GENDER ISSUES

Regional Report

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CONTENTS

1. Introduction 3
2. Gender Policies in the GMS Countries 4
3. Emerging Gender Issues in the Region 7
   3.1 Alarming Spread of HIV/AIDS 7
   3.2. Increasing Feminisation of Poverty 9
   3.3. Graying and Feminisation of Farming 11
   3.4. Ensuring Household Food Security 11
   3.5. Acknowledging Women as Environmental Managers 14
   3.6. Mapping Women’s Biodiversity Knowledge Systems 14
   3.7. Reorienting Watershed Management Policies and Services 15
   3.8. Linking Local and Global: Networking and Co-operating 15
   3.9. Strengthening Institutional Mechanisms 16
4. Moving from Rhetoric to Reality in Project Planning and Management 17
   4.1. Adhere to Key Gender Paradigms 17
   4.2. Work on "Gender Disabilities" - Muteness, Blindness and Deafness 17
5. Conclusion 18

REFERENCES
1. Introduction

The study of qualitative and quantitative gender factors in proposing strategies and designing approaches for the future poverty reduction and environmental management investment projects in the GSM is critical. This is valid not only for the social sector programs, but for all general economic and sector policies, programs and projects to be supported by the Bank.

Gender-blind economic development within the GMS has created and will continue to cause situations in which women do not share development benefits equally. Several studies have shown that women are adversely-impacted by the effects of economic reforms and structural adjustments. A serious attempt needs to made so that all investment projects to be proposed in the Phase II of the GSM-project, are designed with a gender mainstreaming principle: (a) to promote gender equality perspectives in the project design; (b) to ensure an equitable access to and control of productive resources; (c) to further equal distribution of benefits to women and men, girls and boys; and (d) to include safeguards against adverse social impacts on women. Analysing and considering gender in all project work is therefore critical. This is particularly important when carrying out feasibility studies and formulating project ideas during the Phase II.

It should be noted, that secondary data and references obtained is a mix, which has its user-limitations, both in quality and quantity. The rapid space of societal changes in the countries of the region, have made it difficult to make parallel conclusions. Thus, this is not a comprehensive count of all inquiries conducted. There remains a major gender agenda which needs to be addressed and analysed in details during the Phase II of the Project. These are related to gender in watershed management, upland agriculture, environmental management, indigenous knowledge systems, community forestry, poverty reduction, ethnic groups’ cultural concerns, rural infrastructure, cross boarder trade (legal and illegal) and tourism development. A systematic gender mainstreaming and monitoring during the forthcoming feasibility studies, and project identification, preparation, formulation and strategy creation, is thus necessary.

2. Rationale

According to the terms of reference, the following priority issues have been in the discussion focus and when searching data and information: spread of HIV/AIDS and its potential spread into the remote watersheds; women’s socio-economic profiles; case studies on the impact of economic integration; tourism development; drug production and trade on the situation of women; youth and children; trafficking and sex industry; and women’s legal status and land rights. In addition, various information on cultural constraints on women’s participation in the society; division of labour in household resources management; education and training available to women; off-farm and farm employment; income generating opportunities for women and girls; financial services and loan programs for women within the GMS have been in the discussion agenda.

The Gender Specialist has carried out brief missions and collected documentation on the above priority issues including gender profiles, gender and women in development references, policy papers and technical documents. RETA Project introductions were made and wide ranging discussions held with government officials, gender focal points in various multilateral and bilateral agencies and research institutions, individual technical experts, gender consultants and NGO-representatives. This Summary Report highlights emerging issues and trends in the Region. The collected documentation is listed for further reference (See Annexes).

3. Gender Policies in the GMS Countries

All the Governments of the Greater Mekong Sub-region countries are signatories to key international mandates of gender equality as expressed in The "Convention on the Elimination of all Discrimination Against Women", (CEDAW) in Copenhagen 1980; “The World Conference on Human Rights” in Vienna 1993; “The International Conference on Population and Development” (ICPD) in Cairo 1994; "Jakarta Declaration for the Advancement of Women in Asia and the Pacific Region” in 1994; the "Fourth World Conference on Women” (FWCW) in Beijing 1995; and the "World Food Summit" in Rome 1996. These imply a commitment to more participation by women at all stages of project cycles. Compliance implies that those responsible for setting the research
agenda, for making policies and plans and for managing development projects can respond to these mandates.

The Beijing Platform for Action of the FWCW, with its twelve Critical Areas of Concern, provides the framework for national action plans in all six GMS countries. It was adopted unanimously by 181 UN Member States. This blueprint guides the social, economic, and political empowerment and advancement of women.

“In addressing the lack of adequate recognition and support for women's contribution to conservation and management of natural resources and safeguarding the environment, governments and other actors should promote an active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective in all policies and programmes, including, as appropriate, an analysis of the effects on women and men, respectively, before decisions are taken.”

(Beijing Platform for Action, 1995)

A summary prepared by the ADB (1998) of the Platform’s twelve critical areas of concern is provided as Figure 1:

**Figure 1: The Platform for Action: 12 "Critical Areas of Concern"**

| **Poverty**: Governments are to modify macroeconomic and social policies to ensure women's advancement. Multilateral and financial institutions are asked to seek durable solutions to problems of external debt. |
| **Education**: Governments are to commit themselves, by the year of 2000, to completion of primary education at least 80 percent of primary-school-age children and to closing the gender gap in primary and secondary school education by the year 2005. |
| **Health**: Governments agree to provide women with more accessible and affordable health-care services, including sexual and reproductive health care, which includes family planning information and services. They agree to reduce maternal mortality by at least 50 percent of the 19990 levels by the year 2000. |
| **Violence**: Governments agree to adopt and implement legislation to end violence against women and to work actively to ratify and implement all international agreements that relate to violence against women. |
| **Armed conflict**: Governments are to convert military resources to peaceful purposes and to work toward ratification of international instruments that prohibit or restrict the use of landmines. |
| **Economic empowerment**: Governments are asked to guarantee the right of women for equal pay for equal work and to integrate gender perspective into all economic restructuring and structural adjustment practices. Sexual harassment, lack of affordable child care, and inflexible working hours need to be rectified. |
| **Political empowerment**: States are to commit to the goal of a gender balance in governmental bodies and political parties and are to ensure gender balance in delegations to the United nations and other international fora. |
| **Institutional Mechanisms**: Governments are to promote the advancement of women through such mechanisms as gender oriented policy analysis and statistical compilations. |
| **Human Rights**: Governments should advocate equality and non-discrimination under the law and promote women's legal literacy. They are asked to limit reservations to the Convention for Elimination of all Discrimination Against women and to withdraw reservations contrary to its purpose. |
| **Media**: The media are encouraged to create non-stereotypical, balanced, and diverse images of women. They will develop self-regulatory guidelines to address violent, degrading and pornographic materials. |
| **Environment**: Rural women's traditional knowledge and practices are to be integrated into the development of environmental management programmes. Women are to be given full and equal participation in control over resources. |
| **The Girl Child**: Governments are to enact laws ensure that marriage is entered into only with free and full consent. Steps to be taken to abolish traditional practices harmful to girls such as female genital mutilation, female infanticide, early marriage, and discrimination against girl food allocation. |
Based on the topics of this framework, individual countries have established their national machineries, set their national priorities and formulated national programs of action for the follow-up activities. Recently, national committees have started to prepare their "Beijing Plus Five" reports for the forthcoming United Nations meeting in the year 2000. Corollary, maximum public exposure of the critical gender issues in the global media – including HIV/AIDS, women and violence, and trafficking of women and children – have recently demonstrated the importance of considering gender perspectives and securing increased understanding, awareness and cooperation by all stakeholders. What is crucial, is that national women leaders become primary stakeholders in the program and project planning and decision making in development projects’ planning process in their countries. Besides, special efforts are needed to bring male decision-makers into the dialogue of gender mainstreaming.

Table 1: Examples of Implementing the Beijing Platform for Action

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>- National Policy on Women adopted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Ministry for Women’s and Veteran’s Affairs established in 1999 to implement the National Action Plan prepared by the Secretariat for Women’s Affairs (with a staff of 400)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Program Focus is on gender training and women’s participation in all levels of national planning, reconstruction and development including poverty eradication, and environment and watershed management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>- China Women’s Federation has a Five-year Plan (1996-200) which focuses on rural poverty and emphasises marketable skills, to foster self reliance and combat illiteracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Monitors a system to improve laws and regulations to protect the rights of women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao PDR</td>
<td>- Lao Women’s Union (LWU) boosts women’s advocacy in Government, including a Documentation and Research Centre for data collection, statistical analysis and resourcing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>- Institutional machinery at place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>- Beijing Follow up unit is in the Prime Ministers’ office, where a special Ministerial Position has been established to monitor the follow-up and co-ordination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>- Vietnam Women’s Union is nation wide implementing a National Plan of Action</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Emerging Gender Issues in the Region

3.1. Alarming Spread of HIV/AIDS

Asia has the second highest prevalence of HIV infection among women - highest after Sub-Saharan Africa on a world scale. Current HIV prevalence and incidence rates among GMS countries is mixed, but the infection rates are raising rapidly. In Thailand, the infection rate is falling or close to stable, as rapid spread has been tackled by active prevention programmes launched by the government and other stakeholders. In Lao PDR, where the incident rates are still low, national awareness building, information campaigns and preventive programs have been introduced both by the government, UNDP and other donors e.g. in border crossing areas to Vietnam (Care, 1998).

As shown in the Table 2, compiled from UNAIDS data, the HIV/AIDS prevalence in the GMS countries is alarming. A sudden and sharp increase in HIV incidence has happened in Asia during the 1990’s, but the reasons for this are not clear. There is a lack of quantitative and qualitative epidemiological, behavioural and social information on the nature of and linkages between sexual networks in these countries, which makes reliable prediction of the future course of the epidemics difficult.
In Vietnam, incidence figures are still relatively low but vulnerable populations have already been noted, which means that there is an acute need to collect information for projecting the epidemic trends and targeting prevention. In all GMS countries, investigative and ethnographic studies are particularly needed to understand the vulnerability of the upland populations and migrants in cross-border areas threatened with the spread of HIV in order to introduce appropriate programs and projects. Briefing materials for the media, short policy briefs, special briefing sessions for policymakers, project staff and community leaders are needed to discuss the implications and strategic actions.

Using Cambodia as an example, which has the most rapidly widespread and serious HIV epidemic in Asia, the 600 AIDS cases reported in the mid-1997 had increased to 100,000 by the end of 1997. National rates from the national 1997 serological surveillance reveal that appr 40% of the sex workers, and 6% of police/military are infected. In December 1998, the UNAIDS reported that Cambodia has the highest prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the region. Earlier, the focus has been extensively on Thailand, where over 400,000 cases have been reported. Cambodia, Myanmar AND Thailand are the three countries of the GMS region, which are the highest incident countries in Asia.

According to the UNAIDS data, women have contracted the virus at an alarming rate. This is largely due to their low economic and social status in the society, and their dependence on men. The nexus between the spread of HIV and the powerlessness of the women has been seen as one of the major contributors to the spread of HIV/AIDS among women. Therefore, the improvement of women’s economic and social status, education and empowerment are fundamental prerequisites for slowing down the spread of the epidemic in the region. Women need to take an equal place in the society and their sexual exploitation has to be seen as a question of gross violation of women’s human rights.

Table 2: HIV/AIDS Estimates and Indicators in GMS countries, end of 1997

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Cambodia</th>
<th>Lao PDR</th>
<th>Myanmar</th>
<th>Thailand</th>
<th>Vietnam</th>
<th>China*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adults &amp; children w/ HIV/AIDS</td>
<td>130,000</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>440,000</td>
<td>780,000</td>
<td>780,000</td>
<td>400,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults (15-49)</td>
<td>120,000</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>440,000</td>
<td>770,000</td>
<td>86,000</td>
<td>400,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults %</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women (15-49)</td>
<td>60,000</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>92,000</td>
<td>290,000</td>
<td>17,000</td>
<td>48,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>5,400</td>
<td>&lt;100</td>
<td>7,100</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>1,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults &amp; children - Deaths 97</td>
<td>6,300</td>
<td>&lt;100</td>
<td>29,000</td>
<td>60,000</td>
<td>2,700</td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaths – Cumulative</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>86,000</td>
<td>230,000</td>
<td>7,200</td>
<td>6,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orphans</td>
<td>7,300</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>48,000</td>
<td>1,900</td>
<td>720</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


* Figures for Yunnan Province not available separately.

Through Myanmar, the HIV epidemic has also spread alarmingly due to a range of political and economic conditions directly contributing to the spread of the virus. These conditions include: national and neighbouring country economic policies, emerging patterns of trade and transport, changing political alliances, cross-border migration and the "invisible" internal movements. These factors are underpinned by remarkable developments across the international boarders including Thailand, Lao PDR, and Vietnam. The changing patterns of trade, transport, economic intensification, population movements and "wheelings and dealings" across the boarders
affirm that HIV/AIDS is a serious development issue in the GMS region. (UNDP, 1994)

A further point of view to consider is the economics of AIDS and its impact on household and agricultural labour availability. The economic impact of the disease continues to grow and the increasing burden of providing care for the patients falls proportionately largely on women. More data are needed on time and other resource demands on caregivers and on the impact of AIDS on the household economy and labour demands. The Bank has already started to carry out economic analyses and calculations of labour loss. These efforts need strengthening so that HIV/AIDS concerns become an integral part of human resource and social dimension agendas in all investment project portfolios as they are still underestimated by so many decision-makers.

The analysis of the HIV epidemic trends in the region becomes more meaningful when a focus is placed on populations whose cultural and social affinity and networks transcend geopolitical boarders. The new geography of HIV/AIDS in the region helps the foci of intense spread, in the areas of the larger "Golden Triangle", which reaches out to Northern Thailand, Eastern Myanmar, Yunnan of China, and to the Mekong Delta area including Cambodia and Southern Vietnam. In these areas mobility pattern and population factors need to be explored and mapped. Recognising the threat of emerging and fast growing epidemics in certain populations and orienting resources and efforts towards people who are most at risk is essential to an effective response.

The increasing prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the GSM countries cannot be overlooked in the RETA Project as it is:

- border, mobility and migration issue
- human rights and women’s empowerment issue
- labour and household economics issue
- social and health issue
- human and social capital issue
- gender relations and equity issue

3.2 Increasing Feminisation of Poverty

The feminisation of poverty is a serious concern in the GMS countries, where economic reports indicate "booming" development but where poverty indicators reflect persistent and serious "pockets of hunger" both in urban and rural areas. According to many gender analysts, this is ultimately a consequence of women’s unequal access to economic opportunities, gender disparity in economic power sharing, and ignoring women’s role in economic development.

Globally, according to the UNDP Human Development Report 1995 more that 1.3 billion people are expected by the year 2000 to live below the poverty line, and nearly 800 million people are chronically undernourished. Of the poor, almost 200 million are children under the age of five are affected by acute or chronic protein and calorie deficiency. The number of rural women living in poverty is estimated at 565 million in the developing countries, where the number of women in poverty has increased disproportionately to men over the past two decades. Since the 1970’s, the percentage of rural women below the poverty line has increased by 50 percent, whereas that of men only 30 percent. Geographically, the number of rural women living in poverty is estimated 374 million in Asia (FAO, 1995). In the rural areas migration leaves behind a large female population responsible for agricultural production and a large number a female headed and managed households. In these households, poverty is single most dominant characteristics.

Box 1: The Situation of Female Headed Households in Cambodia 1997

For example in Cambodia, the number of female-headed households is 25.3 percent, and has increased due to the loss of male population in recent wars and conflicts. However, at present the percentage of female-headed household in urban centres is higher than in the rural sector, which can be due to increasing rural poverty and
Table 3: Extrapolated Female and Male Population and Household Structure in Cambodia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cambodia</th>
<th>Phnom Penh</th>
<th>Other Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Est no. of Households</td>
<td>2 098 000</td>
<td>178 000</td>
<td>202 000</td>
<td>1 718 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Headed Households %</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Population</td>
<td>4 932 000</td>
<td>441 000</td>
<td>490 000</td>
<td>4 001 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female population</td>
<td>5 436 000</td>
<td>483 000</td>
<td>561 000</td>
<td>4 390 000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Yet another labour phenomenon in the role of female children as unpaid contributors to household production. In their roles as helpers in subsistence farm production, informal food vending, minders of livestock and gatherers of fuel and water and surrogate mothers to siblings, when the mother works in the field and other informal sectors, they are an essential component of a household labour force in agricultural communities in rural areas. The issue is a crucial one to consider as it has an impact on the educational and economic gains for the future generation of women in rural communities (FAO, 1997).

3.3 Graying and Feminisation of Farming

Poverty and lack of opportunities have contributed to the unbalanced distribution of population between rural and urban areas. Rural out-migration of younger generation, for formal employment and other informal income-earning opportunities, has contributed to the "graying and feminisation of farming" in many areas. Economic hardships, environmental degradation, boarder conflicts, break-up of traditional family values, drug use, lure to prostitution and entertainment industries, spreading HIV/AIDS and job opportunities have further impacted the phenomenon in the rural areas of the GMS countries. These are growing phenomena as countries adopt rural employment schemes in small scale industries, self-help group micro-enterprises, town and village enterprises and the elderly, particularly older women remain the principal farmers, as has been witnessed in China. (FAO, 1997).

The situation on women and girls in farming, household labour, food production and rural economy, and women's roles as managers of environmental and natural resources, as preservers of biodiversity, managers of genetic resources, are basic issues to be addressed when preparing the participatory appraisals and feasibility studies for the for the watershed management activities.

3.4 Ensuring Household Food Security

Various farming systems, household economics and time-use research projects carried out in a number of national universities and research institutions (Price, 1997; Ekasingh, 1998, 1998, Kelkar, 1998) have indicated that throughout the region, women make vital contributions to the family food supply both in agricultural production, livestock husbandry and garden keeping. In many cases, women produce, purchase and process nearly all the food that is eaten at home.
Rural women provide labour along with their spouses on the family holdings, or provide labour for richer farmers, or work in small businesses in order to earn income to purchase food or to obtain it in-kind. A general pattern of gender roles that emerges from these studies is that both men and women contribute to production. However, the gender roles vary by region, ethnic group, agro-ecological systems, types of farming systems, types of crops grown, links with fish farming, and livestock production and off farm occupations. As documented in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, where agriculture is a mainstay of economic activity, women are all the time working in the fields: cultivating, planting, transplanting, fertilising, weeding, harvesting and working for post harvest activities (FAO, 1997). They also collect the foods from the wild forests and fields.

Women’s ways of working, earning and contributing to household food security need to be noticed, valued and recognised, even at national level. Far more attention needs to be paid to the overall rural and agricultural development policies and women’s access to and control of productive resources, support services and markets. From the gender point of view, it is critical to find ways and means to reduce the constraints of female-heads of households, who have a triple burden in farming, household management and reproduction.

As can be seen in Table 4. The division of labour and task allocation between men and women is quite distinct and the task breakdown quite remarkable.

| Table 4. Gender Division of Labour in Rice Farming (Lao Loum Ethnic Group) |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| **Tasks**                   | **Male Adult**  | **Female Adult**| **Both Working**|
| Selection of seed           |                 | X               |                 |
| Soaking                     |                 |                 | X               |
| Making bunds                | X               |                 |                 |
| Making fence                |                 |                 | X               |
| Transporting manure         |                 |                 | X               |
| Ploughing                   | X               |                 |                 |
| Harrowing                   | X               |                 |                 |
| Sowing                      |                 | X               |                 |
| Uprooting seedlings         | X               | XX              |                 |
| Transplanting               | X               | XX              |                 |
| Irrigating                  | X               |                 |                 |
| Guarding the field at night | X               |                 |                 |
| Weeding                     | X               | XX              |                 |
| Harvesting                  |                 |                 | X               |
| Threshing                   | X               |                 |                 |
| Packing hay                 |                 | X               |                 |
| Threshing by hand           | XX              | X               |                 |
| Transporting to storage     | XX              |                 | X               |
| Marketing rice              |                 |                 | X               |

Source: Schenk, 1995

In particular, development interventions to support extension services, technical agricultural and home economics education and training, time use and task allocation research need to be supported. Other areas where resources need to be mobilised include development of appropriate household and transport technology to ease the labour burden. Facilitating micro-enterprising, training in legal literacy and awareness raising about property rights are further needed. Access to land, water and natural resources tenure need to be systematically and consciously addressed.

Gender issues are inextricably linked to the main priorities of food security in the GMS, where women perform over 50 percent of the labour in rice cultivation and where women have a major responsibility for, and knowledge of, food systems and agriculture. One of the major solutions to support this effort is to reorient and “feminize policies, programs and projects” to address the food security more adequately from a gender perspective.
3.5 Acknowledging Women as Environmental Managers

Women play a key role as conservationists and sustainers of the environment. Traditionally they have an extensive knowledge of plants and animals in their living environment. Micro-studies have shown that women can identify and use a variety of indigenous plant and tree species that have economic value as fodder, food and medicines. (Price, 1998). They know the fresh water sources and the quality of water for household and agricultural use. Women have a wealth of knowledge about crop association, weeding, soil conservation and pest management. However, often rural women lack access to land or have insecure land and tree tenure, which could enable them to gain access to inputs that can help stabilise or enhance their production systems (AIT, 1998).

Efforts to increase women's resources (land, credit, equipment and technology, education and training, etc.) not only promote agricultural growth, but also better food and nutrition security for all. Therefore, understanding gender issues in biodiversity management and support women as producers of food and managers of the natural resources in their living environment is critical (FAO, 1997).

3.6 Mapping Women’s Biodiversity Knowledge Systems

Biodiversity describes the diversity of all forms of life on earth -- plants and animals, species and ecosystems. In the developing world, biodiversity provides the assurance of food, countless raw materials such as fibre for clothing, materials for shelter, fertilisers, fuel and medicines. Because of their knowledge of forests, crops, soils, water management, medicinal plants, growing techniques and seed varieties, women are major caretakers of agricultural and livestock genetic resources -- identifying, preserving and using wild and domestic species to achieve household food security.

The challenge here, beyond protecting ecosystems, is to recognise women's roles, rights and knowledge in genetic resources management, forge new partnerships between women farmers, researchers and extension services to promote the protection and appropriate use of biological diversity, and create policies and practices which encourage the preservation and consumption of local species. A recent study carried out in Lao PDR within the Forestry Development Project (1998) revealed that women’s knowledge of the non-tree forest products and wild plants – a.o. twelve earlier undetermined varieties were found - was totally different from men's knowledge and their natural resource tenure and land tenure rights should me earmarked accordingly.

3.7 Reorienting Watershed Management Policies and Services

What is needed to reorient policies and programs so that these become people-centred and gender-responsive and so contribute toward poverty reduction, the advancement of rural women, food security and sustainable resource use? There is a need to increase and enhance:

- a comprehensive, interdisciplinary and dynamic understanding of the relations between women, food and agricultural systems and the environment relevant to national reality;
- a continuous dialogue between women and the different actors involved, such as policy makers, service providers and local change agents; and
- a reorientation of developmental goals, policies and actions to accommodate what is learned through gender analysis.

These are inseparable processes: goals and policies must change to permit this reorientation, and it is only through dialogue that the dynamic relations relevant to women's advancement will become evident. This recognises, first and foremost, that women are not only capable and dynamic managers of very difficult life situations -- it also recognises that they are actively seeking social change through co-operation, organisation, mobilisation, and learning.

3.8 Linking Local and Global: Networking and Co-operating
Given gender bias and blindness at all levels, what should be the role of international development co-operation in promoting the advancement of women? Development co-operation should provide means for the expression of rural women's interests as well as support for the articulation and implementation of strategies for social, economic and political empowerment. Diversity among women means that empowerment must begin at the local level -- with social learning, organisation and mobilisation. To achieve change at the national, regional or global level, networking, alliances and exchanges between women and their advocates are crucial.

People's organisations and community groups are essential vehicles for mobilising such empowerment and articulating women's interests and concerns. Through these organisations, strategies and actions may be produced that recognise and challenge gender bias and other interrelated processes that contribute to major problems of our time -- including poverty, food insecurity and environmental degradation.

Networking and alliance building, supported the NGO community, has led to the creation of national and international fora focusing on the advancement of women. The gender focal points met in the GMS countries, have recognised that rural women, and especially women farmers, have a special and critical role to play in the struggle against hunger, poverty and environmental deterioration. However, they have not been given adequate attention project planning and formulation. In order to ensure a central role for women on development agendas at the regional, national and local levels there is a great need to bring male decision-makers and women together to identify and negotiate solutions to most pressing problems.

3.9 Strengthening Institutional Mechanisms

It is important to look into the institutional mechanisms that are available or should be established for ensuring that gender issues are systematically considered in policy and program formulation in each country.

The Bank’s program support should include reinforcement the activities and institutional settings of Women in Development (WID)/Gender Units not only in the streamline ministries of women’s affairs, but also in sectoral ministries of environment, agriculture and fisheries, where technical and analytical support is needed, and in “major” ministries of planning and finance where resource allocations are decided and the development policies defined. More advocacy and mobilisation work is also needed to influence the ways of thinking and bringing about awareness of the critical gender concerns to the “ears” of the policy and decision-makers at the highest level.

4. Moving from Rhetoric to Reality in Project Planning and Management

4.1 Adhere to Key Gender Paradigms

The four main objectives of the Beijing Plan of Action adopted by each country are evolved around four paradigms of equality, empowerment, efficiency and economic advancement. In order to obtain these goals, development planners needs to focus on the following four key areas:

- to increase the availability, accuracy and use of both quantitative and qualitative data and information - gender statistics and data including gender desegregated data on human resources;

- to develop and utilise participatory methodologies, tools and training activities to assist development specialists to promote people-centred development and to bring gender perspectives into development approaches and foster partnership with local men and women;

- to support the formulation of and application of gender responsive management cycle checklists and tools to direct development policies and programs; and

- to increase rural people's opportunities for economic gains and employment and in particular strengthen the skills and capacities of rural women to reduce the burden of their labour.

4.2. Work on "Gender Disabilities" - Muteness, Blindness and Deafness
Gender bias and blindness are prevalent not only in the GMS countries but world-wide and they constitute principal constraints contributing to underdevelopment. Such muteness reflects the inability to take into account and involve both men and women both at household and national level decision-making. This "disability" can be rehabilitated only by doing and conscientizing and educating stakeholders about gender issues and equity. Gender awareness also increase efficiency, with women and men contributing according to their respective but different knowledge, skills, beliefs and values.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, poverty alleviation and environmental management require an holistic approach that addresses, not only the technical and socio-economic constraints to development, but also embraces the more important human, social and institutional resource capacities in the context of utilising and conserving the natural resource base. This approach must seek to ensure that present and future generations have equal access to the total endowment of natural and human resources. This should be our underlining principle in all development project planning.

"Nothing - no resources, no decisions or plans, no technologies or strategies – should be assumed to be gender-neutral" (Stephens, 1998). Gender is a dimension of development with consequences for economic, social, political and environmental sustainability. Failure to consider gender issues can be a major barrier to success, whereas gender-sensitive development assures better results, effective economic growth and increased equity.

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