

Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Central to the New Development Enterprise

2011 was a milestone year as major international organizations firmly acknowledged the centrality of gender equality to development outcomes. In March 2011, the Food and Agriculture Organization issued the first-ever *State of Food and Agriculture on Women and Agriculture: Closing the Gender Gap for Development*. The report marshals new economic evidence and analysis to argue that one of the key reasons agriculture is underperforming in many developing economies is that women do not have equal access to the resources and opportunities they need to be more productive. Closing this resource gap, the report argues, will increase agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5%–4% and reduce the number of undernourished people in the world by 12%–17%.¹

In September 2011, the World Bank released its first-ever *World Development Report (WDR)* on gender equality and development, reiterating the

key message that gender equality is smart economics. Gender equality has long been recognized as a core objective in its own right, but the WDR notes that it also raises productivity and improves other development outcomes, such as life prospects for the next generation and the quality of policies and institutions.²

While the report makes a strong business case for gender equality, it also acknowledges that economic growth is insufficient to improve women's lives and reduce gender gaps. Rapid economic growth has, in some circumstances, even exacerbated gender inequalities. The report identifies “sticky” (that is, persistent) gaps in health and education, discrimination in the workplace, underrepresentation of women in governance structures, and lack of property rights in many countries. For instance, maternal and child mortality rates remain unacceptably high in countries that have made huge economic progress, such as India and

1 *State of Food and Agriculture: Women in Agriculture* (Rome: FAO, 2011), 43.

2 *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2011), xiii.



Players of ARV (anti-retroviral drugs) Swallows during a practice session at Zinyengerere Government School in Epworth, Zimbabwe on June 28, 2010. ARV Swallows is one of 16 teams in an HIV-positive women's league formed by veteran football administrator Chris Sambo. | AFP Photo: Desmond Kwande

China. Women now represent more than 40% of the global workforce, but they are more likely than men to engage in low-productivity and labor-intensive activities and to earn less for the same work, even with equivalent education and training. They are also less likely to own or control key assets like land and housing. And they are still largely responsible for unpaid household work.³

Other imbalances also persist. For example, women remain dramatically marginalized in peace processes. The United Nations has found that women comprise less than 10% of peace negotiators and less than 3% of the signatories to peace agreements. That exclusion has had

consequences: post-conflict recovery programs and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs often fail to differentiate between the needs of male and female former combatants in their design. Moreover, critical issues are often overlooked. For example, of 300 ceasefire accords, power-sharing arrangements, and other peace agreements negotiated since 1989, just 18 of them—only 6%—contain even a passing reference to sexual violence.

So why do these gaps remain? Gender equality advocates and others have, for decades, been calling for a fundamental shift in the approach to development and working to alter the distribution of power, opportunity, and outcomes for women and men. Yet innovations have proven difficult to

³ *World Development Report 2012*, 3-17.

translate into practice at the scale required to bring about profound change. In light of the increasingly compelling evidence that we need to do a better job, how can we best improve our approach to achieving gender equality and women's empowerment?

Analysis and field experience reveal critical lessons that must shape strategy, program, and project design. These lessons are simple, practical guideposts to help move us forward:

It's about women and men. Too often, the commitment to gender integration means a focus solely on women or simply on creating balanced male-female representation in an institution's staff or among program beneficiaries. This will not work. Advancing gender equality and empowering women depends on engaging men and women in strategy and program design and implementation. Sexual violence will not disappear until male allies, perpetrators, and victims are partners in solving the problem. Women's experience, perspectives, and priorities will not be respected and heard until their male counterparts in societies and communities value and seek their views.

Similarly, advancing whole societies through strategies that promote gender equality will succeed only when focused on the needs and priorities of women and men. Projects to promote women's economic well-being through employment and small business development will have the greatest durable, positive results when structured so that men see the benefits to themselves and the well-being of their households. Education programs can only meaningfully engage students when cognizant that young boys have fallen behind in some places and young girls in others.

Broader societal transformation is key. Often we focus on individuals' beliefs and attitudes when we think about addressing gender bias. Although individual perspectives matter, they are

reflective of broader social norms that assign specific roles, rights, and responsibilities to men and women. In turn, those beliefs often are reinforced and institutionalized by laws, institutions, customs, and market forces (such as employer hiring practices) that can inhibit access to opportunities, control over resources, and voice in decision-making. For example, the subordinated view of women is often reflected and reinforced by legal limits on their rights to borrow money, inherit property, and own land. Occupational segregation in markets reproduces norms about who is responsible for care and housework. Reducing gender inequality on a large scale will require broader transformations in societal attitudes and the way those attitudes are reflected in laws, institutions, and markets.

Success will require integrating attention to gender in all programs...and some strategic investments for women. Efforts to advance gender equality and women's empowerment must be woven into sector programming to succeed. While some may assume that certain areas, such as macroeconomic or growth policy, are gender neutral, there is now a large body of evidence showing that gender gaps in education reduce growth in some countries and gender gaps in labor markets facilitate growth elsewhere. Economic growth programs must ensure that benefits accrue to men and women to have an impact that promotes long-term, broad-based sustainable development. Health programs will only reach men and women if they are designed with an awareness of the different schedules and clinical needs of males and females, among other issues. Elections will only enfranchise men and women if they are planned and carried out in ways that reach potential voters using the different communications technologies men and women can access—and if polling places are situated in places accessible to men and women

given their habits, schedules, and norms that may restrict mobility.

At the same time, some of the challenges women and men face are unique and will require tailored and dedicated programs. Combating and assisting victims of gender-based violence, for example, can require specifically targeted interventions. Programs to elevate the voices of women leaders in peace processes or governments will often necessitate a concerted effort focused on females. Successfully achieving gender equality and women's empowerment must involve a two-track strategy—one that integrates these objectives into sector programming and makes strategic investments for female empowerment where necessary.

Technology can help or hurt. Technology is increasingly looked to as a means for moving societies forward rapidly. And it can be an incredible tool. In places like Afghanistan and Kenya, mobile banking already has dramatically reduced losses in income due to corruption. Internet and communications technology enabled social movements to push for democratic change in the Middle East and North Africa. At the same time, if we aren't careful, technology can exacerbate the divides between the "haves and the have-nots," the rich and the poor, men and women. The gap between male and female access to mobile technology provides a perfect example of the risk; in low- and middle-income countries 300 million fewer women than men own mobile phones.⁴ In seeking to harness the power of mobile networks, we must recognize that the gender gap means women will often not benefit equally from those interventions. Similarly, unless that gap in ownership is closed, we must understand that using this technology risks leaving women farther and farther behind.

⁴ GSMA Development Fund, *Women & Mobile: A Global Opportunity* (London: GSM Association, 2011).



An Afghan girl looks at the camera during a Women's Day ceremony held by the All Afghan Women Union in Kabul on March 8, 2009. Around 200 Afghan women gathered to celebrate International Women's Day and shouted "We want peace with justice." | AFP Photo: Massoud Hossaini

Data and information are critical. The only way to know if projects and programs are effectively serving men and women and reducing gender gaps is to have data that is sex-disaggregated and can be used to construct indicators that measure change in both absolute levels and women's status relative to men's. Today, basic data gaps exist on project beneficiaries; but there also are myriad larger questions for which we don't have answers:

- Are strategies that focus on promoting gender equality and empowering women more or less effective in promoting agriculture sector growth, poverty alleviation, and reductions in malnutrition?



An Indian woman carries a pot of water from a well in the village of Kayla, India. The government has made progress in the supply of safe water to its people, but gross disparities in coverage persist. The World Bank estimates that 21% of communicable diseases in India are related to unsafe water.

AFP Photo: Sam Panthaky

- Which types of interventions are more effective at improving learning and school completion rates for girls and boys?
- Are women and men benefiting equally from projects in governance, security-sector reform, or other sectors?
- Have there been unforeseen negative consequences for men or women as a result of our programs, such as displacing women from access to resources or assets, increasing the unpaid work or caregiver burden of females relative to males, or increasing the risk of gender-based violence? If so, how widespread are those consequences?

Without that basic information, it is impossible to know the extent to which gender gaps are being reduced and women empowered, how effectively that is being done, and with what effect on overall development results. A fundamental, foundational building block to success—and to awareness of that success—is quality data and information.

Women must benefit from and be active partners in the development process.

Historically, the foreign assistance community has focused on serving the needs of the poor and underprivileged. As a result, our ability to meet the needs of women has improved. But recognition and engagement of women as critical partners in development and decision-making lags behind. Though we seek increasingly to involve stakeholders in designing, implementing, and evaluating strategies and programs, we often fail to leverage

the insights and talents of women in civil society, government, and communities. For example, though the vast majority of adult refugees and displaced people are often women, decision-making structures and camp committees are regularly dominated by men. That is to our own detriment, as women's perspectives and approaches to problem solving are often unique and also necessary to ensure more effective and responsive governance.

Most importantly, broader transformation of the modern development enterprise will require a full appreciation of the most important lesson:

It's about solid development outcomes that improve lives for all with rights and dignity. Gender equality and women's empowerment are critical goals unto themselves. At the same time, pursuing equality and empowerment translate into successful and sustainable development. Our foreign assistance will achieve less until we are better able to weave effective strategies for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment into all that we do.

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