

Gender Equity: An International Perspective

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CONTENTS

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	5
Gender Equity: Indicators of the Position of Women Relative to Men	5
Composite Indices	6
Gender Equity: Indicators of Intent	7
Gender Equity: Evolution of Its Scope	7
Gender Equity: Current Trends in Research, Programming and Policy Advocacy	8
Gender Relations Within the Family and the Community	9
Gender Equity in the Conceptualisation of the Economy: Implications for Resource Allocation and Sustainable Development	10
Conclusion	11
References	11
Works Cited	12

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the 1970s, great strides have been taken in the measurement of gender equity, culminating in the use of composite indices such as the gender empowerment measure and the gender development index in the annual report on human development produced by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). In broad terms such aggregates allow for cross-country comparisons and assessment of progress.

While in aggregate terms the position and situation of women has improved world-wide, the association of poverty with increased gender inequality suggests that there are gender biases inherent in the prescriptions for economic structural adjustment. An analysis of the experience of inequity therefore needs to be informed by an understanding of the relationship between the paid and unpaid sectors of the economy, in particular how the market economy is subsidised by the reproductive work of women. In this way, we address not only the basis of unequal gender relations, but also the dangers of an economic paradigm that is inherently off balance and unsustainable.

The aggregate trends must also be qualified by attention to contingency: different cultural contexts vary in the extent to which they open doors for women, and vary in the kind of influences they have felt through colonialism, integration into a global economy, and exposure to the media. Most significantly, gender inequity is cross-cut by other inequities such as class, age, and ethnicity. As the gap between rich and poor widens, the differences between women of different classes may prove to be as great as the differences between women and men.

The policy and programming implications of these trends centre around enhancing the value attributed to the reproductive, caring economy (broadly defined) in order to elevate the work that women do, attract more men into the reproductive sector, and ensure sufficient public sector support.

ACTION-ORIENTED RECOMMENDATIONS

- Continued attention to documenting the gender differentiated impact of macro-economic policy
- Screening of national budgets, and recommendations for shifts in expenditure to ensure gender equity
- Scrutiny of indicators to ensure that they are valid indicators of gender equity – assessment of the quality of education, for example
- Advocacy at the international level to ensure that unpaid labour is appropriately costed and valued, and that taxation, budgetary allocations, and regulations are adjusted accordingly
- Programmes that respond to changing family structures, particularly those that encourage greater participation of males in child-rearing and other aspects of reproductive labour
- Advocacy for legislation that requires “exit costs” for a parent who leaves the family
- Programmes that are genuinely addressing gender relations and gender equity

INTRODUCTION

In the approach to the new millennium, we are in a position to view the world through a lens that is steadily bringing the position and situation of men and women into sharper focus. The collection of gender disaggregated data in the United Nations system since the first International Conference on Women in 1975 allow us to assess the progress of women relative to that of men in broad terms, country by country, redressing centuries of women's invisibility.

Correcting the biases of data collection, however, has not necessarily translated into more equitable policies and programmes (Tinker, 1990). Acknowledging this, the gender equity agenda has enlarged its scope. Starting with the distinction between formal equality (equality before the law) and substantive equality (equality of capacity to act), it now questions the association of "equity" with liberal notions of "progress" and mainstream economic assumptions of "value". It also challenges the fundamentally inequitable premises on which economic development is based. Reversing the bias towards *women*, and towards helping women catch up with men, the equity agenda now also takes on the task of bringing men back in.¹ Finally, the gender equity issue has had to establish where it stands in relationship to other inequities. As Papanek (1990) reminds us, while gender differences are "one of the great fault lines of societies", other fault lines intersect and influence the distribution of power, authority and resources (such as age, class, race, ethnicity, religion and nationality).

This paper examines briefly the progress of the gender equity agenda internationally as reflected in the data routinely collected at national and international levels. It then traces the evolution of the gender equity agenda, and the complementary trends in programming and policy advocacy at local, national and interna-

tional levels. Finally, the paper examines gender equity in the light of current trends in political and economic restructuring, particularly in a developing country context.

GENDER EQUITY: INDICATORS OF THE POSITION OF WOMEN RELATIVE TO MEN

There are several sources that provide a broad picture of gender equity, aggregated to the national or regional level, in the areas of education, mortality, life expectancy, employment, and participation in public life (see, for example Neft and Levine 1997; UNIFEM 1995; UNDP 1997).

The aggregate picture is one of women making significant gains over the last few decades. However, progress is easily fractured by political, economic and social crises, and regional disparities in women's advancement reflect the geographic distribution of these crises. For example, while women's literacy rates have increased to at least 75% in Latin America and the Caribbean, and in most of East and Southeast Asia, high rates of illiteracy continue to prevail in much of Africa and parts of Asia where economic and political stresses have been most intense. Progress in girls' enrolment in primary and secondary schools has reversed in such cases (Neft and Levine 1997; UNIFEM 1995).

Life expectancy reveals a similar pattern. The trend is positive for both women and men, with life expectancy increasing at a 20% higher rate for women than for men. The exceptions are those countries in Eastern Africa most severely affected by AIDS. Life expectancy is inevitably shortened for both men and women in this situation, but women are more vulnerable to infection through heterosexual contact than are men. Progress in life expectancy elsewhere has by no means saved the 100 million "missing" women that Sen (1990, cited in Staudt 1998) identified in the disparity between the

proportion of women to men in the world's population. The excess mortality is explained by the persistence of "hard exploitation of women" (Sen 1990, cited in Boserup 1995), their inadequate access to reproductive health care, and the preferential treatment of boy infants over girl infants, especially in South Asia.

In employment, the number of women engaged in both the formal and the informal sector has increased. Women continue, however, to be poorly remunerated relative to the wage levels of men, they are in the least secure jobs, and they are poorly represented at the senior levels (Neft and Levine 1997). Feminisation of the workforce in developing countries has occurred as a symptom of the globalisation of production: transnational corporations locate labour intensive production in places where the labour costs are least and hire women because they are prepared to work for lower wages than men.

With formal employment or without, women are disproportionately represented among the poor. Of the 1.3 billion living in poverty, 70% are estimated to be women, and the incidence of male absenteeism and female-headed households are increasing (WHO 1995, cited in Cameron 1999). It is these circumstances that have driven women into the informal sector, as much as the pull of greater autonomy and financial independence.

COMPOSITE INDICES

The Gender Development (GDI) and the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), featured for the first time in the 1995 UNDP annual *Human Development Report*, are composite indices for the measurement of gender equity. The GDI is an indicator of gender inequalities in basic capabilities – as reflected in life expectancy, educational attainment and income – and is used to correct the Human

Development Index, introduced in 1990. The GEM measures gender inequality in terms of economic and political decision-making. The ranking of countries based on their GDI and GEM ratings are provided in the appendix. As Box 1, illustrates, there are striking correlations between gender inequality and poverty.

Summary conclusions from comparisons of GDI and GEM scores

Ranking countries on the basis of their GDI score reveals:

- No society treats its women as well as its men (GDI value for every country is less than HDI)
- Gender inequality is strongly associated with human poverty (deprivation in years of life, health, housing, knowledge, participation, personal security and environment)
- Gender inequality is not always associated with income poverty
- Improvement of GDI relative to HDI is occurring in diverse ideological and political environments

Ranking on the basis of GEM scores reveals:

- Four of the top five countries are Nordic countries, a reflection of the opportunities provided for women and the domestic policy priorities of strengthening human capacities
- Some developing countries outperform much richer industrial countries in gender equality in political, professional and economic activities
- The three countries with the worst GEM ranks also rank highest with the Human Poverty Index (HPI)

Adapted from UNDP: *Human Development Report*, 1997.

GENDER EQUITY: INDICATORS OF INTENT

Women are unequal before the law in many countries in terms of the right to travel, marry, divorce, acquire nationality, manage property, seek employment and inherit property (UNDP 1995). Most countries (154 out of 229) have, however, signed the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and this has served as leverage for human rights advocates pressing for legislative change (Staudt 1998; Chant and McIlwaine 1998). The objectives of CEDAW address both formal equality and substantive equality for women and men: equality before the law; expansion of women's options in the workplace; an increase in their representation in decision-making positions; and equal access to education, health and credit. Nevertheless, as Staudt (1998) points out, "ratification in and of itself does little to liberate women", Despite being signatories, some of the countries with the worst human rights records have done little to implement the legislative action required to realize the Convention's intent.

GENDER EQUITY: EVOLUTION OF ITS SCOPE

International Women's Year was launched in 1975 under the banner "Equality, Development and Peace". From this emerged a large industry in "Women and Development" (WID) international policy and practice. The pervasive understanding of "equality" was with regard to women's legal and political rights and entitlements. Women wanted to "level the playing field" – an appropriate metaphor given the emphasis on equality with men in their domain. Little consideration was given to what kind of development women were to be drawn into (Tinker 1990), and there was little questioning of whether such playing fields could ever be level, given the amount of unpaid

labour women continued to do without adequate recognition or support (Staudt 1998). The WID agenda tended to challenge the status quo only in so far as required to achieve women's equality in the public sphere, rather than to challenge governments to examine the private sphere wherein lay some of the most extreme injustices of all – unequal sharing of reproductive labour, violence against women, and sexual coercion.

Betty Friedan's motif, "The personal is political", was a pivotal turning point in women and men's consciousness. It marked the moment of recognition that equity required a shift by both men and women. From this turning point, the gender equity issue began to address the dynamics of the family, and the process of socialization for gender inequality. Papanek (1990, cited in Boserup 1995), for example, provides a striking example of the psychological acceptance of subjugation in cultural practices such as the perpetuation of the practice of female genital mutilation, but pervasive examples are found to varying degrees everywhere, from the "culture of female sacrifice" in the Indian household to the acceptance of unequal domestic workloads all over.

The equity issue further expanded its scope when chinks started to appear in the assumptions that development programmes in the modernization paradigm would benefit both men and women. Boserup (1970), for example, documented the impact of specialisation and mechanisation in agricultural production on the gender division of labour, showing how the role of women as subsistence food producers and traders was often undermined in the process. Other observers catalogued the deterioration in the position and situation of women as a result of development efforts that directed technological improvements towards men and welfare programmes towards women in line with western notions of appropriate gender roles.² Along with a growing apprecia-

tion for the historical and cultural circumstances under which women were valued as food producers, natural resource managers, public officials, and healers (Tomasevski 1993), the WID agenda was critiqued for its cultural insensitivity. In fact, in some cases, the focus on *women* had inadvertently marginalised women from the mainstream of development.

Concurrent with these stirrings was a marriage of “equity” and “efficiency” arguments. Gender equity came to be viewed not only as a justice issue, but also as an economically prudent strategy. For example, girls education was championed as a means of lowering fertility rates and morbidity rates among women (Summers 1992), while women’s access to credit was seen as a means of improving the welfare of children (for example by Freedom From Hunger and Save the Children, as cited in Mathie 1998). Providing women with the same inputs as men (in terms of education and direct agricultural inputs) was shown to lead to increased agricultural yields (World Bank 1995). Advocates for equity on social justice grounds soon acknowledged that the efficiency arguments carried more weight among policy-makers and planners, and an economic efficiency twist became the pragmatic approach to advancing women’s interests.

Rapid changes in the global political economy of the post war period have also shaped the way in which the gender equity issue has evolved. After a period of public expenditure expansion in the post war years, developing countries were facing a debt crisis by the 1980s, as unfair terms of trade, escalating interest rates, and inflationary public sector expenditure wreaked havoc on their economies. Economic restructuring became the rule. As Palmer (1991) observes, the demands of the global market-place, and the repayment schedules of debt-ridden states, are now as extractive as economic conditions during colonial times. Moreover, it is women, particu-

larly poor women, who have had to absorb the social costs of such a strategy

In the light of these economic crises and their gendered impacts, a rising tide of critiques by feminist economists (for example, Boserup 1970; Beneria 1982, 1992; Waring 1988; Palmer 1977) have turned our attention to the relationship between the unpaid sector and the cash/market economy. In their dominant role in the unpaid and volunteer sector, women are shown to be subsidizing the cash sector (or, from Palmer’s perspective, paying a reproductive labour tax). The failure to value this work in economic terms has resulted in extreme distortions in the assessment of the economic health of communities and countries. Domestic food production that does not pass through the market is not recognized in national accounting systems, and neither the unpaid labour of women in the home nor their volunteer and community organizing activities are factored in as *economic* contributions (Moser 1989; Waring 1988). Moreover, as argued by Elsen (1994), macro-economic policies, blind to the work burden of women, and assuming infinite elasticity of their time, do not have their intended impact. As MacDonald (1995) points out for Canada, “Expenditure cutbacks in health and education services transfer work from the market to the home ... this does not eliminate the costs of these services, but renders the cost invisible and imposes it on women” (1995:184). In the long term, mainstream economics that disregards the caring economy weakens the potential for sustainable economic development. Hence the slogan: *Human development, if not engendered, is endangered.*

GENDER EQUITY: CURRENT TRENDS IN RESEARCH, PROGRAMMING AND POLICY ADVOCACY

How has the broadened scope of the gender equity issue been translated into research,

programming and policy priorities in the international arena? This will be addressed at two levels: Gender relations within the family or local community; and the gendered structure of the relationship between different sectors of the national and global economies.

GENDER RELATIONS WITHIN THE FAMILY AND THE COMMUNITY

As Thin observes (1995), the gender equity agenda has tended to be gender segregated in its approach. It has focused on women and girls, to the detriment of the necessary changes required in the roles and aspirations of men and boys. The other side of the equation — the role of men — is now being pushed to the forefront. In part, this shift of emphasis reflects the concern about rapidly changing family structures:

There is an increasingly high level of marital dissolution in less developed countries and rising divorce rates in the developed world. Non-marital child-bearing is escalating ... giving rise to an increase in the proportion of female headed households and a corresponding reduction of household and family size. In many places, men have been losing their traditional role as the economic (sic) as more and more women enter the workforce out of necessity. Many men migrate for work and are thus separated from their families, while others subsist on seasonal labour which does not allow them to be fully responsible for their families. Yet others are simply unemployed, or have left their spouses and children (Richardson 1995: 14).

Programmes and policies that encourage greater participation of men in reproductive, unpaid work, are designed not only to equalise the workload, but also to equalise the responsibilities and the rewards of primary care-giving.

Social and economic change can exact a debilitating toll on men, as evidenced by the incidence of excessive drinking, violence or inactivity in the face of uncertainty about appropriate roles and behaviour.³ However, a re-conceptualisation of masculinity is slowly percolating, advanced by initiatives such as Fathers Inc. in Jamaica which publicises their members as nurturing fathers, the better parenting programmes in UNICEF's Middle East and Northern Africa region, and programmes to involve Indian men in reducing gender disparities in education and delaying marriages (Engle 1995; Richardson 1995). At the policy level, strategies to increase the "exit-costs" of leaving a parental role have been suggested as a way of increasing parental involvement (Haddad, cited in Engle 1995).

While uniform in philosophy and implementation, structural adjustment policies have not necessarily had a generalisable effect on the situation of women and gender equity (Feldman 1992). Beneath aggregate and average figures lie distinctions between rural and urban contexts, between cultural contexts, and between social classes. An effort to document the contingent effects of these policies is critical to advocacy efforts.

For example, a focus on the intersection of gender and class (Papanek 1990) reveals that while the gender gap may be narrowing in some contexts, the gap in income levels is widening. Thus, a burgeoning middle class in some economies may be experiencing a dramatic increase in gender equity. At the same time, the growing income gap between middle and labouring classes amplifies the differences between women of different classes relative to their respective men folk. For, as Palmer (1991) points out, gender inequities tend to be exacerbated under situations of poverty:

As family resources become scarcer, discrimination against girls in nutrition,

education and health expenditure increases. More limited productive assets for women means greater labour exploitation to maintain living standards (Palmer 1991, cited in Grown 1994.)

Women's employment figures must also be interpreted with caution. According to Tickner (1999), 70% of the labour force in Asian, African, and Latin American export processing zones (EPZs) are women because of their tolerance for lower wage levels. While Lim (1990), has shown how women's employment even at lower wages has *enhanced* women's status and provided a measure of female autonomy, others have pointed to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes by the inequitable wage rates, and the severe exploitation of women in the unregulated employment conditions that characterise the competitive and transient manufacturing sector.

GENDER EQUITY IN THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE ECONOMY: IMPLICATIONS FOR RESOURCE ALLOCATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The most profound way that the gender equity agenda has influenced current economic thought is by challenging the mainstream economic paradigm that systematically neglects the unpaid and volunteer sectors where women tend to dominate.⁴ To correct this bias, efforts to attribute value to these activities are now evident in satellite statistics from the International System for National Accounts, in the UNDP's annual Human Development Report, and in sporadic initiatives at the municipal, provincial and regional levels to fully account for unpaid labour (as well as discounting environmental and social costs) in statements of economic progress. The Genuine Progress Index applied to Nova Scotia is an exciting example of this trend (Colman 1998).

These initiatives have provided important data for the construction of women's budgets,⁵ used

by advocates of gender equity and redistributive justice. For example, The Tanzania Gender Networking Programme's gender analysis of the national budget led to recommendations to reallocate the health expenditures in favour of women, and shed light on the implications of impending cutbacks in public sector education. It also challenged the top-down nature of budgetary decision-making and the absence of female decision-makers.

The connection between gender equity and development sustainability has also been identified. Cutbacks in government services are shown to be associated with an increased burden on women as they struggle with three interrelated consequences: they have to pick up the slack caused by the reduction of services, they are retrenched from the public sector in which they have been disproportionately represented, and they can no longer rely on the services from which they had been primary beneficiaries (Tickner 1999). "Of course," writes Bienfeld, in reference to the stress this places on women, "this process of social asset-stripping will not endure. It is not efficient, it is not just, and it is not sustainable." Informed by the results of research into the impact of structural adjustment programmes and policies at the local level,⁶ alternative economic models strive to reach that sustainable balance by ensuring sufficient investment in health, education and domestic food production; slowing growth by reducing over-consumption and environmental degradation; making governments and transnational companies accountable for their actions; introducing supranational regulation on global economic activity; and levying taxes on international financial transactions in order to bolster the caring economy.

CONCLUSION

This overview of gender equity from an international perspective has attempted to illustrate that the gender equity agenda has gone beyond the concern for women's equal access to the opportunities that men have enjoyed. While measurement of progress towards that goal is still instructive, we also need to examine the extent to which we are changing the criteria of progress so that the work of women is valued and appreciated. This means enlisting men into the caring economy and advocating for economic policies that recognise the value of the reproductive sector for the longer term sustainability of the economy. Equity incorporates empowerment of women, not just their equal access. Empowerment involves both the acquisition of power by women, and the assigning of value to the caring economy so that men and women are encouraged to participate.

Gender equity, while making positive strides, is currently being severely challenged in the current economic climate. The principal reason is that economic liberalisation is exacerbating income and class inequalities. Class and income inequality results in increased levels of poverty, and poverty exacerbates gender inequities. Focusing on growth at the expense of sustainability is likely to accelerate these processes. An international perspective on gender equity can help by revealing ways in which a change in thinking about progress, growth and sustainability can be translated into international economic and social policy.

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1. CBC, for example, recently interviewed Glenda Sims, the Head of Jamaica's National Bureau of Women's Affairs. She has been researching the poor performance of boys relative to girls on several educational and employment measures. She commented on how the focus of women's equality with men has blinded us to the need to deconstruct masculinity and assist men in new roles in such a way as to ease the passage of change (*Some of the Best Minds of Our Time*, 4 July 1999).
2. See for example, B. Rogers, *The Domestication of Women: Discrimination on Developing Countries* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1980).
3. Recent field-work by the author in Kenya (June 1999) revealed an alarming level of dysfunction at the family level. Women interviewed identified men's drunkenness and lack of participation by men in community development activities as the priority problems after inadequate rainfall and lack of water.
4. See for example, Elson 1992 and 1995.
5. In South Africa, Tanzania, Australia, this advocacy strategy is well developed. The Commonwealth Secretariat is currently expanding its application by promoting gender aware country reports that capture the full economy – the cash economy and the care economy (Bakker 1998).
6. For example, The Structural Adjustment Participatory Review Initiative (SAPRIN) (citizen's groups with The World Bank); the Gender and Economic Reforms in Africa (GERA) program (North-South Institute); and the Micro Impacts of Macroeconomic and Adjustment Policies Initiative (MIMAP) (International Development Research Centre).

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