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**Why is gender seen by some as being important in  
development work but for others it is less important?**

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## **Introduction:**

This paper examines the arguments relative to the importance of gender in development work. It first presents three arguments: the range of research on gender and women's participation that has contributed to the rethinking of many aid agencies and development institutions; the closer examination of the role and contribution of women outside the domestic enclave, especially in the area of economy; and finally women's participation as being socially progressive and helpful to women's self-advancement. There are, however, arguments of those who consider gender as being less important, namely, that the issue of gender is tainted with confusions in the discourse; that it stands on the dangerous assumption of the difference between sex and gender; and that the gender issue can be minimized into sloganeering.

## **Gender: The Promise**

These section provide some points as to why gender is considered important in development work. Research on gender and women's participation has given birth and growth to institutional machineries within development institutions for the integration of women in development process. The United Nations (UN) designated 1975 as the International Women's Year, highlighting the more active involvement of women in economic development (Koczberski 1996, p. 138). This culminated in the UN Decade for Women from 1976 to 1985, with the theme of equality, development and peace (p.138), emphasizing the role of women in development and the plight of poor women in the Third world countries (Moser, 1991, pp. 83-84). However, the more remote source of the awareness on the role of women can be traced from the Danish agricultural economist Esther Boserup (El-Bushra, 2000, p. 55), whose *Women's Role in Economic Development* highlighted the role of women in agricultural economy, giving rise to the notions of justice and efficiency in the whole development policy (Razavi & Miller 1995, pp. 3-4).

In 1973, the Society for International Development (SID) coined the term Women in Development (WID) and pushed for recognition of women in international aid programs. Their lobbying resulted to the Percy Amendment to the United States Foreign Assistance Act- ensuring that all aid programs by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) must try to integrate women into the economy, whereby improving women's status and helping the total development effort (Koczberski, 1996, p. 139). Furthermore, many development workers became more aware of women's systematic exclusion form the development process and its benefits (Akerkar 2001, p. 2). In 1995, the UN held the UN 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women in Beijing with women's rights as the centerpiece of the whole conference, targeting governments, policy-makers and rights workers the world over (El-Bushra 2000, p. 55). Other international conferences that looked at gender issues Cairo, Vienna, and Copenhagen focused on women and their role in development.

More recently, the United Nations Development Programme pushed for a more gender-sensitive Human Development Index (HDI) (Sharma 1997, p. 60). In 2000, the UN, through its Millennium Declaration on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), looked at gender equality and women's empowerment as way to combat poverty, hunger and disease and as impetus for sustainable development (Heyzer 2005, p. 9). Hence, the awareness brought by research on the role of women had gone a long way to effect change in how agencies evaluated and re-programmed the works they had been doing.

Second, there arose awareness of the role of women outside the domestic enclave, with new emphasis in the economic contribution of women in the age of globalization.

Jackson cited one case in Northern Oman where women are involved in weaving, and another case in rural Mexico involving women beekeepers (1998, p. 41). In those cases, women's role as contributors to the whole economic enterprise and growth are examined, aside from their usual reproductive roles of child-bearing and child-rearing. Involvement of women is taken not as an end in itself but as an instrument against the subordination of women by men (Sharma, p. 61). The rise of manufacturing of goods and services for global markets primarily concern women (Pearson 2000, p. 12). The majority of the workforce is made up by women, and their contribution to economic growth, not only of their individual countries but also worldwide, is vastly recognized. Nevertheless, Pearson argues that a closer examination reveals that most women belong to lower-paid brackets, and, that worldwide, the observation by Boserup in the 70s is still true- that women perform the bulk of tasks in subsistence agriculture). Globalization brought the consciousness about women as victims of global crimes like trafficking for sexual services, calling for more proactive stance on the part of development workers, maximizing profits without necessarily damaging women's status and role. In the end, women's participation in the economic sphere destroys the masculine illusion that males are the primary breadwinners.

Third, the pervasive argument that participation of women and their integration into the modern sector is socially progressive and can serve as precursor to self advancement is given attention in the social capital discourse. Literatures on social capital ignore gender-relations (Molyneux 2002). The gender-relation debate is not merely to 'stir' but to demonstrate that the micro-logic of the whole social capital discourse is hazy (Lowndes 2004, p. 47). A case-study in Indonesia during the East Asian Crisis in 1997 proves a very vivid point. Examining migration, acceptance to the workforce, and the urban-rural divide, the women in two villages studied began challenging the gender norms embedded in households, hence, potentially reshaping their place within the kin-network (Silvey & Elmhirst 2003). However, the same study presents an ambivalent point. The confusion of the domestic roles and norms often hinder the full integration of women into modern society and their self-advancement. It is more cultural and even religious, like cases in the Arab world that cover not only the domestic domain but even the social sphere (Joseph 1996). Awareness of such ambivalence can be a good starting point for development planning.

### **Gender: The Problematique**

The arguments as to why gender is not important in development work are: first, the concept of gender and development is tainted with confusion in meaning and discourse. Arguments had been put forward for or against gender relative to development and other disciplines. The arguments often add confusion due to the differences on how the concept is understood. Divergent though the notions are, they have a common strand- as a grammatical classification related to sex and sexlessness or neutrality (El-Bushra). With this broad notion of gender, much room is left for various interpretations. These interpretations are misleading and contestable. Exclusive and expert groups, the so-called 'gender specialists', who often decide who are 'gender aware' and who are not, also proliferated (El-Bushra, p. 56). But what constitutes awareness, more specifically, gender awareness? It must be noted that the term gender was first used not in the field of development and cultural studies. It was used first in linguistics. It was only later on when this term was used in other disciplines like anthropology and feminism (El-Bushra 2000). The way it is used also serves as a source of confusion, depending on what sense the discourse is directed to, namely, in analyzing social relations, in describing aspects of people's lives, and even about value judgement of social change. This confusion is even evidenced by the fact that in most languages, the term 'gender' itself has no single

and clear translation. With this confusion, the integration of the gender issue in the development work is jeopardized.

Second, the assumption of the difference between sex and gender is dangerous. The It lies in the contention that 'sex' and 'gender' belong to different realms, the former belonging to observable science, while the latter to culture (El-Bushra 2000), creating further confusions. For one, it can be argued that sexual differentiation is itself part of a cultural promulgation. The term sex itself can mean many things to many people, depending on culture and discipline. It can mean anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures (Foucault 1978). For another, the Western conception of biological sex may not be shared by everybody. The stringent distinction between the masculine and the feminine is too dangerous to assume and cannot be held on solid grounds especially when psychology joins the discourse.

This psychological perspective crisscrosses through the realms of science and cultures, alleging that what exist are sexed bodies and socially constructed genders (Moore 1994). Most importantly, there is the question whether the gender differences that people attach with men and women are socially constructed or are they genetic. This argument is grounded on the scientific belief that one's behavior is driven by need, affecting different people in different ways and that people's attitudes are affected by their 'reproductive strategies'. This precarious differentiation people have with regard to sex and gender collapses, and the argument goes with it.

The third argument is that gender is an oversimplification of complex issues, reducing them into mere slogans that lose their deeper meaning, and at times the same issues having other meaning. An example is the paper by Jackson where she floated the idea of 'feminization of poverty' by examining and comparing the households headed by men and those headed by women vis-à-vis income and poverty (1998, pp. 43-45). This is precisely the point why there is a need to 'rescue gender from the poverty trap'. Providing equal economic opportunities to women is the focus of all the whole gender discourse. The question would be what qualifies as an economic opportunity? Does involvement in agricultural production wherein women have a very high percentage of involvement count as economic opportunity? In the more advanced capitalist economy, many development workers argue that the capitalist society tends to marginalize women by restricting economic opportunities, by not counting the unpaid labor at home. Hence, what they seek is, aside from equal opportunity, is the valuation of the domestic activities of women.

The dilemma is that if women's activities in the domestic enclave are given 'economic' value, what is it and how should it be done? With no viable response, it is an impasse. When advocates of equal economic opportunity push this agenda, the assumption is that women are willing and are in fact able to carry on additional tasks. Hence, economic enterprises may not be emancipatory. Moreover, in some cultures there are specific tasks and economic activities that are exclusive for women. Hence, when development agencies simplify complex issues, they make it harder to achieve solutions. To reduce the whole discourse into an economic argument is to set aside other equally important issues of cultural subordination, power struggle within households and even cultures. Reducing this whole argument into slogans can be misleading and even sweeping the dirt under the rug.

## **Conclusion:**

In recent years, the role of women in the development process has gained a wide acceptance and examination. Such awareness has been one of the major focuses of development studies and even of political discourses. However, there is much to be desired and done, if we want to make the role of gender in this whole discourse gain a prominent seat. As Moser rightly argues- this conceptual awareness of gender and development is nothing but a conceptual awareness, and not necessarily translated into practice (1991).

This essay presented arguments why gender is deemed important in development work. They are (i) research has led to some re-programming on the part of aid and development agencies of their programmes so that women's place be considered; (ii) that there is an awakening and recognition of the economic contribution of women in this global age; and (iii) that women's participation is a sign of social progress and can signal their self-advancement. On the other hand, some argue that this approach to gender: (i) confusions in the whole discourse on gender in the general notion of gender and development; (ii) the assumption that sex and gender are different is at times dangerous and misleading; and (iii) that minimizing the gender issue into women's concerns for economic equality with men makes it nothing more than sloganeering; and can set aside equally important issues such as domestic violence and cultural patriarchy.

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