, skills, bodies of practical knowledge, and access to information and to power and decision making processes.

Without gender analysis, baseline gender disaggregated data and when women's views are not represented among the perspectives of the stakeholders, it becomes difficult to coin a strategy or specific actions to promote gender equality during project implementation. When there is no gender disaggregation of the stakeholders, many project documents demonstrate limited recognition of gender relations, time and work-load dimensions of women and men as constituting potential constraints to the realization of project objectives. Equally when projects ignore to specify a budget or indicate the cost implications of actions geared to promote gender equality, efforts to promote gender equality are undermined. It has been said that programmed actions without money attached amounts to inaction. Gender sensitive budgetary allocation is the means by which development projects can concretely address and respond to the differentiated needs of the diverse groups of men and women as well as boys and girls.

Finally, projects often overlook to put in place gender sensitive result oriented indicators against which the project's impact can be assessed. A gender sensitive indicator is defined as a number, a fact or a perception that point to how far and in what way a development project is meeting its gender objectives and achieving results related to gender equality. Such indicators include economic power entailing reduced inequalities between women and men in access to, ownership and control over resources and benefits of development; political power or equal participation of women with men as decision makers in shaping the development direction of their societies; and social power or the right of women and girls, men and boys to be more able to realize their full human rights.

Thus gender blindness in the design of many development projects is a factor, among others, why inequality persists. For emphasis, when gender differentials are not recognised, baseline information not gathered and women stakeholders ignored, planning for human development is often based on assumptions or stereotypes and not on real experiences of women and men. Gender is context based.

Thus development projects, as is the case of the state as we shall see next week are bearers of gender. They are vehicles through which unequal gender relations are recreated, reinforced and sustained. Many projects have created situations in which the lives of women are made worse off than before the introduction of projects. Women have been put at a disadvantage in several ways:

First, some development projects have increased women's workload and resulted in longer working days for women. These have consequences for women's health and well-being. Irrigation projects are cases in point. Such projects increase women's farming hours and unpaid work entailing activities such as planting, weeding, harvesting and storing with no compensation for increased labour, no new or improved technology, no child care facilities and no guarantee of benefits.

Secondly, some projects erode women's traditional power over control of resources such as income, land or even bargaining power. This includes commercialisation of food crops such as maize, rice and milk. Due to power imbalances in the family, men use their power, including violence, to usurp activities traditionally reserved for women leading to intensification in women's and household poverty.

Thirdly, discriminatory practices have been reinforced. Promoting the adoption of user fees in education and cost recovery in health provision affects the educational and health status of girls and women due to already existing norms that discriminate against them. Another example is

retrenchment as part of structural adjustment programmes which had a disproportionate negative effect on women as they were the first to be fired and the last to be hired.

Fourthly, some development projects exacerbate power differentials between women and men. This often result from designing projects that only take men's needs into account such as the introduction of tractors to increase farm acreage or the use collateral based methods for on-lending that exclude many women who have no immovable assets.

And fifthly, when projects increase women's unpaid work, they deprive them of time to engage in productive activities that are important for reducing their income poverty.

Next week, I will examine the state and its laws and policies as a force for or as posing a challenge to gender equality.

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