

Bridging the Gender Gap

by Lisa A. McGowan*

While the World Bank has publicly proclaimed that women's participation in development is "essential" not only for achieving social justice but also for reducing poverty, a confidential report by its own staff paints a grim picture of the Bank's history of failing to integrate gender concerns into its lending programs.

The confidential report, "Gender Issues in Bank Lending: An Overview," completed by the World Bank's Operations Evaluation Department in June 1994, found that since 1967 only 615 out of 4,955 projects contained "some" gender component, and that 353 of those were approved since 1988. Projects identified consisted of those with "intended" gender components, but did not examine to what extent those components had been implemented, leading to the report's own conclusion that the figures were optimistic. Structural adjustment loans were not considered by the study. The report also found that between 1988 and 1993 only 257 Bank staff (of a total 7,200) had received formal training on how to integrate gender concerns into program design and implementation, and that most of these participants were junior staff who attended voluntarily.

Two months after the Operations Evaluation Department report was completed, in an attempt to signal high-level institutional support for integrating gender concerns into World Bank programs and policies, the Bank publicly released a different report entitled "Enhancing Women's Participation in Economic Development." This document declares the Bank's commitment to integrate gender issues into "country assistance strategies, and in the design and implementation of lending programs, including adjustment operations." It identifies barriers to women's economic progress such as low spending on female education and health, restrictions on access to services and assets such as land, and the existence of legal and regulatory constraints to women's participation in development. The report notes that the successful implementation of the Bank's strategy in this area will require "intensified staff training" and "some degree of resource reallocation within country departments."

The report ignores the Bank's own role in maintaining and exacerbating gender inequalities and fails to look critically at structural adjustment policies that have aroused such opposition among women around the world. For example, the document repeats the assertion that the negative impacts of adjustment on women are "short-term" and thus only require the Bank to "incorporate safety-net measures" into the design of adjustment programs.

Though some women's advocates are likely to applaud the Bank for its commitment to systematically address gender issues, skeptics point out the failure of the institution to translate similar rhetoric into real operational changes in other areas, such as poverty and the environment. Currently a significant proportion of the World Bank's work on gender is being financed not with the Bank's own loan funds but through bilateral funds to support research, staff positions, and gender components for programs.

In response to critics and women's advocates both in and outside the Bank, since the late 1980s there has been a consistent if painfully slow expansion of institutional structures meant to encourage and enable Bank staff to address gender issues. In 1987 the Women in Development Division was created, which at its peak had eight senior staff. In 1993 that division was essentially downgraded to a "thematic group" under the Human Resources Development and Operations Vice-Presidency and was renamed the Gender, Analysis, and Policy (GAP) team. In addition, some regional departments have staff dedicated to addressing gender issues. Now with six senior staff posts the GAP team works primarily to improve staff gender skills and commitment through research, training, and dissemination of information. However, like divisions in the Bank dealing with poverty and the environment, the GAP team has little authority vis-à-vis overall Bank policy, suffers from weak links to operations, and given the enormity of its job is severely constrained by limited resources.

To be truly responsive to women in borrowing countries, at a minimum the Bank will have to squarely address the many ways in which its programs and policies, including structural adjustment programs, have failed women, while providing firm timetables and budget allocations for the promises outlined in the "Enhancing Women's Participation" paper. It must also move quickly to create and utilize mechanisms to bring women to the table so they can be full partners in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of projects and policies that affect them. Without these steps the Bank will continue to perpetuate poverty and the marginalization of women.

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