

On Men and Masculinity

Should men be involved in gender and development work? Is this an effective strategy in pursuing the goal of women's empowerment? The debate continues. Following are highlights of an Interview with Dr. Frances Cleaver, Senior Lecturer at the Development and Projects Planning Centre, University of Bradford (United Kingdom) on questions of men and masculinity in Gender and Development. The interview was conducted by Sonja Klinsky of the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) on 9 February 2001 and was sent via E-mail as part of AWID's Resource Net Issues 12.

Q: Why do you think a discussion of men and masculinity has been left out of discussions on Gender and Development?

A: Many people are quite wary of discussing men in Gender and Development (GAD) because it has been such a long struggle to get gender issues taken seriously in development. In order to get organisations to really consider women's disadvantages and women's empowerment, those interested in GAD have had to use very strong messages about gender-derived disadvantages for women. There is a concern that if people stop emphasising women in gender and development, that the understanding that is now being achieved will be eroded. Introducing men and masculinity into GAD gives people who don't want to seriously address gender an easy excuse to revert back to focusing solely on men. This tension has meant that people have been very wary of tackling this issue.

However, it is an essential area for work within development as a whole. While there are now many documents and research studies that have pushed us to consider the complexities of women's situations globally, there have been fewer acknowledgements of men's diversities. Very often men are stereotyped in documents or projects in ways that we wouldn't accept as women. If we are serious about addressing gendered relationships and gender issues, then we need to develop a rounder picture that encompasses all gender roles.

An additional, but related difficulty is that practitioners faced with issues of men and masculinity are forced to seriously reflect and reevaluate their own identities and backgrounds in order to be able to incorporate these concerns. This requires a great deal of personal energy and it has been very difficult for many people actually doing the work to change their own perceptions. This is a major challenge for practitioners and it does slow down the incorporation of men and masculinity into GAD.

Q.: What are some of the tensions that emerge among different groups when discussing men and masculinity within a GAD framework?

A: This is a tricky area. The seminar series entitled Men, Masculinities and Gender Relations in Development that I coordinated brought together academics and practitioners who approached the topic from very different backgrounds, which sparked some very heated discussions. While there was the usual academic-practitioner debate in which academics wanted to explore the actual concepts of "gender" and "masculinity" and practitioners wanted to focus on "doing," this area also brought to light other tensions.

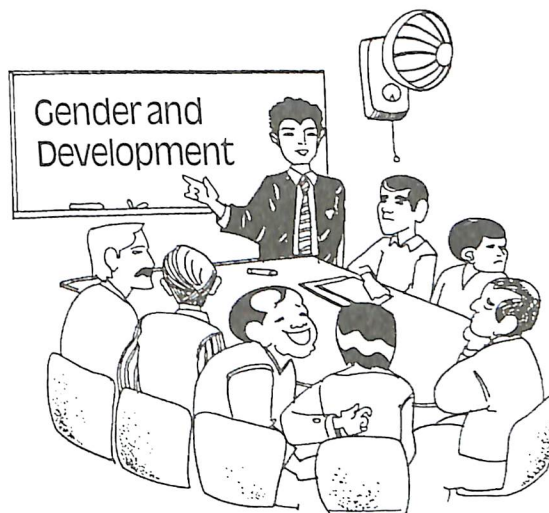
Discussions of men and masculinity can be approached from many different ideological underpinnings, and these different backgrounds can lead to very divergent understandings of power and of oppression. For example, while many of the participants of

the seminars came from a feminist background, many other participants were coming to the issue with backgrounds in sexual diversity studies, or from postmodern frameworks and they brought different conceptions of power to the table. As there has been a long-standing debate in both the GAD and feminist communities around the question "can men be feminists and/or talk about women's roles in development?," there were also tensions around the question; "can women talk about men and masculinity?" These are the types of tensions that emerge from discussions of this nature and subject matter and negotiating around them can be quite tricky but it is an important and exciting issue.

Q: Where is much of the work on men and masculinity in GAD being done on a practical level?

A: There are two main sectors that have been experimenting with men and masculinity. The first is within sexual-health projects and the second has been in projects working with children and education. Many of the sexual-health projects have ended up working on issues such as HIV/AIDS or domestic violence. These are very intimate areas of people's lives that are strongly dependent on how each participant in a given relationship perceives his/her role in that relationship. Working solely with women then, in these areas is not enough as there needs to be scope for change for all participants in a given relationship. Thus, exploring how men think about and approach relationships is essential for work in sexual health and domestic violence and much of the practical experience in terms of men and masculinity has come from this sector.

Projects that focus on children and education are also major sources of much of the experience in men and masculinity. This work has often revolved around providing various role models that children can follow and much of it has included discussion of what it means to be "a boy" in a given context. For example, the Children's Fund recently did an international film project in four Asian countries focusing on boys and their perceptions of masculin-



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linity. Similarly, recent projects in Namibia and South Africa have been working to address high levels of violence in schools and high levels of pregnancies in young women in school. Projects working in these areas did not mean to start working from a discussion of masculinity and femininity; however, it soon became apparent that tackling gendered perspectives was essential for dealing with these problems.

Most of this experience has not come out of explicit "men in...." projects, but has come out of different sorts of projects. The diversity of approaches simply accentuates the cross-cutting and complex nature of the topic and presents both an enormous opportunity and a huge challenge as many different groups of people come together to discuss and to work on masculinity within GAD.

Q: What are some of the strategies you can see for advancing a consideration of men and masculinity within GAD?

A: There needs to be a practical effort to do more research. We need to explore what men are thinking about relationships or situations as compared to what women are thinking. As part of this we also need to continue work on monitoring gender roles and activities as they change over time. This is not a big change from traditional GAD work but it does require a greater sensitivity to the portrayal of and assumptions made about men while doing this research.

Training is another large area for change and growth. There needs to be a great increase in the number of male gender trainers. This is

an area dominated by women and that needs to be changed. More male gender trainers would help to encourage men to reflect on their own perceptions and behaviours and to change some of their own behaviours.

Some NGOs are working in schools on participatory theatre projects and with similar tactics to engage children in active consideration of their own gender perceptions. Similarly, there is some work being done with church groups and other small organisations. These small organisations often seem to be more comfortable dealing with more intimate aspects of people's lives and their strategies have promise for further work. Education at all levels is a major strategy.

There is also a policy aspect to future areas of work and strategy. There may be a role for organisations to encourage policy changes that would encourage the development of new role models for men and boys. Role models could be useful in reversing some of the stereotypical roles that have been assigned men and boys. Within this category, the use of the mass media to simply get ideas and images of alternative roles out there for the general public is a good step. Related to this is the development of a legal and political framework that is supportive of gender equity in all areas of life, including care and reproductive work. There need to be legal provisions that allow men to be "different kinds of men," although it is also recognised that the ability to do this in certain regions is questionable.

Overall, there are opportunities to advance this topic through research and data collection, training and advocacy and policy frameworks. These are all areas in which people can make huge contributions to the development of a GAD framework that includes a consideration of men and masculinity.

Q: What are a few of the major areas that need more research?

A: There are many possible areas that would greatly benefit from increased research. Two

of the main ones revolve around labour and health. While there has been a great deal of discussion of women's double and triple workloads around the world, there has been very little consideration of men's work. When discussing work and work intensity, men have often been left out of the picture. Some people have challenged the view that "men are lazy" and are instead proposing that new ways of measuring work need to be developed, that we need to start rethinking the way that research is done to allow for a better conceptualisation of "work."

A second large area for additional research is the area of men's health. Again, while there has been discussion of the implications of women's gendered identity on their health and access to health care, there has been little consideration of the gendered aspects of men's health. It must be noted that men take some health risks because of their gender identity. For example, men are usually the ones who handle dangerous chemicals, such as pesticides. They do this because it is part of their gender role and yet it increases their health vulnerabilities. There is however, little research done on these sorts of health issues from a gender perspective. Since this is such a new field, are there any good resources that you can recommend to people who are interested in exploring this further?

A webpage is one of the outcomes from the series of Men and Masculinity seminars that was conducted from September 1998 to June 2000. It contains all of the various papers presented throughout the seminar serves as well as contacts for people doing this kind of work, discussions of future research areas, and much more. The address of this site is <<http://www.brad.ac.uk/acad/dppc/gender/mandmweb/contents.html>>.

Note: For subscription to the Association for Women's Rights in Development's FREE listserv with jobs, announcements and analysis, send an E-mail to <awid.resource@reply.net> with "subscribe" in the subject line.