

Where are all the Men? A Revisit to Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality Initiatives in Community Development

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A woman in an underdeveloped¹ country has five children. She tends to the household duties, selects and possibly makes the clothes for her children to wear, travels to the local city market (where there are other women like her) to purchase food, and prepares the meals to eat for her children, her husband, and then herself. In almost every instance, these activities would be common of a woman who lives in a country that is considered “developed” (**note use of terms**). However, the social differences between these women have been the focus of researchers and experts in the world of international community development for over twenty five years. The woman in the underdeveloped nation can not leave the home as she pleases, and if she does, may need the permission of her husband. She may also be prohibited from having a job, holding and using her money for her own purposes, driving, and making any substantial and vital decisions regarding the household in which she lives. To those in the west and of developed nations, this spells gender inequality and is enough reason for recognition and intervention.

For the past three decades, women have become the focus of community development initiatives through various empowerment movements and so called “genderized” or Women in Development (WID) programs (Koczberski 1998). While all the efforts and methods of intervention by developers around the world are highly commendable, there remains the questionable role of men in the society in which these women are being empowered. The fact of the matter is that these women at the end of the day must live with and face the person to whom outsiders are trying to equalize her- her husband and other men. This paper argues that the role

¹ In this paper, the term “underdeveloped” is used to describe those countries which are economically disadvantaged and underdeveloped, and those that have a history of colonization and have received independence during the 19th and 20th century. The use of “Third World” and “First World” implies an order in terms of existence (many of the “Third World” countries have been in existence for centuries before “First World” countries), therefore it is incoherent in its use.

of men in community development is imperative to the longevity and sustainability of gender equality and women's empowerment movements around the world. By focusing in on the historical context of women in community development, the various perspectives on genderized initiatives, and the new strategies of the United Nations, the arguments of this paper will be revealed.

Historical Context

It comes as no surprise that women have come to bear the brunt of colonization and then decolonization, globalization, failing economies, transitional governments, civil war atrocities, and more recently, the onset of life-threatening diseases such as HIV/AIDS (Acosta-Belen & Bose 1990; Koczberski 1998; Levine & Neft 1997:17). In the midst of these events, many developing nations have had to deal with the burdensome social, political, and economic catastrophes that came as a result. The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) was established in June 1946 to "prepare recommendations and reports to the Council of the United Nations on promoting women's rights in political, economic, civil, social and educational fields" (UNDAW). Additionally, in response to the growing number of women in the labor force after World War One, the International Labor Organization (ILO) adopted the "Equal Remuneration Convention", which mandated "equal pay for work of equal value" to women. The ILO and other foreign aid agencies would adopt more conventions, laws, and agreements to further aid in the engenderment, or inclusion of women in international economic and community development. Twenty-five years after the ILO Convention, the focus of women in community development began to kick into gear when the United Nations declared 1975, "International Woman's Year". Right after, the United Nations declared the "equality of rights of men and women" and would seek to alleviate discrimination, gender violence, and other forms of gender degradation around the world. It is important to note that five years prior (1970) to the UN initiatives regarding gender equality, Ester Boserup wrote on the plight of women in the global south and their status in community development. Her book called, *Women's Roles in Economic Development*, asserted the need for a larger emphasis on poor women in efforts concerning community development and the reduction of poverty.

Since the days of Boserup and others, various initiatives, programs and conferences would follow that sought to strengthen the role of women in developing countries and provide them with the equal access to scarce and abundant resources. These efforts were believed to bring female and male counterparts in other countries to the same level (Acosta-Belen & Bose 1990). So what is the political, economic, and social environment like of a women living in a global south country that made them so unequal and the center of focus in the world?

Over the past three decades, much data have been gathered regarding the political, economic, and social conditions of women around the world. First, women constitute half of the world's population and women-headed households make up a majority of the severely poor both in developed and developing countries. More than 900 million women live on less than one dollar a day, and the number of rural women living in absolute poverty has risen by 50% over the past 20 years, as opposed to 30% for men (Sharma 2001; Levine & Neft 1997). Ironically, the women who provide the means of food to the world and to their family make up seventy percent of the 1.3 billion people living in poverty around the world (Levine & Neft 1997:1). According to the Interactive Population Center (an agency of the United Nations), "women grow up to eighty percent of the world's food...much of their work is unpaid, therefore making a lot less than men and work up to 30% more hours" (UNFPA 2004). Additionally, women comprise sixty percent of the world's illiterate population and if educated, are exposed only to topics that are supposedly appropriate for women- the arts and humanities (Levine & Neft 1997:2-3). In the case of Islamic countries, women make up fifty-five percent of the college graduates, but only eight percent of the labor force (Levine & Neft 1997:61). Not only are the women bearing the consequences of the handicaps in their society, but they are under the control of institutions that dictate what they can and cannot do. Clearly, there was an evident need for community development to shift towards assisting the poorer women of the world. When the recognition of the need emerged, it spread like wildfire. However, the change to a focus on women did not come without backlash from men.

Women and girls have always been targets of violence and marginalization, both in the underdeveloped and developed nations. Now, with the world focus on women in the alleviation of the political, economic

and social stress, emerged the backlash from men. With the special attention on women, men felt their position not only in the home was being threatened, but in the workplace environment. Employment for women would mean fewer jobs for men, or the possibility that they would have to work underneath a woman, which would both be a blow to their masculinity. With many countries, the role of the woman is confined to household duties and minimal decision making regarding the home. Historically and culturally speaking, the money-making, decision-making, and in some instances, baby-making issues were made by the men (Barker 1999; Acosta-Belen & Bose 1990; Medrado 2003). Predictably, when there were efforts to “empower” or “equalize” women, there was an unappealing sense by men that her new liberties and roles would undermine all traditional responsibilities, expectations, and privileges that come with being born a man.

To combat and minimize the implications of the roles and freedoms of their “new” wives and preserve the sanctity of their manhood, many men would retain earnings that their wives made, for themselves (Rahman 2004). As seen in a study of women who borrowed from the Grameen Bank², seventy-percent of the one hundred and twenty women said that their husbands told them to join the bank. It appears as if the men are open to the idea of the non-domesticated wife. However, this was quite the contrary when the researchers concluded that “78% of the women’s loans were being used by men and in 60% of the cases, women passed on the entire amount without any control over the investment” (Rahman 2004). The study implied that men are open to the “new” women in their lives, but only if they are in control of all earnings. When it seemed like efforts made by community developers were just adding another negative social package (gender violence, continued subordination by the husband, etc) for women to carry, another study came along to offer a new forecast.

According to Syed Hashemi & Ester Rojas-Garcia, the increase of women taking advantage of microfinance opportunities amounted to a

² The Grameen Bank is a micro credit loan organization that provides banking for the poor in Rural Bangladesh. According to the Bank, “There are currently 3.7 million borrowers, 96% of whom are women...and branches of the bank covering more than 68% of the total villages in Bangladesh” (Grameen Bank Website, 2004). <http://www.grameen-info.org/bank/index.html>

short term increase in the amount of gender violence cases. However, in the long term, Hashemi concluded there would be a decrease in violence against women, increase in self esteem, and a sense of independence. Hashemi and Rojas-Garcia's study recognizes that domestic violence is deeper than a woman who is being beaten by her husband. Domestic violence is embedded in the very power-driven and patriarchal structure of many of the villages that the subjects came from. Microfinance is not the answer to all the problems of domestic violence and other social issues, but as the researchers put it, "it [microfinance] opens up choices for poor women". Evidence in the study revealed that women who engaged in microfinance activities said that their status in their communities improved and they felt an increase in self confidence in the long term. Hashemi's study does not specify what "short term" and "long term" periods imply, but the reasons stated previously, leads one to believe that this study may be leading to a greater understanding of how to achieve gender equality and empower women in poorer environments. In order for the women to feel like their status improved in their communities and experience a decrease in domestic violence, there had to have come some acceptance or agreement by the men in their lives of their new roles and responsibilities. Beyond the empirical studies exist the more theoretical and abstract approach towards recognizing the complex efforts needed to raise the bar on living standards of women in all aspects of their lives.

Include Men? Perspectives on the Approach towards Gender Equality

There are not many perspectives that address the role of men as an approach to gender equality and women's empowerment in community development. This paper has already discussed some of the reactions by men to the global intervention into the traditional roles of "their" women. This section will discuss two views, one from a feminist perspective and other from a more traditional perspective, on the role of gender equality in community development.

Acosta Belen and Bose (1990), use a framework typically associated with the Feminist paradigm to their arguments of community developer's intentions regarding gender equality and women's empowerment. They

argue that women in third world countries are experiencing a new form of colonialization masked by the efforts of developed nations to spread globalization. Under their terms, western influence in community development is a “contemporary mechanism...that in the long run, better serves their own interest than those of their intended beneficiaries” (1990:299; Koczberski 1998). Furthermore, they argue that the efforts to empower women are only a veil that hides the true objective behind the west’s international involvement in developing nations- a new form of colonialization.

In Acosta-Belen and Bose’s discussion on the history of the west, they refer back to the days when colonialization and slavery were needed in order to establish longevity and sustainability of the capitalist environment. In today’s context, women, like the slaves of the African slave trade, are vital in the west’s push toward “more advanced capitalistic and industrial” nations (1990:302). The authors say, "Although it isn’t always self-evident, both women and colonies have served as the foundations of industrial development of the economically dominant Western nations” (1990:305). The enslavement of women in non-western countries places them not only at the mercy of modernization and globalization, but at mercy to western customs and ideologies. These ulterior motives of the west also came blanketed under the belief that they have the answer to everyone’s social problems (1990:302). According to developed nations in the West, industrialization and modernization became the solution to primitive and socially handicapped cultures of the third world. Acosta-Belen and Bose summarize this argument and says, “It is impossible to address the woman question in developing countries without recognizing that it is inextricable linked to the global capitalistic model” (1990:305). The idea that men need to be involved in gender equality is minor. What is important according to the two authors is that a true liberation of third world countries from the industrialized countries and western ideologies of capitalism be sought and the role of domesticated women in developing nations reflects her multiple jobs and therefore should be counted as wage labor. Even more so, decolonization or a “reformulation and restructuring of power relations between women and men at the domestic and societal levels, and free of all hierarchies”, is key to alleviation of the gender inequalities and social subordination of women in poor countries (1990:317). To Acosta-Belen and Bose women were the “the last colonies”, the last objects left on the

planet to be conquered by power-seeking men and those in the western society in conquest to globalize the world.

Audre Lorde once called for the unification of all women against the oppression of men and in her one of most famous quotes said, “the masters tools will never dismantle the masters house”. Acosta-Belen and Bose would unarguably agree. In their work, the women discuss the efforts by women in Latin American countries that have “collectivized their survival problems, instead of privatizing them, and formed social change groups based on social reproductive concerns” (1990:312). Collective action by women and gender-based movements is most favorable and effective in bringing out sustainable gender equality and empowerment to women according to Acosta-Belen and Bose. As an example of this, she refers to the famous feminist revolutionary movements that swept across Latin America and the successes in bringing about social and political change in their communities. One of the key successes noted by the followers of Latin American feminist movements was the ability to gather women, “politicize practical gender interests”, and resist succumbing to the threats made by the government and others against the movement.

Both Acosta-Belen and Bose’s feminist perspective adds another dimension to the strategies of gender equality in community development. In order to “decolonize” women, or in the current text, “empower” women, both argue for “colonial women’s liberation must be balanced with collective national liberation struggles...a profound reformulation and restructuring of the power relations between women and men at the domestic and societal levels” (1990:317-318). The role of men should be minimal for the simple fact that men themselves are oppressed by globalization-hungry westerners and are in the fight to ward them off. The feminist perspective taken by both women are quite compelling and offer thought-provoking arguments as to the role of developed nations in the liberation of developing nations from their social issues. By the end of paper, there is a definite feeling of “who do they think they are” that makes one ponder the true motives of the West. The arguments by Acosta-Belen and Bose are the opposite of the newer and emerging perspective, which views the role of men as imperative to the success of gender equality and women’s empowerment and ultimately the reduction of poverty and social

problems. As insightful as the feminist perspectives are, it is not likely that they are practical in applying to the current developing nation's dilemma

Since the 1995 UN World Conference on Women, the topic on the involvement of men in gender relations has been the focus of many in community development. Experts are agreeing and recognizing that it doesn't make any sense to engage in gender equality strategies without including the oppressors (Barker 1999; Interactive Population Center 2003; Cohen & Burger 2000; UNFPA 2004; Connell 2003). The role of women-based initiatives and strategies is understandably a threat to men in patriarchal societies. Therefore, there has been much conversation on the inclusion of men in efforts to not only equalize women, but also alleviate poverty. Many experts and developers argue that in order to "change the culture"; the formation of identity must start at a young age.

Boys, generally speaking have been socialized by their surroundings to act and think in certain ways, which in the long term may be detrimental to the community at large, especially to women (Barker 1999; UNFPA 2004; Cohen & Burger 2000). By involving boys in discussion about women and girls, the importance of family, and their stake in the success of the family and their communities, their responsibility of their own health and the equal responsibility with the woman on the care of the children, the eradication of gender equality is an achievable task according to some (Barker 1999; Barker 2004; Cohen and Burger 2000; Connell 2003). Without early intervention and with the sole focus on empowerment of women, men, particularly in rural communities, will seek others means to regain their sense of "masculinity" (Silberschmidt 2001). According to Silberschmidt's study these means included, but were not limited to, increased sexual activity, aggression, and increased the levels of low-self esteem in the men of her study. Silberschmidt's findings although interesting, unfortunately cannot be generalized to the over-all poor male population. However, her argument helps to better understand the need for a renewed and combined focus on men in women's empowerment and gender equality initiatives. In addition, the rest of the international organization and this paper would agree with Silberschmidt that a new emphasis on the inclusion of men will make the efforts of effectively alleviating poorer countries of their social handicaps an easier task.

Gender Mainstreaming Process and the UNFPA “New Approach”³

The new watchword for those in community development is “gender mainstreaming”. Gender mainstreaming involves the establishment of community development initiatives that cater to the needs of both men and women around the world. As stated before, the amount of resistance towards women’s empowerment and gender equality is partly the result of separating a woman’s public and private life and forgetting the social role she plays in her community. The UN and all its agencies and affiliates, The World Bank and their associates, and others have begun strategizing new ways to include men as a part of the gender mainstreaming process (UNDP 2000). There is much to focus on when it comes to the literature on gender mainstreaming and what organizations are doing to combat gender inequality, but for the sake of this argument, the focus will be on the UNFPA’s “New Approach”.

Like Silberschmidt and others, the United Nations Population Fund (UNPF) has taken into consideration the involvement of men in its promotion of gender equality. Although their intentions are from a health and reproductive perspective, their theoretical basis for doing so can be applied to all aspects of community development. The first approach to including men has to do with the idea of the “new father”. The “new father approach”, according to the UNPF includes, but is not limited to: supporting the mother during pregnancy and childbirth, strengthening relationships with the children, cooperating with the partner, and sharing in household tasks. What is interesting is that the organization warns that anyone who wishes to include this approach will have to face significant cultural and societal barriers upon implementation. As much as this sounds like the warning on the drug container, this caution should not be ignored if this approach is to be implemented. Below is a snapshot of the “New Father” approach framework.

³ All information was retrieved from the UNPF website on Population Issues via http://www.unfpa.org/gender/male_involve.htm

| Contrasting between Hegemonic Model of Masculinity and New Paradigms of Fatherhood | |
|---|---|
| Old Paradigm: Masculinity | New Paradigm: Fatherhood |
| Primary and sole financial provider, Authoritarian disciplinarian | Shares financial-provider role with partner Supportive and understanding of his children's emotional and educational needs |
| Unemotional, distant, restrained | Emotional, present, involved in all aspects of child rearing |

Source: Cohen, Sylvie L. & Michele Burger. (2000) "Partnering: A New Approach to Sexual and Reproductive Health".

Encompassed into the efforts of the UNPF is another initiative called "Partnering". Partnering helps to get at the "root of the problem" by redefining masculinity and what it means to be called a "man". There are a number of key intervention initiatives that aim to bring men closer together with women and making them realize that they are not "losing" their manhood if their wife or daughter has a job. Other objectives in implementing the "New Paradigm" include: engaging community leaders in the broadest sense (government, private sector, religion, media, entertainment) to endorse equal partnerships between men and women; advocating for gender equality, men's and women's reproductive and sexual health needs beyond family planning, ending harmful practices, and working with the mass media, educators and service providers to promote alternative male role models and change norms that tolerate violence. These initiatives, as the real intentions are to some degree good, actually seem to be the blueprint for spreading the western ideology (socially, politically, and economically) and denationalizing of the culture and history that exists within the "developing" countries. At some point one must ask whom these role models will be and why, and how easy it will be to get high-ranking officials in power to suddenly get involved in promoting equality and this "new paradigm", when they themselves are the "pushers" for inequality.

The idea of changing the culture of these men and boys embodies a seemingly an ethnocentric tone. In actuality, this is exactly how the UNPF sees it. The organization calls for "creating an enabling environment for faster changes in attitudes, beliefs and behaviors" that will aid in "achieving

its objectives in gender equity and increase male responsibility...promote gender equity without questioning patriarchal and other power hierarchies that accept men's power and women's subordination and curtail women's access to human rights". As much as no one wants be the perpetrator of cultural degradation, the UNPF and others recognized the need to reformulate the way men view themselves and others, and not make it seem so bad. The role of men is a vital step forward in alleviating poverty and social problems, which the UNPF and others have set as an achievable goal.

These are just a few of the major initiatives of the UNPF. Criticisms of the UNPF and other organizations doing the same will of course emerge. However, for now and for the future state of gender equality initiatives, those in the poverty alleviation and gender quality business see gender mainstreaming as a step closer to placing men and women on the same level. Whether someone calls these initiatives gender mainstreaming or engendering development⁴, they are at least involving the other half of the world's population that is effected by social change- the men.

Conclusion

Whichever way one chooses to look this, the role of men in the involvement of all facets of community development is vital to reaching gender equality goals and empowering women. The two conflicting perspectives on how to approach gender equality pose valid points. Nevertheless, a synergy of collective action from both the men and women of underdeveloped countries and the recognition of the social and cultural connection of women to their communities by developed nations, will aid in diminishing gender inequality and ultimately lead to the foundations for social, political, and economic revolutions. It just does not make sense, in any movement towards equality, to empower a historically and culturally marginalized group, forget those that commit the marginalization and are most socially privileged, and expect everything to be peachy. R.W.

⁴ This term has been used by The World Bank synonymously with gender mainstreaming.

Connell in his argument for the consideration of men in gender equality initiatives said it best:

Men and boys are unavoidable involved in gender issues... [Men] control most of the resources required to implement women's claim for justice... Men and boys are thus, in several ways, gatekeepers for gender equality. Whether they are willing gatekeepers who will support practical reforms, is an important question. The answer varies from one situation to another, and has to do with the ways men's beliefs and practices are shaped by the gender system. Research has repeatedly shown that patterns of gender inequality are interwoven with social definitions of masculinity and men's gender identities. To move towards a gender-equal society often requires men and boys to think and act in new ways, to reconsider traditional images of manhood, and to reshape their relationships with women and girls. Changes of this kind are already happening in many parts of the world, but not in all situations or with all men and boys. (Connell 2003:3-4).

From a sociological perspective, when one group is being privileged (even if they are marginalized) they risk facing hostile reaction from the unprivileged group (which could be the group in power). For the simple fact that one group is receiving something that the other is not, provides reason for social upheaval and a furtherance into regression mode for everyone. We see this in the United States with Affirmative Action, Welfare Programs, and the so called "mixed housing" initiatives. In each case, the majority group, which in most cases are the white middle to upper class, are saying, "But its not fair, I want a job too!" or "Not in my Backyard!", or even better, "Not with my tax dollars you won't!". In terms of community development, we seek to empower women and bring them to the level of men, which is great! Nevertheless, if foreign aid agencies focus primarily on developing women, ignoring the men, and dictating what people *should* be given, they are hindering the progression of an already regressing society.

Gina Koczeberski, in her analysis of WID programs points out that the major problem with foreign aid agencies was that they just got a bit too excited about their new genderized initiatives. Not only were men excluded from aid agency initiatives, but the "specific social and cultural context of

women's lives" were ignored" and "colonialized people were defined as incapable of self-government" (Koczberski 1998:397). These and many more problems that Koczberski raises, allude to one of the arguments of this paper. Only the people of undeveloped countries know what they need in order to serve their citizens and "develop" their communities. Furthermore, in order for any project to be sustainable and achieve the goals put forth, it will take a considerable amount of support and agreement from the side of those who are socially privileged and have the power- in this case the men. Should there be some type of intervention from the outside, which more than likely would be the case, the most important question should be, "what do you and your people need?" By approaching community development with a "here's what you need to do" attitude, foreign aid agencies are repeating the ethnocentric beliefs of the colonization era.

The issue of outside intervention in redefining the attitudes of men is complex. Some degree a change and agreement from the men in the culture must take place in order for "gender mainstreaming" to be truly effective. UNPF can spend as much money as they please on "partnering" and "gender role refining", but if the men themselves are not willing to accept the fact they are an integral part in alleviating some of the social problems, then it all is just a waste of time and resources. Indeed, there is the argument of the necessary need for outside influence, who exactly will be the "role model" man, and who will be the one to choose him. But as stated before, through collective action and other approaches, I believe groups will be able to formulate their own way of establishing the "do's" and "don'ts" that fit their own society. The largest mistake aid agencies have and could make with gender mainstreaming is to separate the social and cultural connection of a woman with her community (the husband/boyfriend, her sons, male workers, etc). To better understand what initiatives will work best, the needs would best be expressed from those who live and breathe every aspect of their life as a member of the community.

A few NGO's exist whose priorities are redefining the way men think about themselves and others. *NOMAS*, *The White Ribbon Campaign*, and *Program H* in Brazil, are all examples of grassroots initiatives that sought to involve men in the efforts to alleviate their environment of its social

problems. In Calabar, Nigeria, *Concretizing Male Adolescents (CMA)* have a “critical reflection model” of manhood used to reformulate the meaning of being a man. Everything from discussions on AIDS, sexuality, gender based violence, and many others are steps towards getting the men to partner with, rather than dominate the women in their lives. Ex-militants of South Africa’s *Engender Health and Partners*, through alliance-building, help to recreate the idea of manhood and sexuality (Barker 2004). In summary, a good start to ending inequality, empowering women, and ultimately sustainable community development, would be to include and reeducate men about their “manhood”. Whether intervention comes from within or from the outside, both men and women will have to take it upon themselves to customize the education received, or come up with their own, to fit their own needs and social environment, and forge their own revolution.

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