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Enhancing Participation of Women in Development
through an Enabling Environment
for Achieving Gender Equality and
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*Gender - The view from below**

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations

This paper discusses women's participation in development through an enabling environment, drawing mainly on the empirical evidence of development programmes at the grassroots level and the views of the women themselves, living in some of the poorest areas of the planet.

There is no denial that gender responsive legislation and policies are essential steps towards enabling women to participate in development and towards their achieving gender equality. The fact remains, however, that the majority of poor women, who should benefit in particular from this legislation and these policies, are still largely unaffected by them. For such poor and powerless women, participation – if any - in development is governed by the social realities of their immediate communities. Regardless of gender-responsive legislation at the national level, usually the only exposure to new ideas and progressive practices these women ever have are measures initiated by organisations working at the grassroots level.

I will use the key theme questions that will be addressed by the EGM as the structure for the paper.

1. What is the inter-relationship between health, education and work for enabling women's participation in development?

Nowadays, it is almost a cliché to say health and education are essential for women's basic needs for survival. Low life expectancy, high maternal mortality, low literacy and poor nutrition limit women's productive capacity and participation in development.

We also recognise how advancement in each area - health, education and work- is key not only to women's participation in their own development, but also to the prospects for their children. Plan International's¹ experience (and a number of impact studies) has proven time and time again that when a mother is healthy and has some education, her children - daughters especially - are also healthy and educated. Moreover, Plan's support for programmes in livelihood and micro-finance has demonstrated that increased income for a woman typically translates into a chain of positive improvements in the household. When the family income increases, a mother's highest priorities are food and education for her children.

In areas where women are the main labour force, their employment is understandably critical to the family's economic security. Yet women's education alone does not guarantee their employment. This most commonly holds true if the level of education is low, or when women reside in places where both the formal and non-formal labour sectors offer little opportunity. In such cases, the question often asked is why invest in women's education when it does not lead to their employment. Wouldn't it be more effective to support efforts to create job opportunities for women?

¹ Plan International is a non-governmental development organization that supports integrated community development programmes in 46 countries. In Asia Plan supports programmes in education, health, water environmental sanitation and livelihood in 12 countries- Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor Leste and Vietnam.

The answer is no! Being able to find work is usually thought of as a likely outcome of obtaining education for women living in poor areas. Further, employment is indeed a very useful channel for women to apply the skills and knowledge they acquired through education. Undoubtedly, it leads to greater economic security. But it is not the only channel.

Targeted education programmes, supported by grassroots organisations such as Plan International, infuse the knowledge that enable women to discover their rights and take part in a wider range of community activities. This knowledge awakens a sense of worth and confidence. It helps to make the family healthy. So often too, it ensures daughters as well as sons go to school. In other words, even though many poor women will not find work, the knowledge they acquire through education still yields great value in their own empowerment. The example from Bangladesh in the box below is just one of many cases where community-level programmes have created unprecedented opportunities for women's advancement.

The Learning Camp: An Education Innovation in Bangladesh

Plan International in Bangladesh brings poor women and men together to discuss the problems of children's education in their community. Problems affecting children are brought to the fore: bad behaviour, lack of basic learning materials, teacher absenteeism, corporal punishment, poor learning achievement and high failure rates in state exams, and so on.

Women are encouraged to suggest how to deal with these problems. They identify solutions they think will work in their environment. Some who despite having completed basic education, have found no work, are selected to become tutors. Adolescent girls too participate in the discussions.

Plan International provides the tutors with their initial training and on the job coaching. This enables them to tutor children for two hours before the official start of the school day. The tutors use child participatory teaching methods. With the help of specialists from Plan, they themselves develop the materials. The parents monitor progress and the changes in their children's learning habits.

The results are spectacular. In its first year, 1800 children attended the Learning Camp. 86% saw the twelve week course through to the end. Thereafter, the number of schoolchildren getting 'A's increased thirty fold from pre-tests, while the number of children getting 'D's was cut by over 90%. Mothers discovered to their surprise how much they themselves were able to help their own children.

Once cannot examine the interrelationships between health, education and livelihood without discussing domestic violence. Shockingly, it still typifies the conditions to which women in poor countries are subjected to. In South Asia as a whole, one in every two women experiences

violence in her daily life. In Pakistan the figure is four out of every five². Where the children intervene, Plan found in Sri Lanka, they too are beaten. Nevertheless, according to the survey, the children said the most difficult thing for them to bear was watching their mothers being assaulted.

The domestic character of such violence has made punishment of abusers difficult, especially in cultures where women are treated as the property of their husbands and are compelled to remain silent. In countries which have ratified CEDAW, governments are obliged to eliminate discrimination of women in both public and private spheres. Yet the violence continues, even after a government has passed legislation and regulatory measures to correct gender-based discrimination. In the communities where Plan is working, not one woman has said that violence against her has got less. Violence still dominates their lives. There has been no change. In most cases, sadly, these women are not even aware of any such progressive legislation.

Violence and entrenched discrimination against women has many faces. In some countries it expresses itself through early marriage forced upon adolescent girls, violating their health and reproductive rights, as well as their right to an education. Early marriage marks the end of schooling and, for all practical purposes, the beginning of a life like a slave.

In other countries, it may take the form of female foeticide. A study in India of seven hundred pregnant women undergoing a genetic amniocentesis test revealed that less than one in twenty of the women who were informed they were carrying a daughter actually continued with the pregnancy³. Female foeticide is a direct result of deep-rooted discriminatory attitudes and women's perceived low worth. When I first went to India some years ago, I was shocked to discover that even though the Government had banned the payment of dowry, in poor areas, the practice still dominates the life and the mindset of virtually all poor families. Hence the belief that girls are a burden of little worth.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic reflects another face of violence against women. Two thirds of young people infected by HIV/AIDS in the 18-24 age group are women. Sexual coercion and fear of violence seriously limit negotiation for safe behaviours. The experience of the pandemic shows again how gender-responsive policies scarcely reach down to those who need to benefit from them the most.

More attention must therefore be given to effective implementation of gender-responsive legislative measures at the grassroots. This attention needs to parallel systemic policy corrections of the imbalanced gender-based power relationships. The limitations of these policies lie in their defective implementation and enforcement. The focus has to be on the weak link of the chain, if the policies are to have meaning.

2. At local and household levels, which strategies have ensured that women effectively seized opportunities created by more favourable national laws, policies, infrastructure, institutions, services, etc?

² Oxfam, 2004. *Towards Ending Violence Against Women in South Asia. Briefing Paper 66.*

³ Plan International. 2005. *Gender Equality and Plan*

A number of strategies introduced by Plan and other grassroots organisations have enabled women to seize the opportunities created by favourable national policies and services.

One strategy is Organised Village Women's Groups, *based on specific themes*. The idea of establishing and building up organised women's groups is not new. The Vietnam Women's Union, for example, with its widespread network of committees down to the village level is a long established organisation created by the Government. However, for want of focus, the effectiveness of organised groups is limited. General discussions have little relevance for women who are busy working in the field and raising a family.

On the other hand, Plan International's recent experience in supporting *thematic women's groups* in several countries is quite different. Taking an example from Vietnam again, where Plan has helped to set up Village **Health** Groups, let us note the difference that *focus* and *specificity* can make. At their monthly meetings, the Groups are a centre of attraction for the women while also interesting an increasing number of male participants. Even at harvest time women will meet - willingly - for a couple of hours to discuss health issues they see as important to them - breastfeeding, how to take care of themselves during and after pregnancy, the best ways to cook food to conserve nutrients, safe food storage, etc. These may seem to be simple problems, quite different from the general issues that get discussed at 'higher level' meetings. But it is the simple things, like poor hygiene and post partum maternal care that kill thousands of women every year.

It is interesting to note that after a year of such meetings where women really participate in discussions and learn about issues that affect their health, the groups have planned to branch out and tackle other issues important to women, such as work (e.g. how to farm their land more effectively, what products have better market value), and how to support their children's education.

Another strategy is *integrated development programmes*. By this we mean initiatives that encompass education, health care, safe water and micro-finance. Taken together, these programmes improve the security of women and their families. It is not difficult to imagine what would happen if a programme is conducted to provide women with information on basic primary healthcare or childcare, but she does not have a water supply or basic sanitation in her home! In Plan's experience, when these programmes are designed and implemented *in conjunction with each other*, their effectiveness is compounded.

Integration stretches across the board. Adult education programmes for illiterate women are effective when they are part of a life skills training programme. Women do not see as useful a stand-alone literacy course offering only a low level of literacy and numeracy, without any link to life skills or potential employment.

Consultation with women on their specific needs, and on the occupational landscape of their villages, is of course crucial in designing functional literacy programme. This has been borne out by Plan's support for life skills and functional literacy for women in West Nusa Tenggara province of Indonesia. They were unable to read and write and lacked the skills needed for productive work. Plan identified those women, researched their interests for improvement and potential, then designed and conducted a training programme that meets their needs. In the course of skills training, the women also learn to read and write.

Enabling very poor women to seize the opportunities on the work front has long been a subject of discussions and research. Conclusions on the need to link education provision to employment have been drawn, and agreed upon. But how to actually do so effectively and for the large number of poor women still remains a question.

Working together with an Indian national NGO- Dr. Reddy's Foundation- Plan International has been using an effective strategy that helps many poor young women, and men, in India's big cities to use their education and training successfully in improving their livelihood. The strategy may sound *déjà vu*, as it seeks to ensure the links between graduates of skills training programmes with their future employment. But while few other programmes have been able to make it a reality, this programme called LABS (Livelihood Advancement Business Scheme) has succeeded in doing exactly that. Poor adolescent girls are carefully screened to make sure they are indeed the poorest and need help most. They are given the opportunity to choose one vocation that most closely suits their calling among several that Plan has identified after a thorough market research. During the three-month programme of training, Plan staff connects with potential employers. This is feasible as the potential employers were identified during their market research. The employers are invited to be resource people for the course, and to provide an on-the-job training for graduates afterwards. So far all graduates have been able to find work soon after graduation.

The LABS programme is also being successfully implemented in Vietnam and soon will spread to China and Sri Lanka as well. It has provided opportunities for thousands of poor young women, to find work, security and confidence.

Programmes in microfinance targeting the poorest women, with an emphasis on savings and offering demand-driven products, flexibility in the terms of loans and their repayment, has proved to be an effective strategy in reducing their vulnerability. The well-documented success of such programmes supported by Grameen Bank is one example. In addition, over the last few years Plan's programme SafeSave for slum dwellers in Dhaka focusing on savings have also demonstrated the effectiveness of such approach.

3. What policy recommendations could be drawn for different actors, including Governments, United Nations, other international and regional organisations and civil society?

The examples above show that a lot of positive things are happening on the ground, and are contributing to enhancing women's participation in development. However, they are the result of proactive programmes that organisations working at the grassroots support, rather than a result of progressive policies and legislations adopted at the national level. The gulf persists between gender-favourable national policy statements and their intended results at the level of the community.

There is no doubt that progressive national policies on gender are indispensable in providing an overall enabling environment for the programmes of grassroots organisations. Ground level

programmes would be less likely to be effective if there were no gender-responsive policies to complement them.

It should be noted, however, that most successful programmes of grassroots organisations still remain on a relatively small scale when compared with a country's needs. While this state of affairs persists, the poorest women wait for their chance to live a decent life.

It is therefore essential that upstream people - policy makers and donors - draw on downstream experiences and use their respective advantage and strength to scale up the best practices. Until good practices reach everywhere, especially the hard to reach corners of the globe, women's participation will remain only a subject of discussion and an elusive goal. The situation calls for a closer collaboration between national level institutions and grassroots development organisations.

And we need to *really* listen to women's voices. The call for listening is not new. But unless we do not do even the simple things to make sure this happens, it will remain rhetoric. Moving beyond the rhetoric to listening to what poor women are saying means not limiting ourselves to what a few vocal women activists are saying, and reaching out to those who are so often silent and voiceless. Two decades ago an expert on micro-finance who supported women's groups in Bangladesh said, "*Don't think these illiterate women are ignorant and stupid. They are smarter than you and me. They know exactly what they are doing. Otherwise how could they manage their families with pittance earnings?*" Indeed, learned people have a lot to learn from these poor and seemingly powerless women.

Finally, the cooperation among Southern countries needs to be supported a lot more proactively, both by governments and donors. Plan International's support for LABS programme, mentioned above, first took roots in India then was spread to Vietnam, and soon to China and Sri Lanka. It has all the necessary elements to succeed in those countries as well. But in my humble view there is still too little of such South-South cooperation that can *make a difference* in many women's life. In contrast, there seems to be so much reliance on the use of Northern experts and consultants who come and tell women in developing countries in the South what to do. And yet, the experience in the humble ground below shows that while these women may be poor and disadvantaged, they are not poor in their wisdom.