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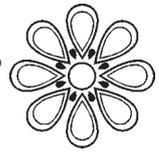
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Women involvement: empowerment or disempowerment?

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THAT WOMEN SHOULD be involved in Water and Sanitation Development in order for projects to be sustainable, is well documented, and agreed upon by those in the development field. In some countries participation by women in development projects is legislated, as in my own. Funders of development projects are increasingly pressurising developers to include women in development projects.

The importance of women participation is well documented and many papers offer advise on how to encourage increased participation. In this paper I wish to emphasise that although any strategy that aims to increase the participation of women is greatly welcomed, I find it disheartening that much of the actions taken to include women are superficial. They only touch the surface, yet on a deeper level, cause some conflict.

Change threatens traditional views and roles, and everyone involved in change is effected and unsettled by it. With the developer comes the promise of change and often long awaited improvement which the community welcomes. The developer brings along a bombardment of technological, educational and capacity building changes. New ideas need to be assimilated. Women are especially targeted for education. Yet it is this very education that challenges the traditional roles of society. Change is perceived to threaten the essence of people, roles, culture and traditions.

Resistance to change is often seen in the men of the community who are reluctant to hand over decision making and other roles, that are traditionally seen as their domain and right, to women who are often regarded as less important within the community. Male domination and their reluctance to accommodate are well documented and again strategies are offered by authors on how to deal with this. Yet, these often deal only with the blatant and overt resistance. It is the subtle resistance that is of concern and which does not enjoy much attention.

Men are being challenged to maintain their superior role and will go to lengths to impose their authority over women, reminding her of her place. Continued subtle harassment undermines the woman's active attempt at participation. This is the result of men's own discomfort with the women's changing role. As developers, we do not offer any assistance to ease this discomfort. It is too deep rooted within the person and we do not like to look too deeply.

The woman herself is also often reluctant, which presents itself in subtle manners. Well meaning developers see themselves as emancipating the under-trodden woman, freeing her from her serf like existence and empowering her to take charge of her life and that of her family. Women are often eager to take on new roles and learn new skills. But what of the essence of who she believes she really is, the essence of how she sees her own value in society, the meaning that her role gives to her as an individual in that specific community? We ask of her to increase her burden and add responsibility to an already burdened life style, in the belief that our teachings will make it easier.

Our self esteem is developed from the meanings that others give us. The rural woman's self esteem is bound up in her ability to successfully carry out the roles that her community have given her, namely the roles of reproduction, domestication, production and maintenance within her home and community. Women often lack the self confidence and belief in their own ability to take on the further roles that will "emancipate" them.

According to anthropologist Caroline Moser (Moser, 1987), "gender is a social concept, used to identify the differences between men and women as social beings, and the social meaning of what is important to being men and women. In other words gender refers to men and women not as "natural" sexual categories, but to the relationship between them, and the way these relationships are socially constructed. Men and women play different roles in society with gender differences shaped by ideological, historical, religious, ethnic, cultural and economic determinants". The difference between males and females is interactive and learned over generations. Within a social system role definition is developed in a dynamic interaction between the genders. That women are seen as the subordinate gender is not coincidental but rather part of a whole system of thinking.

We are conditioned by our culture, tradition and environment yet as developers we ask that others change for the sake of progress. There is much talk of "equality" between genders. But reality tells us that women are not seen to be equal to men. It is short sighted for developers to think that by regularly articulating that women are "equal parties", that their communities will enable them to "rise" to this status. By their very role in society women are not equal partners.

That people cannot change is not true. People, societies and communities do change. But people hold onto what they know. Unless society finds a reason to change, all attempts at change will be met with resistance. Unless a

woman's own attitude changes she will not feel that she is able to embrace change. Unless men are convinced that a changing status in women will not disrupt the family or community harmony, they will remain reluctant to share power.

The change that we, as developers, are asking societies to make, while we "empower" their women, is not a technical one but a very personal and emotional one. Women cannot be separated from their menfolk, be empowered by external agents, during a few days of workshopping, then be artificially returned to an unchanged environment that is ill prepared to accept them.

Men and women both need to be "empowered" and no longer seen separately. When we talk of changing women's status in society we are asking of men to change their role in society. Both genders need to be alerted to the problems as well as the possibilities that arise from the involvement of women. Educating genders to become aware of the effect of greater inclusion of women must also occur on a very personal level.

Developers must look to offering personal and emotional support on a long term basis as part of the strategies of empowering. Developers need to understand that just as first world technology cannot be applied in the third world in a sustainable manner, so too "empowerment" cannot be sustained without support on an emotional level and the readiness of the whole community - both male and female- to embrace change.

Although urbanised women have had many years of exposure to the process of female empowerment, we ourselves, the "emancipated women" are still confronted with the dilemmas of the woman's changing role. On a very personal level we wage an internal battle for our own personal role identification. The fight between tradition and emancipation brings with it many upheavals. More so where the woman is materially, financially and socially dependent on men in a community that offers little alternatives. What are we as developers leaving behind from our own experience as a support to buffer the effect and resistance to change that is inevitable when traditional roles are encouraged to change by an external agent? Or are we too afraid to face those questions that we ourselves have not yet adequately answered? These are the questions that won't leave the communities as we, the developers, pack our ideas away and leave.