



## Women & Development Aid

By Ritu R. Sharma, Women's EDGE

Over the past 30 years, study after study by academics, development practitioners, and international agencies has demonstrated the seemingly self-evident fact that women are equal to men, and sometimes surpass men, in contributing to social and economic development.

Researchers have also documented the significant economic dividends of investing in women and girls. Studies conducted by the World Bank, United Nations, and various academics have shown that discrimination against women and girls in education, health care, financial services, and human rights dampens overall economic output, productivity, and growth rates. One World Bank report found that gender inequality in education and employment suppresses Africa's annual per capita growth by 0.8%.

Beyond direct economic impacts, women's increased access to education, health care, and human rights brings a "virtuous" cycle of enhanced child health,

improved food production, lower population growth rates, higher incomes, and, of course, better quality of life for women themselves.

In addition to undermining women's potential, discrimination and low status have relegated many women and their children to the ranks of the poor. Women-headed households make up a majority of the poorest of the 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.

Advocates, academics, and development practitioners have been working hard for more than thirty years to integrate gender roles—that is, the different roles males and females play in a society—into American aid policy and programming. Yet, despite the evidence that women are active in national development and that investing in women and girls yields a multitude of benefits, U.S. international assistance programs and policy have not caught up with the facts.

In 1970, the women-in-development movement was crystallized by Ester Boserup's groundbreaking book, *Women's Roles in Economic Development*. In her book,

she debunked the myth that women are not economic actors; brought to light the extent to which the economies of poor countries are propelled by women; and asserted that programs that considered women's roles would lead to greater contributions to development.

In 1973, Congress passed an amendment that, for the first time, explicitly addressed women's roles in the development process. The Percy Amendment (after its sponsor, Senator Charles Percy) is still in effect. It requires U.S. bilateral assistance programs to enhance the integration of women into the national economies of developing countries, and it instructs the State Department to consider progress on women's issues when making decisions about funding international organizations (e.g., United Nations, World Bank). In 1974, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) established the Office of Women in Development to assist USAID missions and regional bureaus in integrating women into their various projects in the field.

In 1993, the Government Accounting Office evaluated USAID's progress in meeting the requirements of the Percy Amendment. The report found that USAID "has only recently begun to consider the role of women in its third-world development strategies, despite the fact that 20 years have passed since Congress directed that AID assistance programs focus on integrating women."

By 1995, First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton's leadership as head of the U.S. delegation to the UN Conference on Women in Beijing created a flurry of activity within USAID. One outcome was the creation of the Gender Plan of Action (GPA) in 1996, a three-step plan for the total integration of gender dynamics into all USAID activities. This plan was significant in its willingness to use mechanisms that really matter—bids and contracting systems, performance evaluations and promotions, and USAID's annual "Results Review and Resource Request" process—to ensure real change on programming with a gender perspective.

Four years later, the Advisory Committee on Voluntary Foreign Assistance (ACVFA), an independent adviser to the USAID administrator, commissioned an in-depth analysis—including over 500 interviews—of the Gender Plan of Action. The summary report states: "Over 90% of those interviewed in USAID and the PVO/NGO community said that the GPA has not had any measurable impact on Agency operations." This was not due to faults in the plan; it was because the plan was never promoted or implemented by the agency's leadership.

### Key Points

- Economic studies and program evaluations show that considering gender roles and targeting programs to women and girls dramatically enhances economic growth and project effectiveness.
- Women-headed households represent the majority of the poor worldwide. U.S. development programs, which aim to reduce poverty, should logically center on women.
- Despite economic evidence, evaluation results, and directives from Congress, U.S. development assistance programs have largely ignored gender integration.

# Problems with Current U.S. Policy

Why, despite congressional action, a law mandating gender integration, committed practitioners within USAID, and years of advocacy, has gender integration not penetrated U.S. development assistance as it has in other nations' bilateral aid agencies, e.g., Canada and the Nordic countries?

Foreign policy decisionmakers often cite a reluctance to "impose our culture" when it comes to women's issues, not recognizing that most women's issues are matters of human rights. It is also ironic that policymakers do not voice the same concern in other foreign policy matters that may be equally cultural.

Secondly, most decisionmakers and the majority of development practitioners view women (and, by association, gender integration) as just another sector. They do not consider women as a constituency that must be part of every program, nor do they view gender integration as an analytical tool to help programs support women and get better results.

In addition, the attention gender integration receives within individual USAID missions, bureaus, or projects depends heavily on the beliefs and commitment of their leadership. The 2000 ACVFA report states that for true integration of gender to take place, "senior leadership, particularly the chief executive, must 'walk the talk'—with vision, commitment built on consensus, requisite resources and training, and clear accountability."

The one bureau that received high marks in the ACVFA report was Eastern Europe and Eurasia. Its recipe for success: an assistant administrator and deputy assistant administrator who valued and promoted gender integration, a highly skilled and diplomatic gender expert, who assisted missions and projects in integrating gender; and adequate resources to promote gender integration.

In addition to the lack of leadership, there was a paucity of communications from Washington to USAID missions, bureaus, and partners about the existence of past women-in-development policies and, in particular, about the 1996 Gender Plan of Action. Though the administrator announced the GPA, he did so just once and only on the electronic bulletin board, which few personnel read. As one senior USAID official said during the interviews that the ACVFA conducted, "The GPA has been invisible and irrelevant."

Another internal obstacle has been the lack of real incentives for integrating gender. The Gender Plan of Action's best tools—evaluating performance on gender

integration as part of personnel promotions, and scoring bids for contracts based on the bidder's treatment of gender—were weakened or delayed in their implementation. The gender criteria were only included in evaluating and promoting junior and mid-level employees, not in choosing and monitoring senior management. The procurement regulations were adopted at the very end of the Clinton administration (four years after they were proposed in the GPA), and only because of sustained advocacy by the ACVFA. Because contractors, consultants, and grantees play such a large and growing role in implementing USAID programs, this procurement requirement has the potential to integrate gender like never before, but that remains to be seen. The challenge now is to ensure that contracting officers know how to evaluate the quality of gender integration in proposals and that field staff know how to implement gender requirements in their projects and planning processes.

To compound matters, if mission directors, bureau chiefs, or project directors proactively seek to analyze gender and/or target women as part of their work, the Office of Women in Development (WID) lacks the technical staff and resources to adequately assist them. With a budget of \$10 million and only 5-7 direct-hire staff, it is essentially impossible for WID to give attention to more than a small fraction of USAID's 200-plus projects with a budget totalling \$2.7 billion.

Furthermore, foreign direct investment and trade now grossly overshadow USAID's development assistance, and trade and investment are increasingly touted as the alternative to aid. USAID's economic growth portfolio over the last five years has shifted from building nationally based enterprises to assisting developing nations in joining and adhering to international trade pacts and collaborating with the World Trade Organization. In other words, it provides aid for trade.

## Key Problems

- Four obstacles have blocked the integration of gender into U.S. development assistance—no zeal within USAID leadership to make gender a priority, the absence of accountability mechanisms, shortages of resources to integrate gender into projects, and a lack of staff training for conducting gender analysis.
- USAID has only recently started using effective agency-wide mechanisms, e.g., requiring attention to gender in contracts.
- USAID's economic portfolio has shifted from building domestic enterprises to assisting developing nations in joining and adhering to international trade pacts and collaborating with the WTO.

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# Toward a New Foreign Policy

Several factors may be aligning to facilitate the integration of gender into some aspects of U.S. development assistance programming. The increasing statistical evidence of the feminization of poverty is becoming harder to ignore. And the current push from Capitol Hill for U.S. development dollars to show results may lead USAID to invest in areas that bring a high return—women and girls. Moreover, the cure to the HIV/AIDS

pandemic in Asia and Africa hinges on raising the status of women and girls and giving them more power to demand safe sex. USAID's renewed emphasis on agricultural development must also target women, since they are often the only able-bodied people left in some rural communities, as men migrate to find jobs. After all, women have always been the small producers who grow food for the family and the local marketplace.

The Women's EDGE coalition, together with over 60 organiza-

tions, has developed a blueprint for a gendered development assistance portfolio. This blueprint will be introduced into Congress as the GAINS for Women and Girls Act (Global Action and Investments for New Success for Women and Girls). It is the most comprehensive legislation on international women's issues ever introduced.

The GAINS Act proposes concrete and pragmatic changes to adequately address women's concerns in ten major areas of U.S. development programming: gender integration, poverty reduction and economic growth, education, health care, agriculture and food security, human rights, violence, conflicts and peace building, leadership and participation, and environmental protection.

A working group led by the International Center for Research on Women has proposed four primary actions to integrate gender:

- Create financial incentives for integrating gender and targeting women and girls. The GAINS Act establishes a matching fund within the Office of Women in Development to provide USAID missions or specific projects with the resources needed to incorporate the different roles of women and men into program design, implementation, and evaluation.
- Provide adequate funding for and elevate the Office of Women in Development and its leadership. Under the agency's new structure of four development pillars—the Global Development Alliance, economic growth and agriculture, global health, and conflict prevention and humanitarian relief—the WID office should be situated within the economic growth and agriculture division, because these two areas need gender integration more urgently than the others.

The WID office should receive up to \$30 million, and its director should become a deputy assistant administrator or the equivalent. These changes would give the WID office both the stature and resources it needs to effectively assist all USAID missions and bureaus with gender integration.

- Establish a WID Management Group within the agency, consisting of deputy assistant administrators. Members of the WID management group should meet on a routine basis to monitor and assist with the ongoing implementation of and compliance with USAID gender integration policies and programs. Such a mechanism would provide adequate oversight and buy-in by a larger set of actors than merely the WID office alone.
- Form a council to: (a) coordinate and promote the advancement of women and girls in the programs and policies of all U.S. federal agencies and departments and (b) provide a means for nongovernmental organizations to work in partnership with the federal government on areas of mutual concern.

In addition, recent USAID reorganization proposals suggest that the office of Program, Policy, and Coordination (PPC) will conduct all planning, policy development, and budgeting for the entire agency. It is absolutely critical that the PPC include a full-time political appointee to ensure that gender integration and women's programs get their due attention.

The GAINS Act details how gender can be integrated into each of the nine sectors covered in the bill. For example, the conflicts and peace-building section recommends that whenever the United States is party to a peace process, the diplomatic team should consult with women's organizations and women leaders in the region and take these views and recommendations into account while assisting conflicting parties to reach agreement. The agriculture and food security section spells out the substantial role that women play in household and commercial food production. It then provides a menu of ways that these roles can be factored into agricultural aid—from ensuring that equipment is appropriate for women (who have less muscle mass than men) to building on the deep knowledge that women have about local plants and growing conditions.

Advocates can facilitate the agency's integration of gender in several ways. First and foremost, they can bring a vocal constituency to support gender integration or call attention to inaction. In addition, a quick analysis of how development resources are reaching communities can lead to a focus on two areas outside of, but related to, USAID. One is the private voluntary organizations, contractors, and country-based nongovernmental organizations with which USAID is increasingly contracting. For example, InterAction's Commission on the Advancement of Women has ingeniously focused on convincing these large aid organizations to integrate gender into their USAID and non-USAID fieldwork. The second area is the private sector. With private investment and trade surpassing government development assistance, it is imperative to understand the gendered impacts of these policies and institutions—such as the WTO—and to use that knowledge to get the best out of trade and investment for poor women and their communities. The focus on women and U.S. development assistance, particularly in the economic, agricultural, and human capacity development sectors, is absolutely critical if women and girls are to gain from the globalizing economy.

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## Key Recommendations

- Development effectiveness, combined with problems such as HIV/AIDS, may force the integration of gender in U.S. aid.
- A view of gender integration as necessary for program effectiveness must replace the concept of gender as a sector or "just another initiative *du jour*."
- Women's development must be situated in the larger context of international investment and trade.

# Sources for More Information

## Organizations

### Advisory Committee on Voluntary Foreign Assistance

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## Publications

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