# GENDER
# Equality
## POLICY AND TOOLS

## CIDA ✦ ACDI

## QUESTIONS ABOUT CULTURE, GENDER EQUALITY AND DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

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# Why this note?

Concerns about culture are frequently raised in relation to initiatives for gender equality in development cooperation.

In some cases, program officers or partners are concerned that promotion of gender equality would "interfere with local culture", and therefore they feel that gender equality should not be promoted for ethical reasons. In other cases, the cultural values of a particular area are described as a major constraint to efforts for gender equality, and therefore action is considered to be difficult for practical reasons.

Are these concerns valid? What should we be doing as development workers?

# What do we really mean by "culture"?

When we talk about "culture" we often mean intellectual and creative products, including literature, music, drama and painting. Another use of "culture" is to describe the beliefs and practices of another society, particularly where these are seen as closely linked with tradition or religion.

But culture is more than that. Culture is part of the fabric of every society, including our own. It shapes "the way things are done" and our understanding of why this should be so. This more comprehensive approach is proposed in the definition of culture adopted at the World Conference on Cultural Policies (Mexico, 1982) and used in ongoing discussions on culture and development:

> "Culture… is… the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or a social group. It includes not only arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs." [1]

# How is gender related to culture?

Expectations about attributes and behaviours appropriate to women or men and about the relations between women and men—in other words, gender—are shaped by culture. Gender identities and gender relations are critical aspects of culture because they shape the way daily life is lived in the family, but also in the wider community and the workplace.

Gender, like race or ethnicity, functions as an organizing principle for society because of the cultural meanings given to being male or female. This is evident in the division of labour according to gender. In most societies there are clear patterns of "women's work" and "men's work," both in the household and in the wider community—and cultural explanations of why this should be so. The patterns and the explanations differ among societies and change over time.

While the specific nature of gender relations varies among societies, the general pattern is that women have less personal autonomy, fewer resources at their disposal, and limited influence over the decision-making processes that shape their societies and their own lives. This pattern of disparity based on gender is both a human rights and a development issue.

# Are cultures and traditions unchanging?

Societies and cultures are not static. They are living entities that are continually being renewed and reshaped. As with culture more generally, gender definitions change over time. Change is shaped by many factors.

Cultural change occurs as communities and households respond to social and economic shifts associated with globalization, new technologies, environmental pressures, armed conflict, development projects, etc. For example, in Bangladesh, changes in trade policies allowed for the growth of the garment industry, which drew large numbers of women into the urban labour force. This process has involved a reinterpretation of the norms of purdah (female seclusion) by the women entering this employment and by their families. The much greater visibility of women in cities such as Dhaka is also influencing public perceptions of possible female roles in the family and the workplace.[2]

Change also results from deliberate efforts to influence values through changes in the law or government policy, often due to pressure from civil society. There are many examples of efforts to influence attitudes about race relations, the rights of workers and the use of the environment, to name three areas in which cultural values shape behaviour. Efforts to reshape values about women and gender relations have focused on concerns such as the number of girls sent to school, women's access to paid work, and public attitudes to domestic violence.

New cultural definitions are formed through a process in which some segments of society promote change through advocacy and example, while others resist it. In other words, societies are not homogeneous and no assumptions can be made about a consensus on "cultural values".

# If it is "cultural" is it unquestioned?

As suggested in the point above, cultural values are continually being reinterpreted in response to new needs and conditions. Some values are reaffirmed in this process, while others are challenged as no longer appropriate.

A member of the Cambodian government uses a vivid image when describing the need to question the cultural norms that reinforce gender inequality. She says the aim is not to overturn the cultural identity of the nation, but to focus on the elements within it that oppress women:

> *"There is a Cambodian saying that men are a piece of gold, and women are a piece of cloth. The piece of gold, when it is dropped in mud, is still a piece of gold. But a piece of cloth, once it's stained, it's stained forever. If you are a prostitute, if you have been raped, it you are a widow, you are no longer that virginal piece of cloth. But men, whether they are criminal or have cheated on their wives, they are still a piece of gold. When there is such a saying, a perception, then there is something wrong with that culture and that's when you want to change it."*[3]

# Are there different interests that we should be aware of?

We noted that gender identities and gender relations are critical aspects of culture because they shape daily life. Changes in gender relations are often highly contested, in part because they have immediate implications for everyone, women and men. This immediacy also means that gender roles—and particularly women's roles as wives and mothers—can be potent symbols of cultural change or cultural continuity.

The political potential of such symbols is evident in the ways that religious and political movements have focused on women's roles. This has served to highlight adherence to religious or cultural values—and resistance to "Western" influences. In such contexts, internal efforts for change become even more complex as those advocating change can easily be dismissed as unpatriotic, irreligious, or tainted by the West. However, religious beliefs and national identity are also important to women. This is evident in the efforts by different groups of women to review interpretations of religious texts and to reaffirm values and traditions that support freedom and dignity for women.[4]

This example reinforces two points made earlier: that cultural values are constantly evolving rather than fixed, and that there are different interests intervening in the process. Views about the role of women and about gender equality that are held by one person or group will not necessarily be held by others (and views will differ among women as well as among men). A balanced assessment of the potential for gender equality initiatives requires consultations with a range of actors, including those working for equality.

Post-Soviet countries provide another example. There the rhetoric of gender equality is associated with the propaganda of the Soviet period. That women are "free to be women"—free of the requirement to be in the labour force—has been referred to as a benefit of the transition by politicians and officials. Women's organizations have noted that this serves to justify discrimination against women when there are too few jobs for all. Such organizations have been struggling to gain recognition from male-dominated political and bureaucratic structures that women want (and need) to participate in the labour market and to maintain their human rights.[5]

# Are development initiatives culturally-neutral?

Development is about change. Development initiatives (by governments, NGOs or development agencies) are investments in promoting social and economic change. Some development initiatives aim to change values and practices that shape social relations—consider, for example, the investments made in family planning and what this implies about family structures. Development models also incorporate cultural values—consider, for example, the concern with the transition to market economies and the support for private property as a cultural value.

Other types of initiatives less obviously concerned with culture nevertheless have an impact on the social relations that characterize a culture. Consider, for example, the possible impacts of an improved road network linking rural and urban areas. New roads allow greater mobility of people and goods. Many villagers could benefit from better access to markets for farm products, to health services and to schools for their children. Others may not benefit, for example, producers of clay pots would find themselves having to compete with cheaper and more durable plastic pots. Roads could lead to an increase in rural-urban migration. This could result in more households where men are absent and women take charge of farms and families. Or (depending on the region) it could lead to women leaving villages to seek employment in urban areas. Can it be said that there has been no intervention in local culture? Or that there has been no impact on gender relations?

# Can development initiatives be gender-neutral?

Decisions made in planning an initiative shape the type of impact that it will have on culture. Even if gender equality is not explicitly considered, decisions made in the planning process will have an effect on gender equality.

For example:

- A community-based rural water supply initiative:
  - Could include efforts to involve women as well as men in problem identification and management;
  - Or not, in which case the strategy reinforces the idea that decision making is a male function and results in decisions that reflect only the priorities and perceptions of men.

- A governance initiative concerned with the reform of the civil code:
  - Could include research and public consultations on the equality implications of provisions on marriage, divorce, property in marriage, inheritance, etc.;
  - Or not, in which case it ignores an opportunity to review aspects of the civil law that in many countries institutionalize discrimination against women.

- An infrastructure initiative that restructures a national telephone company's exchanges, equipment and workforce:
  - Could include consideration of the gender aspects of the employment restructuring and retraining required for the new system;
  - Or not, in which case it misses the opportunity to contribute to increased equality in the future workforce of an important employer.

These examples show that the decisions taken in planning are not neutral with respect to gender equality, even where gender issues are not considered. To address this, *CIDA's Policy on Gender Equality* requires explicit consideration of gender equality issues in the planning process and a decision-making process that supports progress toward gender equality. Partner countries agree on the gender equality goal, as noted later in the text.[6]

# Are we imposing "Western" values?

The notion that gender equality is "Western" ignores the ideals and activities of the women's movement in partner countries as well as commitments to gender equality by partner governments.

Governments in countries as diverse as Indonesia, Uganda, Jamaica and the Ukraine have undertaken commitments and action in support of gender equality. The commitments are stated in national constitutions and in international instruments such as the United Nations *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)* and the 1995 *Platform for Action (PFA)*. These commitments to gender equality were reaffirmed in June 2000 at the Special Session of the General Assembly that reviewed progress in the implementation of the PFA (see Table 1 on page 8). These instruments reflect a broad international consensus on the elements of gender equality and the steps required to achieve it.

While practice has not fully caught up with these commitments, many steps have been taken. Actions by governments to promote change in cultural values and practices include changes in the law (on marriage, property, inheritance), public education campaigns (about domestic violence, women's rights to education and health care), and program redesign (e.g. incorporation of gender equality themes in HIV/AIDS prevention initiatives).

Women's organizations in partner countries have been at the forefront of efforts to define gender issues and gender equality strategies. They have advocated adoption of instruments such as CEDAW and participated in formulating the PFA. They are becoming increasingly sophisticated in using these instruments to promote law reform and policy changes and to hold governments accountable for their commitments. Many women's organizations are also seeking to understand and respond to the complex interconnections between gender and nationality, tradition and religion. It remains a struggle for women's organizations to make their voices heard by the mainstream media and influential institutions. However, CIDA and its partners can make deliberate efforts to meet with women's organizations and hear their views.

## TABLE 1. EQUALITY COMMITMENTS OF PARTNERS

The UN *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)* has been ratified by about three quarters of UN members. Reports on implementation are made every four years. The Convention:

- Includes articles on the elimination of discrimination in public life, civil status, education, employment, health care and other aspects of social and economic life;
- Goes further than other human rights standards by requiring states to take measures to eliminate discrimination;
- Also requires states to take action to modify social and cultural attitudes and practices that disadvantage women; and
- Applies to discriminatory actions by private organizations and enterprises as well as the state.

For the text of the Convention and recent country reports, see: http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/

The *Platform for Action (PFA)* was adopted by governments of all countries at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. Progress is periodically reviewed at the international level. The PFA:

- Outlines strategic objectives and actions in relation to 12 critical concerns: poverty, education, health, violence, armed conflict, the economy, power and decision making, government structures to support equality, human rights, media, the environment, and the girl child;
- Emphasizes the responsibility of governments to promote equality between women and men;
- Emphasizes the relevance of gender equality commitments to government policy and programmes in all sectors; and
- Outlines responsibilities of NGOs and development agencies as well as governments.

For the text of the PFA and selected national action plans, see: http://www.un.org/womenwatch/confer/beijing/

# Isn't cultural sensitivity important?

It is of course important to be culturally sensitive. But respect for other cultures is not merely uncritical acceptance when culture, tradition or religion are invoked. We would not accept culture or tradition as a rationale for discrimination against an ethnic group—rather we would look for opportunities to counteract prejudice and its consequences.

In relation to issues of women's position and gender equality, cultural sensitivity and respect would be better demonstrated by the following:

- Adherence to the values of equality and women's rights espoused by the international community. These are important human rights commitments made by both Canada and partner countries that are undermined by the assumption that cultural values take precedence when they do not coincide with human rights norms.
- Recognition that any society includes different views and interests on gender relations. The assumption that cultural values are static ignores the process of conflict and change underway in any culture. It also disregards the efforts of women (and men) in that society who are questioning cultural values and working toward equality.
- Recognition that decisions about what aspects of culture and tradition to protect are not for outsiders to make. Assuming a role in protecting cultures from changes in gender relations is an outside imposition, as much as the imposition of change based on our own cultural values. A more respectful approach is to consult with women and equality advocates to learn how they are defining issues and what they see as potential ways forward.

# What about women's empowerment?

Strategies that support women's empowerment can contribute to women's ability to formulate and advocate their own visions for their society—including interpretations and changes to cultural and gender norms.

*CIDA's Policy on Gender Equality* emphasizes the importance of women's empowerment to the achievement of gender equality. It provides a definition of empowerment and indicates a role for development cooperation:

> *"Empowerment is about people—both women and men—taking control of their lives: setting their own agendas, gaining skills, building self-confidence, solving problems, and developing self-reliance….*
>
> *"Outsiders cannot empower women: only women can empower themselves to make choices or speak out on their own behalf. However, institutions, including international cooperation agencies, can support processes that increase women's self confidence, develop their self-reliance, and help them set their own agendas."*

UNDP's 1995 *Human Development Report*, in making the case for an "engendered approach", highlights the importance of women's empowerment to social and cultural change:

> *"The engendered development model, though aiming to widen choices for both men and women, should not predetermine how different cultures and different societies exercise these choices. What is important is that equal opportunities to make a choice exist for both women and men."* [7]

# And what about men?

Although this is often overlooked, gender is an aspect of the social identity of *men* as well as women. Just as there are cultural norms and expectations about women's roles, there are also cultural norms and expectations of men as leaders, husbands, sons and lovers that shape their behaviour and opportunities.[8]

Aspects of gender expectations may have costs and disadvantages for men (the expectation that they will take up arms and the defence of the nation, for example). However, the overall pattern of gender relations favours men in the distribution of resources, opportunities and power. Men's privileged position also gives them disproportionate power in determining the values that prevail.

To date, the struggle for increased equality between women and men has been led by women. However, recent developments include the formation of men's networks for gender equality and the "white ribbon" campaigns initiated by men in Canada and other countries such as Nicaragua against domestic violence. These are promising signs as the achievement of gender equality will require the participation of men as well as women.[9]

Development agencies are beginning to realize the importance of involving men in initiatives for gender equality. In some cases, this has been motivated by resistance from men when they were not informed of the wider benefits of women-specific initiatives. Other initiatives pursue the more ambitious objective of engaging men in promoting equality. Certain initiatives related to reproductive health have been particularly innovative in involving men in exploring the links between inequality and the well-being of families and communities.[10]

# What should we be doing?

The question is not *whether* we intervene in local culture, but *how*. For all development initiatives, the challenge is to gain a better understanding of the context and, in particular, to do the following:

- Identify opportunities for positive steps in support of gender equality;
- Be informed about, and work in cooperation with, governments whether by efforts to encourage change or by civil society organizations in partner countries.

These challenges are particularly relevant to initiatives that do not focus specifically on women's rights and gender equality. Most development resources are directed to sectors such as education, health, infrastructure, or to issues such as economic reform, poverty reduction, or capacity development. Given that such initiatives account for most development investment, they will also account for most of the impact on people—and the impacts, both intended and unintended, on culture and on gender equality.

## Establish a constructive dialogue with partners

A constructive dialogue with partners on gender equality issues is best established when an initiative is first being contemplated. This requires professionalism and a long-term view.

Not all partner agencies, or all officials within an agency, will be knowledgeable about the equality commitments in law and government policy or the perspectives of women's organizations. Some will be ambivalent or opposed to the changes implied by the pursuit of equality. Too often, discussions on gender equality are dropped when partners show a lack of understanding or enthusiasm. However, development workers have a professional responsibility to support state commitments to gender equality and to reinforce the human rights and development perspectives on which they are based.

Table 2 on page 17 focuses on strategies for talking to partners about gender equality. In short, prepare appropriately, be ready to make contributions to the discussion, allow for the time required to develop mutual trust and respect, and adhere to the long-term objective of gender equality.

## Build on a gender analysis

A gender analysis is required for all initiatives as it ensures that planning is based on facts and analysis rather than merely on assumptions.

Gender analysis has been advocated for over 20 years because of findings that projects can fail due to lack of information about basic cultural patterns such as the division of labour by gender within households and about the rewards and incentives associated with the division of labour. A gender analysis is therefore a means of increasing the quality and effectiveness of initiatives as well as supporting gender equality.

A gender analysis should provide information and analysis about the families and communities that will be targeted or affected by an initiative—about activities, needs and priorities, whether and how these differ by gender, and the implications for the proposed initiative. It should identify local and national initiatives for gender equality—the efforts by governments and civil society to pursue these issues, and how the initiative can complement these efforts. A gender analysis is the basis for planning an initiative that has realistic objectives and activities related to gender equality.

*CIDA's Policy on Gender Equality* identifies the basic elements of a gender analysis. Many guides are available to assist in identifying the issues that should be considered in different sectors or types of initiative. Three points that are particularly important about a gender analysis:

- It requires skilled professionals with adequate resources;
- It benefits from the use of local expertise; and
- The findings must be used to actually shape program design.

## Be innovative

There are no blueprints. The particular actions appropriate in a specific situation will depend on the policy environment, the relations established with partners, and the findings of the gender analysis.

Appropriate action also depends on the capacity of project planners to be innovative. A CIDA-supported initiative with local organizations in Pakistan provides a good example. In one community, constraints to women's participation in joint meetings with men were overcome by using a speaker and microphone to connect men's and women's groups—the two groups could share ideas and interact while still meeting separately. This approach was a constructive response to the situation that served to affirm the legitimacy of women's participation in discussions and decision-making.

# Finally

Finally, remember that we are directing attention to gender equality because it is an important development (and human rights) issue, not because we pretend to have all the answers about what a society based on gender equality would be. Women and men in other societies will not necessarily make the same choices we do, nor should they be expected to. When development initiatives start with a commitment to work toward greater gender equality, they can play an important role in increasing awareness of inequalities, in supporting a constructive search for solutions, and in enabling women to have an effective voice in this process.

## TABLE 2. TALKING ABOUT GENDER EQUALITY WITH PARTNERS

Preparing yourself:

- **Take an approach that reflects your own respect for gender equality as a development objective.** Gender issues should be addressed as part of the main discussion about the sector or initiative in question. If they are just an extra agenda item ("finally, let us discuss the gender aspects…") there is an implicit invitation to disregard them.

- **Do your research.** Start the discussion from an informed position. Investigate the gender equality issues that are relevant to the sector or initiative. Identify relevant government initiatives. Find out what women's organizations have to say.

- **Identify internal allies.** Identify individuals or units in the partner organization who are interested in gender equality issues (as a matter of personal commitment or organizational responsibility). Gain their views on issues and possibilities.

- **Use clear language and make the issues concrete.** Raise the issues in a way that makes sense to partners. For example, if you want to ensure that the benefits of an agricultural diversification initiative reach both women and men, then begin the discussion by saying that. Partners are more likely to be engaged when the relevance to people or to the country is clear.

- **Draw on national commitments to women's rights and gender equality.** All partner countries have endorsed the *Beijing Platform for Action* and most have ratified the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*. Many have also formulated strategies to guide implementation of these commitments. These are important tools for dialogue on gender equality because they ground the discussion in commitments already made by partners.

Monitoring reactions:

Many people are ambivalent about gender equality or opposed to the changes it entails (including people in development agencies) and thus avoid taking real action. It is important to recognize different forms of avoidance and to respond constructively.

| Form of Resistance | Ways that action is avoided | Constructive actions in response |
|---|---|---|
| **Denial** | Stating that gender equality is not a concern for the country (or region, or community), or that a particular program does not discriminate against women. | Present sound empirical evidence (statistics, oral histories, research) that documents gender disparities and discriminatory practices. |
| **Speaking on behalf of "women"** | Generalizing one or two experiences into a broad statement about all women, or presuming that own experience justifies a statement about "what women want" or need (generally ignoring the fact that women are not a homogenous group). | Find research that provides a more reliable perspective. Demonstrate the need for an understanding of the specific situation and promote the use of gender-sensitive participatory methods, dialogue with women's organizations, etc. |
| **Token action** | Acknowledging that something should be done, but selecting an action that can only have limited impact (a small add-on project or project component) or focusing on women's participation in a project activity (rather than the project's impact on gender equality). | Shift attention to the results of the initiative. Ask questions about how the project will change the way in which the partner serves its public – is there an opportunity in the project to improve services to women or impacts on gender equality? |
| **Lip service** | Acknowledging the issues at the level of rhetoric but failing to take meaningful action. | Build gender equality into the results and monitoring framework. |
| **Commissioning a study** | Delaying decisions by setting up a study to provide more information (often in the hope that the need to address the issue will disappear with the delay). | While research may be required, this does not mean that all action should be postponed. Propose action research, or preliminary action based on what is already known, or a pilot project to explore the issue. |

| Form of Resistance | Ways that action is avoided | Constructive actions in response |
|---|---|---|
| **Compartmentalization** | Referring all matters concerning women or equality to the persons officially responsible for "women's development." | Make a concrete case about the relevance of gender equality issues to the mainstream of the agency's work or to this specific project. |
| **Appointing a token woman** | Resolving the need to act by appointing a woman to a committee or a decision-making process. | If you encounter a "token woman" in a meeting, join with her in identifying and pursuing gender issues and encourage others to participate. Or if you are the token woman, look for allies. |

Adapted from DAC Sourcebook on Concepts and Approaches Linked to Gender Equality (1998) (drawing on work by Sara Longwe).

# Notes

1. See UNESCO website on culture and development : http://www.unesco.org/culture/development/index.html

2. N. Kabeer, "Women's labour in the Bangladesh garment industry: choice and constraints," in C. F. El-Solh and J. Mabro (eds) Muslim Women's Choice: Religious Belief and Social Reality. Oxford: Berg, 1994.

3. Quoted in Sunam Naraghi Anderlini, Women at the Peace Table: Making a Difference UNIFEM, 2000.

4. See issue on "Gender Religion and Spirituality," *Gender and Development* (Oxfam) Vol. 7 (1) (March 1999), and issue on "Women and Culture" Gender and Development (Oxfam) Vol. 3 (1) (February 1995).

5. See, e.g., Bridger, S. et. al., *No More Heroines? Russia, Women and the Market*. London: Routledge, 1996.

6. CIDA, *CIDA's Policy on Gender Equality*. CIDA, 1999.

7. UNDP, Human Development Report 1995. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. Available on-line: http://www.undp.org/hdro/1995/95.htm

8. See issue on "Men and Masculinity," *Gender and Development* (Oxfam) Vol. 5 (2) (June 1997).

9. The UNDP website on men and gender equality provides useful links to various groups and to other resources. See: http://www.undp.org/gender/programmes/men/men_ge.html

10. On initiatives that deal with male resistance, see e.g. http://www.popcouncil.org/ publications/seeds/seeds16.html On initiatives in reproductive health, see: http://rho.org/html/menrh.htm#designing