

## CHAPTER 2

### Introduction to Gender: Issues and Concepts

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#### THE GENDER VARIABLE

We live in a gendered world. Everywhere we look, we see differences between how males and females are situated in society, what they do, where they gather in groups, to what degree they have access to and control over resources, etc. Although it is easy to accept as fact that men and women are actually different in some ways and to appreciate the differences, what is increasingly difficult to accept is that women around the world are discriminated against in particular ways simply because they were born female. This last fact is one basis for the global women's movement. In the last quarter century, women from all parts of the globe have begun to meet and talk, to recognise the commonalities in their lives, and to begin to challenge patriarchy – male-dominated society – and women's subordinate position in it.

Society is a construction. It is never static; it is always changing. Gender is also a construction. There is a growing movement to close the gender gap, to build more equity societies where men and women, boys and girls have more equal opportunities and rights. Although more gender equity is a goal of those working for social justice, there is another critical reason for bringing women up. Many in the development field have begun to see that development efforts that leave women in a subordinate position in society do not lead to sustainability.

#### INTRODUCTION

The Marshall Plan, an aid plan instituted by the United States to speed the rehabilitation of Europe following World War II may be mentioned here. In the years that followed its inception about 50 years ago, the Marshall Plan was used as the model for "development" efforts in the new countries emerging out of colonialism. Development based on "modernisation" has proved less than satisfactory in the LCDs for a number of reasons. Ideas about development have changed a good deal in this half century.

--- *Introducing Gender and Biodiversity* ---

In 1970 an important book, *Women's Role in Economic Development* by Danish economist Ester Boserup, provided a wake-up call to development practitioners that "development" was not gender-neutral. Boserup's book documented a nearly global phenomena, that women and men did not benefit equally from development, but in fact, the lives of many women actually deteriorated in the face of development.

During the United Nations Decade for Women, 1975–85, UN member states were asked to collect gender-disaggregated statistics in order to see how the lives of males and females were differently constructed. These statistics revealed some of the ways in which women's opportunities were limited, in comparison with men. The following statements emerged as a response to this new information:

- Women constitute half of the world's population.
- Women perform nearly two thirds of the world's work hours.
- Women received one tenth of the world's income.
- Women own less than one hundredth of the world's property.

Clearly, many women were disadvantaged and development efforts were not reaching them.

The Nairobi Conference in 1985 served as a watershed for women. Since the beginning of the UN Decade for Women (1975), women were learning how to talk with one another. The global women's movement was born in the process. The ten years plus since the Nairobi Conference have revealed that this event was highly significant for African women who have moved forward on a number of fronts.

Several other UN-sponsored international conferences have begun to address the special problems that women face. The Earth Summit in 1992 highlighted the close relationship between women and the environment. In fact, the links between the women's movement and the environmental movement have had a long history. The 1993 Vienna Conference on Human Rights was the first international forum in which strong statements were made about women's rights being human rights that deserved attention and protection. A major policy change took place at the 1994 conference on Population and Development in Cairo. Prior to that time, family planning had been the major approach in population programmes. The Cairo Conference did not abandon its emphasis on safe family planning programmes, but highlighted the need to raise women's status through education and increased opportunity. There was a consensus that this new emphasis would not only lead to smaller families but to better health and well-being for all family members.

---- *Gender and Biodiversity Conservation in Africa* ----

It should not be overlooked that a major paradigm shift has been occurring during this period about how "development" is perceived and approached. The new model for development which puts women in the centre of development efforts – along with men – continues to meet high levels of resistance. Thinking of a world where women are on an equal footing with men is extremely difficult for many who benefit from the present situation.

Initiatives on women and biodiversity is very timely. These should be viewed as part of the changing paradigm. In Africa and in other parts of the world, rural women possess a rich knowledge of the environment in which they live intimately. They are in daily contact with the soils, water, fuel wood, and plant species, and they educate future generations about the natural resources at hand. In fact, the survival of women and their families depends on the women's ability to be devoted caretakers of their environment. For successful preservation of African natural resources, women should be recognised as important managers of the environment, and their knowledge and wisdom sought.

However, many times environmentalists seek out women only to get some work done. It is well known that women in Africa already have workloads that are too heavy. Can we continue to move the paradigm shift along by listening to the women and learning what they know, and at the same time finding ways to lighten their workloads? For Africans who consider themselves serious environmentalists, perhaps the most important work of all is to recognise what women on this continent are already doing to conserve the environment, to acknowledge their contribution and to support their efforts. What is contradictory is that resources for environmental programmes in Africa are rarely used in support of what rural women of Africa are already doing. If the above description of women and the environment in Africa is true, what will it take to shift the emphasis?

As participants in the development arena, we should all be humbled by the overall dismal record of development efforts to date. There is no doubt we are well educated and intelligent. However, for us to achieve sustainable results, it appears that we must do better analysis and get smarter. Something about the way we are doing things needs adjustment. Currently, top-down approaches are being challenged as misdirected. Science and technology consume a large share of the resources available, with what results? Where will the answer come from? The best thinkers in Africa must get busy and find real solutions for sustainable development. What better approach could there be than fully involving your traditional environmental managers who are already on the frontline fighting the daily battle to conserve the resources they need for tomorrow? Of course, that means the women.

---- *Introducing Gender and Biodiversity* ----

The table below which focuses on gender roles and relations provides food for thought.

**Gender roles and relations**

Women	Men
Work very long hours Use most of their resources for basic development: health, education etc. Do 80% agricultural production in some countries	May work long hours May use resources for basic development No sanction if use resources family well-being for personal consumption
Have limited access to education, training	Sci/tech training for men educ employment & employment op ag extension for men
Sector perceived	of as
Private Traditional The past The problem	Public Modernising The Future The Solution
Resources	invested
not here	here

This table suggests that women work very long hours. Some men also work very hard, but if they do not, society does not sanction them. Women use most of the resources under their control for what is considered basic development. Some men also use their resources for basic development, but if men use their resources for personal consumption, society does not sanction them. Women, the most productive workers, have limited access to education, training, and employment. Science and technology training favours men who also have more educational employment opportunities. The majority of agricultural extension goes to men who are not themselves the agricultural producers. Resources flow to men (away from women) to the sector that is perceived of as public, modernising, the future, the solution. An analysis of the table would suggest that resources are not being invested in support of the most productive workers, i.e. women, or those who are the most committed to basic development.

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**Gender needs**

Moser (1993) describes a critical distinction between practical and strategic gender needs as follows:

PRACTICAL GENDER NEEDS require technical solutions to an immediate perceived necessity. In meeting these needs, existing gender roles are not challenged and there are no moves towards empowerment or equity.

STRATEGIC GENDER NEEDS are political in nature, challenging the relationship between women and men, particularly with regard to the distributions of power and access to and control of resources and benefits. The purpose is to transform the gender division of labour and overcome the subordination of women and men.

EXERCISE	GENDER NEEDS	
	Practical	Strategic
Access to credit for household	X	
Access to credit for women		X
Training women in carpentry/mechanics		X
Health care facilities for children		X
Husband writing will in favour of wife		X
Handicraft training	X	
Family planning	X	
Family food provision	X	
Housing and basic needs		X
Participation in household decision-making		X
Literacy classes for women	X	X
Introduction of maize mill	X	X
Earning income for household needs	X	X
Participation in the political process		X
Nutrition/health care training for women		X
Nutrition/health care training for men		X
Universal primary education	X	X

**Source: Moser, C O N. 1993 *Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training*. NY: Routledge**

There is clearly work to be done. Can future environmental programmes be designed to coincide with the realities of rural life? Can bureaucratic short-

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sightedness be transformed into new initiatives to support and energise the work Africa's mothers have been doing since time began?

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---- *Gender and Biodiversity Conservation in Africa* ----

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