



Breaking the mould

Amid the many buzzwords batted around by development workers and agencies, 'gender sensitivity' probably ranks as number one. But what do they mean?

And how do we translate such trendy concepts into reality? **JENNY SCHREINER** offers some pointers

CLEARLY "GENDER SENSITIVITY" means more than having men make the tea at the next meeting, or running sewing classes for women, or starting a women's farm project. Or does it? The words have become code for complex and heatedly debated issues, in the development world and daily life.

Also known as the "Women in Development" (WID) versus "Gender and Development" (GAD) debate (more buzzwords that barely do justice to the scope of the debate and its centrality in our lives), it revolves around this question: Are women's needs best addressed by setting up projects that focus on women? Or is this best achieved in projects that incorporate men and women, but that are "gender sensitive" and committed to transforming gender relations?

First, a few steps back. By the early 1970s, international development workers were beginning to recognise the category of "women" — which was still seen as wives and mothers. This approach became popularised during UN Decade of Women (1975-1985) as "Women in Development".

One result was the creation of many projects that focused on women and were geared to provide them with, say, home economics training, domestic skills, nutritional education, first aid



■ **QUEUE HERE FOR DEVELOPMENT:** Rural women are usually last in line

and health education. Many of these projects failed.

The failures — and a chorus of criticism against the condescending approach — led to a shift in analysis. Gradually, women came to be seen as economic agents.

Scores of agricultural and informal sector projects were set up, small factories were started, and so on. These projects were forced to confront the fact that many women are at once workers, wives and mothers. And gradually it dawned on development agencies that projects which focus on women still leave untouched the underlying — unequal — gender relations. It became clear that gender relations are part of broader social relations. One result was the “Gender and Development” or GAD approach, which yielded the “gender sensitive” criterion.

The debate around gender sensitive development hinges on the distinction between *practical* and *strategic* gender needs.

Practical needs refer to the daily problems faced by women in the course of their work — their “double day” of paid labour and household work, lack of childcare and so on. Strategic needs slot into the social relations that sustain women’s subordination — who controls resources, who benefits from them, legal discrimination, and so on.

But this understanding is severely limited. Under capitalism many obstacles prevent women from taking part on an equal footing with menfolk. The distinction between strategic and practical gender issues degrades the practical needs of women. It obscures the crucial link between women’s broader political and legal rights, and the conditions under which women live and struggle.

Development work aimed at empowering women must be based on a clear understanding of how broader political and legal rights are connected to the basic problems of daily life.

We cannot reject a project because it concentrates on child care. A creche can be set up in ways that challenge the division of labour (between men and women) in relation to child rearing — perhaps through a parent’s education programme. It could challenge employers to assume responsibility for the care of workers’ children. The bottomline is how we manage to integrate political issues and the goal of transformation

Why development is a women’s issue

Men in suits might design the plans, manage the processes and reap the praise. But development is a women’s issue — particularly a black working class women’s issue

...

● **Women make up 53,6% of the population, but only 36% of the workforce.**

● **In the workforce, working class women occupy the least skilled, lowest paid and least unionised jobs.**

● **African working class women occupy the most vulnerable positions in the workforce.**

● **Many women classified as ‘unemployed’ actually work in the informal sector, where 86% of the 2,4-million people so employed earn less than R250 a month.**

● **Many women are invisible in work and unemployment statistics because they are categorised as ‘housewives’.**

On top of this, apartheid has denied black working class women most of their fundamental needs and rights — shelter, food, healthcare, clothing, education and access to land.

Black working class women have been excluded from formal political institutions of the state, from the current process of negotiation and from decision-making within the broad liberation movement and civil society.

into the project.

So, the GAD approach recognises different gender needs and tries to transform oppressive gender relations. Usually it includes some training and education for the affected women. Projects are not necessarily focused on “women’s issues” but might be directed at community issues such as housing or health.

And WID includes projects that deal with “women’s issues” but lack the commitment to change gender relations that make for specifically “women’s issues” instead of “people’s issues”.

The proof is in the planning

A development project’s success or failure depends to a great extent on its planning. Some of the standard planning assumptions have dramatic gender implications:

● It is often assumed that men and women will benefit equally from the project.

● It is assumed that income is shared equally in the household, so women will benefit from projects which give men an income.

● Households headed by women are seldom recognised, although they are hardest hit by poverty and most in need of development.

● There is a presumption that the man adequately represents the views of all the household’s members, so women are once more rendered silent.

● Farmers are assumed to be men, although in Africa they are generally women.

● Age and gender differences and divisions are dismissed among the “the poor”, “peasants” or “workers”.

● Women’s contributions through housework, seasonal farming and storage tasks, and child rearing are not recognised.

● Planning seldom takes into account that most women have several jobs.

Sussex University’s Institute of Development Studies has taken this bull by the horns by starting a training programme to promote development planning from a gender sensitive angle.

Part of the training explores how distinct gender relations are formed in different classes and cultures. The debate of how applicable western feminism is to African women is by now a familiar one. Similarly, by imposing western models of gender relations, we might doom development projects to failure — leaving the real gender relations in that community untouched.

The programme also concentrates on a critical aspect of gender relations: the division of labour in productive and reproductive work. The gender division of labour not only shapes who does what, it also ascribes value to different kinds of activity, and spreads skills and allocates resources in particular ways.

Finally, the programme tackles the horrifying extent to which women internalise ideologies of gender difference and inequality.

The individual consciousness of women involved in development projects is central to empowerment. It must be demonstrated that alternative ways of living, working and relating to others are possible and acceptable.

In our context the arena of cus-

tomary law and traditional practices takes on great importance. A good example was the effective sabotage of a National Union of Mineworkers farming co-operative recently when the local chief withdrew women members to do unpaid and forced labour at a crucial point in the season.

Development is not simply about income generation and resources. It's about empowerment, gaining control over one's life. This requires that women be organisationally developed.

The development of women participants starts with a clear understanding of the project's goals, who is in the project, why they have joined, what expertise is available in the project, what the division of labour is, and the goal of the collective.

Development work is not always run collectively. Often projects have managers who allocate and staff who execute tasks, with a fairly clear divide between strategic and practical tasks.

If development work is to be empowering in racial, class and gender terms, the process of building and strengthening a collective as a progressive social form of organisation, which facilitates growth and learning, should be made integral to the project.

A standard critique of development work is that projects designed to serve the needs of black working class women are often researched, planned and run either by men or middle class women from outside the community.

Here's a possible development scenario. It's a rural development project, with a staff of about 15, of whom seven are women and the rest are men.

A couple of the women are activists from outside the community. The others are drawn from the local community. The women tend to be less confident, less skilled and less trained in strategic thinking and planning than the men. Some of the men are middle class "intellectual" activists, others are from the local community.

The staff speak different languages with varying degrees of fluency. They have different levels of literacy, and are distinguished by race, class and gender differences.

When the project began, the activists within the staff were central to unifying and building democratic practices within the group. They helped develop a common approach to the

work. The men or the middle class women dominate access to resources and the skills to use them. In many ways, working class women are weakened by involvement in a project like this.

The acid test for such a project would be to examine the relations between the staff and the growth of staff members after the project has been running for about a year.

Have the activists — women and men — passed on their skills to others? Do decisions still depend on their input? Have the women from the local community improved their literacy, become more articulate and picked up the skills to play a more active and assertive role as staff members?

Often these changes in the power and skill relations within development projects are barely addressed, particularly when it comes to women staff members. Such processes do not simply happen by osmosis, with skills and abilities "rubbing off" on others. Skills consciously have to be shared among staff members. And there needs to be training that allow for the development of women — particularly black working class women.

There are other important elements: affirmative action, training in political and technical skills, a code of conduct to deal with the implementation of affirmative action and with matters like sexual harassment, and more.

The task of making gender sensitivity an integral part of development work starts with a detailed analysis of the community, in order to develop a grasp of the gender, racial and class relations operating there.

Tailor the tactics

It is possible to identify some aspects that can bring development strategies in line with the needs of working class women:

● **Job creation:** These programmes should not confine women in unskilled and under-paid labour, they should be aimed creating long-term jobs, and those jobs should not be reserved for men (with women getting the short-term ones).

● **Access to land:** Women's access to land should not depend on their relationship with a man.

● **Access to credit and financial backing:** Again, women must have this

access in their own right and with full legal powers.

● **Education and training:** This includes skills training for adult women and formal education for girls and young women.

● **Safe living and working environment:** Practical obstacles that block women's equal participation in life must be removed;

● **Equal opportunities:** Women should not be penned into certain job sectors or subjects at school or university; training and affirmative action could help set right such discrimination.

● **Reproductive rights:** Not only should parenthood be a choice for women, but in order to participate in society on a more equal footing they require access to adequate health, child-care and educational services.

● **Organisation:** Unorganised women are isolated and cut off from the organised strength of their community and class (which becomes male-dominated, as a result).

● **Discrimination:** Legislation that hampers these advances must be removed.

● **Stereotypes:** The gender stereotypes that narrow the scope of women's involvement and growth must be tackled by challenging traditional attitudes and practices.

The challenge is huge but not overwhelming. Because, ultimately, beyond having the "correct" line and mastering the buzzwords, gender sensitivity is a matter of plain common sense — and will. ■

■ **WAITING FOR A MIRACLE: Women need action, not words**



PHOTO: FRANCINE JOSS