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University of Nairobi

POLICY BRIEFS

DEMYSTIFYING GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT ISSUES: Policy Pitfalls and Prospects

by

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Introduction

The concept of gender and its application in modern thinking and development practice has become a topical issue in contemporary concerns regarding social change. The concept embodies a myriad of dimensions, including social, cultural, physical or biological components. The mixture tends to influence much of our lives and work.

Simply defined, gender refers to the social construction of sex, i.e. what we think of male and female. In gender, the concepts male/female take the dimension of man/woman. Gender is not uniform as there are different notions of man/woman depending on race, ethnic group, social class and religion, among others. A comprehensive analysis of the various conceptions is needed whenever there is need to address gender issues properly.

Gender construction affects the socio-economic and political conditions and position of men and women in a given environment over time and space. Gender is socialized into people through their life-time, especially during the formative years. Over time, we are no longer “male or female”, but “men or women”. We become gendered persons living in a gendered-world and having gendered thoughts.

As a “development alternative”, the perspective of gender brings to the fore the need to consciously consider the specific issues, needs and priorities of men and women during development planning, monitoring and evaluation. Generalizations that assume sameness of men and women have

traditionally tended to isolate one gender thereby occasioning imbalanced development.

Gender issues are everyday societal issues, which affect both men and women in their relationships. Implicitly, gender inequalities breed development inequalities. The latter are not new in Kenya and Africa in general, where inequalities are manifested in unequal power relations between men and women, particularly with regard to the pattern of resource use, development management and capital accumulation.

A Note on Gender Mainstreaming

Since the birth of ‘gender’ in the mid 1970s, the aspirations of the “new wave” generation of feminists have resulted in an increasingly high profile given to women’s issues and gender issues within development policies, projects and programs (Allen & Thomas, 2000)¹. This has been partially as a result of initiation of women into international development institutions and whose voice has influenced the integration of women in the development process.

The term ‘gender’ became popular in the late 1980s as a replacement for the notion of ‘women in development’ (WID). The change was seen as an alternative development approach to address the issues of participation and shortcomings of the previous development models, especially the modernization and dependency schools. These traditional models tended to look at women as “automatically” involved (read represented) whenever

men (their fathers/brothers and later husbands/sons) were made part of an intervention.

Although there is still a worrying practical resistance to the concept of gender, it is becoming clear that engendering development is a “development alternative” seeking to achieve more inclusion of groups that were hitherto ignored in the development processes. Today, it is being recognized that mainstreaming gender entails a conscious, comprehensive and systematic incorporation of gender issues in all aspects, sectors and levels of local, regional and national development (Njoka, 2004)². Contrary to orthodox practice, gender mainstreaming is not an accidental or polemical episode, but a very clearly thought out process in which gender concerns are taken as part and parcel of an overall national development planning and management culture.

This implies the need for a concerted and conscious effort aimed at designing development policies, projects and programs that recognize the needs, differences and priorities of men and women. It is an attempt to strike a balance and harmony from the unequal gender-based social relations in the society. It entails taking gender as a universal reference point for analysis and action (Allen & Thomas, 2000).

The Pitfalls and Prospects

Several decades of trying to engender development have failed as seen in the continued “feminization”³ and “masculinization”⁴ of poverty and inequalities. Although the masculine area is least studied and addressed due to the overwhelming visibility of the feminine side, it is increasingly becoming known that boys and men also face serious abuses several of the key pitfalls towards engendering of development.

A Narrow Perspective on Gender

For a long time, women’s issues were often viewed from a narrow perspective of “sex”. This is the interaction between individual men and women in the sphere of personal relationships, or in terms of biological reproduction. This meant that men, in all their diversity and until recently, have been largely missing in gender and development discourse. When they have occasionally appeared, men tend to be portrayed as the oppressor, perpetrators of male domination and as culprit obstacles to equitable development. Representations of men in relation to women often portray men as figures women struggle

against, fear, resist or resent. Rarely, if ever, are men depicted as people – sons, lovers, husbands and fathers with whom women have shared interests and concerns, let alone love and cherish. Men “as men” are equally missing from gender mainstreaming efforts (IDS Bulletin, 2000)⁵.

Given that women, including the extremely oppressed, are sisters, mothers, daughters, wives, and much more to men, it is crucial for development agencies, particularly governments to consciously promote positive gender dialogue between men and women, boys and girls. This dialogue should enable the two genders to understand one another especially the specific gender differences and needs. This is, for instance, exemplified by the sanitary towels’ campaign in Kenyan schools and women’s prisons as well as in the relief food support for the needy. Both women and men turned up in large numbers to render support to their brothers and sisters. This is an opportunity to similarly profile other gender issues and debates.

Poverty

In the 1990s, there was a lot of discussion about the need to distinguish between the needs of poor women in terms of gendered responsibilities for household survival and reproduction, and issues surrounding the importance of supporting women to challenge the existing gender relations.⁶ The implication here was that women and girls have less access than men and boys to the scarce resources and services available to the poor in developing countries.

It has been argued that anti-poverty strategies have tended to focus on the concentration of women amongst the poorest groups in society. This is attributed partly to the lack of a gender analysis into the causes of poverty as well as the effectiveness of poverty elimination/eradication strategies. The persistence of poverty is closely associated with the ‘feminization of poverty’ and it is also argued that the poorer the family the more likely it is to be headed by a woman (Snyder & Tadesse, 1995)⁷. Gender and development efforts must therefore also be based on effective poverty eradication.

From a resource allocation viewpoint, poverty makes it very difficult for African governments and civil society to allocate and relocate resources towards enhanced gender mainstreaming. In addition, poverty alleviation is taken to imply a broad based approach, with gender issues being taken for granted in the process.

However, pro-poor approaches to gender issues make it imperative to recognize that although most of the poor are women, structures of gender sub-ordination cannot be reduced to poverty. Similarly, poverty analysis and pro-poor policy should not be focused only on women. Both require an analysis based on the dynamic social processes surrounding gender relations. A mixture of gender and poverty analysis is therefore unavoidable.

Ignorance

In Africa, illiteracy levels are quite high, with many people, especially in the rural areas hardly understanding the negative impact of gender stereotypes and discrimination. This hinders the attainment of gender equity. Many socio-cultural constructs regarding sex are used to justify gender disparities in development, due mainly to ignorance. Even some policy makers do not know what gender mainstreaming is all about. Majority of them, like the feminist predecessors, comfortably equate gender issues to women's issues.

Gender mainstreaming requires a multifaceted approach, which intervenes at the level of the home, community, the work place and within the educational system. It is not enough to deal with issues of access. What is required is behaviour change communication (BCC) for effective socio-cultural and political transformation which then can bring about an environment that is both gender sensitive and gender fair. Both women and men have to be mobilized and sensitized so as to participate meaningfully in local and regional development. If there have been marginal successes in the areas of HIV/AIDS, reproductive health and basic education, BCC can also succeed if applied to gender issues.

Sidelining of Masculinity

One of the most obvious gaps in gender mainstreaming, where new tools and approaches are needed, is the sidelining of masculinity. In feminist theory, men were seen as the problem and as those who stand in the way of positive change. While feminist activism stresses change in attitudes and behaviour on the part of women in coming forward to claim their rights, it offered little of the same to men than a series of negative images of masculinity. It is hardly unsurprising that many men find gender mainstreaming a difficult issue to deal with. Not only

are they told that they should give up positions which have traditionally given them leverage/advantage over women, they are also left without anything to value about "being men".

To reverse the situation, it is imperative to approach gender issues without criminalizing men and by also offering men something to be proud for just being men. A simple analysis of SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) for a man and a woman can be a great opportunity for enabling people to celebrate their strengths before discussing the weak and problem areas.

Limited political will

Gender mainstreaming in Africa is faced by problems mainly due to the lack of a comprehensive policy regarding incorporation of gender issues in the development process. Even a basic policy such as Equal Opportunities Act is lacking in most countries. In addition, existing policies have created extreme difficulties in gender mainstreaming. A good example is in structural adjustments programmes (SAPs).

Structural adjustment policies required factors of production, including labour, to respond to changes in market incentives, transforming their activities to more efficient and profitable activities. SAPs also imposed user charges for basic services, especially health and education. This translated into the vulnerable groups suffering not just from income poverty but also from exclusion from basic social services. Given the concern about "feminization of poverty" and the phenomena of female headed households amongst the poorest groups, UNICEF identified women, or rather mothers and young children, as the most vulnerable groups who should be targeted by reforms with a 'human face'.

Allen & Thomas (2000) point out that SAPs have had two outcomes on gender mainstreaming. They forced leading institutions like the World Bank to acknowledge the importance of understanding how gender relations will affect the efficacy of the implementation of SAPs. Secondly, there is now greater understanding of the importance of human capital in long-term development and the centrality of non-marketable activities, including health, education and shelter. These are now recognized as important not only in terms of the reproduction of labour as a factor of production, but also in their direct impact on the overall welfare of people as the result of the development process.

In spite of this recognition, most of our African governments have continued to pay lip service to the advancement of the gender cause. Many efforts can best be described as tokenism with the usual response of government officials being to allow women into the cabinet or to establish ministries of women and national bureaus, which lack resources and capacity. This trend unfortunately fails to address all aspects of development and to an extent prevent the examination of the real causes and obstacles preventing women from participating in development. The 1985 UN Covenant, *The Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women*, among its numerous recommendations emphasized the need for national governments to mainstream women's concern and participation at all levels, and in all sectors of national development. Similar recommendations have been made in Beijing (2005) and subsequent forums.

Unfortunately, not much progress has been made to implement the recommendations by Kenya. Even after the return of multiparty politics and the so called

democratization process in Kenya, issues of gender equity and justice remain low in the government's agenda. To be sure, limited political will is seen in low budget allocations in gender sensitive areas but there is lack of pro-gender policies in the development processes.

The required action is massive sensitization, mobilization and lobbying of political instruments and structures for them to prioritise gender concerns and issues not only for women but for the "troubled" boys and men.

Cultural and Religious Resistance

Culture is a strong determinant of gender relations. As a denominator of culture, religion plays a crucial role in gender socialization and construction. A contemporary example is violence against women, which is culturally entrenched in many of our cultures. Africa also has cultures and religious practices, which make it difficult to respond to the call for gender mainstreaming at least using our current combative approaches. These cultures include initiation rites, patri-locality, payment of bride wealth, etc.

It is imperative to approach culture more cautiously, systemically and in one step at a time process.

Bibliography

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Feminisation of poverty implies the numerous populations of women who are poor simply due to conditions of them being women.

Masculinisation is the fact of suffering simply because one is a man.

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IDS Policy Briefs

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Edited by Kibisu-Kabatesi

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