

IDS Policy Briefing

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NEW THINKING ON GENDER AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Summary: The need to build women's interests into policy making on the environment is widely accepted and many environment projects have made attempts to involve women. But up to now the approach has been too narrow. As a result, women have gained little, and in some cases have become worse off. If women are to benefit, a more subtle approach is needed to replace the current 'add women in' mentality; one that recognizes the complex interactions between women and men, and takes account of how power structures within families, communities and institutions affect environmental management.

Involving women

The move to involve women in environment projects, and consider their needs as distinct from men's, dates back at least 15 years. It stemmed from the recognition that:

- *through their role as farmers, and as collectors of water and firewood, women have a close connection with their local environment and often suffer most directly from environmental problems;*
- *women's detailed knowledge of the natural environment, for example the uses of different tree species, can be a valuable asset to projects, as can their time and labour;*
- *men's and women's interests are not always identical, so to make sure women benefit from projects they need to be consulted and involved.*

Nowadays, many environment projects stress the need to involve women and include an element of women's participation. But experience is showing that simply involving women is not enough, and does not guarantee that women will benefit. In the environment sector, as in other areas, a new approach is emerging based on a more thorough understanding of how gender issues affect development.

The Gender Approach

The gender-based approach is distinct in that it focuses on women **and** men, rather than considering women in isolation. It highlights, in particular:

- *the conventions and hierarchies which reinforce men's dominant position in the family and community, and in state bodies such as forestry services;*
- *differences between women's and men's interests, even within the same household, and how these are played out;*
- *differences among women and among men, based on age, wealth, ethnic background and other factors;*
- *the way gender roles and relations change, often quite rapidly, as a result of economic forces, migration for work, and other social trends.*



In too many environment projects women have been treated simply as a source of free labour.

Photo: Cooper and Hammond/Panos Pictures

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The gender approach provides a more subtle and complex picture of women's roles within the family and community, and helps explain why many of the more simplistic approaches to involving women in environment projects have failed. It is also controversial, as it raises sensitive issues to do with confronting social and cultural norms and challenging power structures – something that communities, governments and donor agencies are generally reluctant to do.

Project Experience

The penalties for ignoring gender issues can be seen from experience in different environment sectors.

Forestry Projects

Forestry projects have shifted substantially in the last two decades towards a far greater recognition of the need to involve local communities in projects, and share the benefits with them. Greater participation by women has been part of this trend.

While some projects continue to ignore women, many have targeted women and women's groups for activities in woodlot planting, rehabilitation or protection. Joint forest management schemes in India, for example, have made women's participation a priority.

The fact that most projects now recognize the importance of trees and forest products to households, and acknowledge the role of women in collecting them, is a step forward compared to earlier initiatives in which women were largely invisible. Yet significant problems remain:

- *the costs in time and energy of women's involvement in projects are often ignored. Obligated by custom to commit labour to communal projects, women have often had to switch labour away from their own crops, which may be one of their few sources of independent income;*
- *women's input at higher levels, in planning or project management, has usually been minimal. Men tend to dominate decisionmaking bodies, and women's interests have been ignored as a result. In the joint forest management schemes in India, for example, there are many instances where village authorities have closed off areas to encourage regrowth of trees, and in doing so have cut women off from their major supply of firewood;*
- *the fact that women often have traditional rights to use certain trees and forest products is frequently overlooked. Planting woodlots on areas of common land has meant women have lost access to gathering sites. Granting women rights to the new trees has proved a poor substitute if the species planted do not provide the same range of useful products.*

Farm forestry is another approach being tried, with projects geared to encouraging smallholders to grow

more trees on their land. Some projects acknowledge the importance of gender differences. In practice, however, most still assume that households can be treated as a single unit from the point of view of costs and benefits. This has led to project failures, for example in agroforestry schemes where women have been expected to tend trees, but were reluctant to do so because they knew that the men in the family would reap most of the benefits.

Water Resources Management

Women's roles as providers of water for the home, managers of water at community level, and guardians of family health, are the normal reasons given for integrating women into water and sanitation initiatives. Ideas of efficiency also underlie this thinking. According to the World Bank Development Report in 1992 'women who are trained to manage and maintain community water systems often perform better than men because they are less likely to migrate, more accustomed to voluntary work, and better entrusted to administer funds honestly.'

As in other sectors, water supply projects have tended to assume that women's participation, in itself, will advance their interests. They have often drawn on women's labour, but done little to increase their technical or managerial skills. Many have failed for this reason.

Isolating women from the decisionmaking process has also led to their views being overlooked. Although projects have used community-based organizations to encourage participation, these organizations tend to reflect and reproduce existing gender hierarchies. So even when women are present on project committees, their voice is rarely heard as forcefully as that of men.

Cost recovery is one of the new trends in water supply projects. A special problem here is that water pricing discussions generally avoid the question of who has access to finances in the household, and who makes the decisions. Charging for water could end up squeezing out women's water uses, for instance in small-scale food processing, in favour of men's uses. This could deprive women of a vital source of income.



Women in charge: these Kenyan women get paid for maintaining village hand pumps.

Jeremy Hartley/Panos Pictures

Soil Conservation

Labour-intensive soil conservation projects, many using food-for-work or cash incentives, replaced the earlier technical or engineering-based approach during the 1980s. As 'victims' of soil degradation, it was thought that women's involvement would benefit them directly. But even where they have led to short-term increases in food production, these projects have often proved to be at odds with many women's interests. This is evident from the poor maintenance of conservation structures and the way in which techniques have been discarded once external incentives such as food or cash are removed.

The latest soil conservation projects have adopted a strong farmer-centred perspective. They recognize the value of local knowledge – including that of women – in adapting low-cost techniques to local conditions. Most, however, remain remarkably silent on gender issues. In one of the best known projects of this kind, the Projet Agro-Forestier in Yatenga, Burkina Faso, women's input has been central in building the rock bunds used to conserve soil and water. Food yields have increased. But because the project has diverted women's labour away from other income-generating activities, there have also been costs involved. Even in cases such as this where great efforts have been made to encourage local participation, for women the benefits can be mixed.

Rangeland Management

Recent thinking on rangeland management favours strengthening pastoral associations so they can take greater responsibility for managing local resources. So far, policies have remained largely blind to gender issues, holding on to the view that what is good for the community as a whole, is good for women too. Women are generally excluded from substantive participation in pastoral associations. In a World Bank-funded project in Mali, for example, women's sole input was to provide food for association meetings. The danger is that women's rights, for instance over use of water points, might be undermined when new tenure arrangements are negotiated.

The Urban Environment

A similar failure can be observed in new thinking on the urban environment. Here, investments are being directed at institutional capacity-building of municipal authorities, non-governmental groups and community organizations. The aim is to mobilize public support for environmental improvement. Again, these policies tend to forget that the in-built hierarchies in these organizations may block true participation by women, as well as other disadvantaged groups. Existing schemes at the local level already draw heavily on labour forces of 'volunteer' women, but do little to ensure that they can also draw on the benefits of their input.

Challenging the Assumptions

Assumptions underlying early thinking on women and the environment are now being challenged:

- the assumption that participation in projects will of itself ensure that women will gain, when in reality it depends on the type of participation and the terms on which it takes place;
- the view of women as an untapped pool of labour that can be drawn upon, despite their numerous other commitments;
- the tendency to treat women as a homogeneous group, ignoring the important differences between them;
- the simplistic assumption that women's interests and those of the environment and conservation are necessarily the same.

Integrating the Gender Dimension

A gender-based approach requires a new outlook and a much more thorough analysis of local situations. The first step is to understand the differences that exist between men and women and between various sub-groups within communities. This means differences in workloads, knowledge and skills, social status, and other factors. These are critical in determining who is in the best position to contribute to and benefit from projects, and who is likely to be excluded.

Understanding power structures and recognizing the arrangements of rights and responsibilities that exist within communities, is a second key element. Often these are complex, and they change over time. And in many cases, they are partly hidden and may not be obvious without careful investigation. Traditional rights of access to land and the products it yields often exist side-by-side, for example, with official ownership laws, but they are rarely written down or codified.

Insights of this kind cannot be gained overnight. It takes time to build up a picture of target groups before project staff can appreciate the more subtle interactions that may prove crucial in determining the outcome of projects. The new range of participatory methods (PRA) being developed to give people a voice, and a forum to discuss problems and solutions, can be extremely helpful in this regard. Getting men to reflect on the distribution of power within their community can open their eyes to the inequalities that exist, and begin to change their views. In some cases, women's participation in community decision making has improved as a result.

But these methods, too, can be undermined by gender factors. If women are reluctant to speak out in front of men, women-only sessions may be needed to find out their views and build their confidence.

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Improving the Quality of Women's Participation

Some projects have made important strides in overcoming gender stereotyping of women. A water supply and sanitation project in Casamance, Senegal, successfully trained women in the assembly and maintenance of hand pumps. Technical training was highly valued by the women, and some said their status in the community had increased as a result. The project's success depended on:

- *participatory project planning, where women were able to set out their aims and objectives for the project. Their input into the choice of technology made a critical difference to pump maintenance;*
- *the quality and quantity of initial training was high and refresher courses were provided;*
- *women were paid for attending training sessions. Arrangements were also made for community groups to take over women's market gardening activities while they were in training.*

A New Way Forward

The crucial importance of gender issues is being recognized in many areas of development. Key lessons emerging in the environment sector are that:

- *protecting women's access to resources and improving their bargaining position in the household, and more widely, should be primary concerns;*
- *people-centred approaches need to recognize local power structures, and drop the assumption that participation will always benefit women;*
- *care is needed to avoid involving women in project activities that bind them to extra unpaid work, without adequate compensation;*
- *efforts should be made to improve the quality of women's participation. For instance, they may often be the best candidates for technical training;*
- *changes in land tenure arrangements should seek to ensure that women's rights of access and ownership are reinforced, not undermined;*
- *new policies that use market mechanisms and pricing to govern environmental management need to pay special attention to their impact on women, given women's unequal access to and control over cash resources;*

- *institution-building projects need to find ways of increasing the representation of weak and less vocal groups. The assumption that building community 'consensus' is a fair way of representing all interests should be viewed with caution. Apparent consensus can be very misleading;*
- *since state institutions such as forestry services themselves have in-built gender biases, there is a need to look at ways of sensitizing these institutions to gender issues. Institution-wide gender training is one way of tackling this. Another is to employ more female staff in management positions and as extension workers, especially women who have had gender training;*
- *preserving the status quo is not always the best way forward. In some circumstances, helping women to find alternative sources of income may be better than trying to preserve their reliance on a dwindling natural resource base.*

For some, interest in a more gender-based approach is based on pragmatic concerns. They argue that unless gender issues are taken into account, projects cannot be implemented effectively. At the minimum, therefore, steps are needed to prevent projects from failing because of misconceptions over gender issues.

For others, the approach is seen in a more proactive way as a means of challenging power structures and tackling issues of inequality and disadvantage against women. By strengthening the position of women, and building their confidence and independence, environment projects could provide a route towards achieving broader goals of women's empowerment.

Either way, gender analysis has an important role to play. It does not offer easy solutions to the problems arising from long-standing and deeply ingrained patterns of gender inequality. But it provides an opening, and a way to begin addressing them.

Further Reading

Joekes, S., Green, C., and Leach, M., 1995, **Integrating gender into environmental research and policy**, paper prepared for the US Agency for International Development, Washington, DC: USAID

IDS, 1995, **Gender relations and environmental change**, IDS Bulletin Vol 26 No 1, Brighton: IDS

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