

Foreword, OED Regional Gender Workshops

Written by: Jan Piercy, July 8, 2001

1. To provide context for this introduction, let me explain that the World Bank's 183 member country owners oversee the Bank's operations through a system of national World Bank Governors, and a resident 24 person Board of Directors. The Board approves all World Bank loans and policies and considers all Country Assistance and Sector strategies. I served as U.S. Executive Director on this Board from mid-1994 until August, 2001, and this is the perspective from which I joined the workshops reported here. This preface reflects my personal experience, and is written in an individual rather than official capacity.
2. Somewhat to my surprise, I was the first woman to represent the U.S. on the Board, and there was only one other woman ED when I joined the Bank (Eveline Herfkens, who was Dutch Development Minister). With average terms of 2 years, many Directors changed during my tenure. Never, however, has the Board had more than 3 women directors simultaneously.
3. While I will not dwell on these demographics, they do reflect the broader reality that there are still very few women "at the table" making critical development and economic policy decisions, either at the country level or internationally. The significance of attention to gender as a critical variable in development effectiveness is today much better understood than it was even 7 years ago when I became a Director. However, further and accelerated progress is urgent.
4. The catalytic effects of inclusive environments encouraging women's participation are by now well documented. The 2001 Engendering Development policy research report issued by the World Bank, based on exhaustive analysis of existing and new research by an international team of experts, strongly underscores that gender must be taken into account for effective development.
5. Despite recognition of the positive impact of gender sensitive policies, Bank country assistance strategies in 1994-95 when I began, did not systematically address gender, and the anecdotal evidence I encountered as a Director indicated an unevenness in the Bank's application of its own gender policy. A 1994 Overseas Development Council/ International Center for Research on Women report on gender in the Bank Group by Gwin and Buvenic raised a number of questions about the effectiveness of the Bank's efforts to take full account of gender in its policies, programs and employment.
6. Against this backdrop, the Board strongly supported OED's plan to undertake the gender study for which these workshops were convened. We were especially pleased that the study would occur at the same time as a gender Policy Research Report was underway, and would occur in time to inform consideration of the Bank's gender strategy and policy. The Bank Board is scheduled to adopt a new gender strategy in September, 2001, which draws significantly on this OED study.

7. As Chairman of the Board Committee on Development Effectiveness (CODE) to which OED reports, I had the chance in December, 1999 to attend the first of four regional gender workshops planned to hear first-hand the experience, concerns and recommendations of Bank clients in areas related to gender. The Manila meeting was such a provocative, far-reaching exchange that I went on to attend the three subsequent meetings as well, eager to compare experiences across regions. We met in Nairobi in June, 2000; Quito in October, 2000 and Warsaw in January, 2001. Each meeting was done in partnership with other international and bilateral agencies, and the various collaborations gave a distinctive focus to each meeting and spurred ongoing work beyond the meetings themselves. The excitement and continuing exchanges generated was high in all regions – coming together in itself created important momentum.

8. Collectively, the meetings were highly illuminating in providing deeper insights into gender issues in different cultures and national contexts. The main finding is that gender remains an issue in all regions, although specific concerns, and the severity of exclusion, varied across countries.

9. The meetings held many striking common messages across regions. I'll highlight just one: in all regions, women from many different fields and occupations -- researchers, policymakers, political leaders, community service providers, homemakers, educators – all observed that *until and unless women are “at the table” in public life and elected leadership*, gender concerns will not be adequately addressed.

- In East Asia, labor markets and women's employment, the impact of globalization and Free Trade zones, and achieving equal status as members of society were stressed as critical issues. Consensus emerged quickly: to be relevant to East Asian countries, the Bank's gender policy had to cover the emerging challenge of economic participation of women in globalized economies.
- Organized with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the International Service for National Agricultural Research (ISNAR), the African gender meeting added a well-received workshop in evaluation capacity building. Circumstances of increasing poverty, deepened by consequences of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, environmental degradation, decreasing access to agricultural land and water combined with increasing inequality were all reported, reflecting the nexus between gender and poverty issues. Participants, including rural women farmers who addressed the group, urged “Do not treat us as victims. Help to empower us with assets and access to resources and we will deal with gender issues.” Some practical strategies which emerged from the workshop were to be pursued by ISNAR, the Bank and UNDP.
- The Latin American workshop was organized with the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). Achieving gender equality was a major focus, with discussion of macro-policy changes and engendering budgets for supporting gender equality. The need for tools and instruments to develop appropriate measures of policy impact was stressed, and discussion of a number of country initiatives and pilots highlighted strategies which can be effective. A session with

indigenous peoples' leaders underscored the need to address gender in culturally appropriate ways if change is to be sustainable and acceptable to men as well as women.

- The Warsaw workshop drew participants from both Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and was sobering in spotlighting reverses in women's labor force participation and educational attainment in transition countries. "You must recognize that we are going backwards!" was the urgent message, as speakers criticized the international development community for focusing too long on the relatively positive profile of women's access to education and economic opportunity in the early transition years in contrast to other developing regions, rather than on the dynamics of change and rapid erosion in women's status. United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) joined the Bank in organizing this workshop. Forging partnerships with NGOs and donors in attempting to address increasing inequities was a focus of discussion. The Bank was urged to pay more attention to gender consequences of its approaches and to better use its leverage to halt growing gender discrimination.

10. As this selective summary highlights, all workshops underscored that we must address gender to achieve sustainable, effective development but they also highlighted different priorities, approaches and nuances across countries within regions, and between regions. Strategies to attain gender equality must be home grown to be effective; the workshops offered overwhelming evidence that there is plenty of local energy, leadership and resolve seeking to influence national policies and programs. Many stressed the responsibility of the Bank -- with its knowledge of gender's significance and its access to policymakers -- to foster further dialogue and action on the gender agenda.

11. I am glad that these proceedings will bring the intense debates, many good program experiences and a range of profound questions to a larger audience. The Bank owes quite a debt to hundreds of participants who gave generously of their time, experience and ideas because they trusted this process to have an impact. I think the gender strategy and the OED gender study both live up to the high expectations and challenges participants issued. Making these discussions more widely known will help hold the Bank and other institutions accountable for incorporating these insights into their ongoing work. And I, for one, now outside the Bank, will be monitoring progress with great anticipation!