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## Gender and Institutions: Creating an Enabling Environment

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***Gender and Institutions: Creating an Enabling Environment***

Prepared by

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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

## ***Overview of Gender and Institutions: Sources of Discrimination***

Enhancing women's participation in development requires an 'Enabling Environment'. What does an enabling environment look like? An enabling environment would presumably be favorable towards women's empowerment and it would need to be described and assessed at global, national and local levels. The actions and change strategies to create such an environment would be undertaken by international organizations, Governments, and civil society actors.

At the global level, an enabling environment has been created under the UN aegis, where women's networks have learned about lobbying and advocacy, come together to debate and promote their views, to negotiate with Government representatives and hold them accountable for global conventions and resolutions (Kardam, 2004). In many countries, women's movements have also successfully pressured Governments from below to change legal institutions, laws and policies. In fact, I just finished a study on how women's networks and movements in Turkey are doing precisely that (Kardam, 2005).

But why do we still not have a strong grip on what is the nature and the source of the limitations faced in creating an enabling environment: what exactly are the sources of discrimination against women? If we don't clearly identify the sources, how can we find solutions? In fact, I would argue that donors have done a great job in identifying and measuring the different types of inequality, but identifying outcomes is not the same thing as identifying and tackling the sources of discrimination. Donors have so far been effective at creating measurements that demonstrate the discrimination against women clearly in exercising their political, civil, economic, and social rights (for example GDI and GEM measures). We now have valid indicators that focus on gender disparities related to access to education, health care, political representation, earnings or income and others. Two important indicators are the Gender Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM). The GDI is an unweighted average of three indices that measure gender differences in terms of life expectancy at birth, gross enrolment and literacy rates and earned income. The GEM is an unweighted average of three other variables reflecting the importance of women in society. They include the percentage of women in parliament, the male/female ration among administrators, managers and professional and technical workers, and the female/male GDP per capita ratio calculated from female and male shares of earned income. According to the OECD study by Jütting and Morrison (2005), both of these indices have a fundamental weakness in that they measure the 'results of gender discrimination' rather than attempt to understand its underlying causes. If we don't focus on the underlying causes in each individual case, how can we recommend strategies for change? Simply put, we need to know what causes a problem, so that we may look for an appropriate solution. As Jütting and Morrison put it: For example, the school enrolment ratio and the percentage of women among managers are useful in comparing different country situations, but neither explains why these differences arise (2005, p. 6). The answer to such questions should be sought by examining the sources of inequality that perpetuate a *disabling* environment for women's empowerment: why are inequitable institutions that discriminate against gender perpetuated?

According to the World Bank's 2006 World Development Report, high levels of economic and political inequality, leading to inequitable institutions, generate economic costs and are inimical to sustainable development and poverty reduction (World Bank, 2005). Such high levels of economic and political inequality tend to lead to economic institutions and social arrangements that systematically favor the interests of those with more influence. The distribution of wealth and political power is closely correlated with social distinctions that stratify people, communities and nations into groups that dominate and those that are dominated. (World Development Report, 2006, p. 2). One of these 'social distinctions' is the one based on gender; in other words, whether you are a man or a woman (along with what race and ethnicity you belong to, your socio-economic status) makes a difference in terms of whether you will belong to those that dominate or are dominated. It should be clear, even though we don't always talk about it in straightforward terms, that the 'overlapping political, social, cultural, and economic inequalities perpetuated by the elite' that the World Bank Report refers to, are also perpetuated by men to have power over women. Of course, such power intersects and is mediated through class and ethnic identities. But it doesn't negate the fact that overall, what is termed as patriarchy, men's power over women, is a worldwide phenomenon that must be faced directly.

Let us do an experiment and replace the term 'elite' each time it appears in the discussion of inequalities in the Bank's Report with the term 'men' and to see what insights we might gain.

"Patterns of domination (*of men over women*) persist because economic and social differences are reinforced by the covert and overt use of power. Elites (*men*) protect their interests in subtle ways, by exclusionary practices in marriage and kinship systems, for instance, and in ways that are less subtle, such as aggressive political manipulation or the explicit use of violence. These inequalities are perpetuated by the elite (*men*) and often internalized by the marginalized or oppressed groups (*women*), making it difficult for the poor (*women*) to find their way out of poverty (inequality). Inequality traps can thus be rather stable, tending to persist over generations. This report documents the persistence of inequality traps by highlighting the interaction between different forms of inequality." (World Development Report, 2006, pp. 2-3)

The *gender* inequality 'trap' persists over generations because they have their sources in social institutions, norms, values and cultural, traditional and religious practices which are, in my view, still not explored and tackled very extensively.

The World Bank emphasized creating appropriate legal and economic institutions for gender equality: 1) Legal reforms are needed to especially redress inequalities in family law, protection against violence, land rights, employment and political rights and 2) An economic environment needs to be created that provides new job opportunities, tackles falling poverty levels and encourages investments in basic water, energy and transportation infrastructure. (World Bank, 2000) But as we see, the perpetuation of

power of men over women may occur in very subtle ways, internalized and accepted through mainstream values and norms, justified by arguments derived from culture, traditions, and religion, and persists over generations. Traditions, customs and social norms can constrain women's activities directly – by not allowing them to start their own businesses, by refusing them jobs that involve contact with or managing men, or by simply not allowing them to leave the home alone. All these factors lead to an exclusion of women from entrepreneurial activities that are often the first step towards independence, self-esteem and liberty of choices. Access to education and health care are strongly related to access to participation in the labor market. Traditional institutions can hinder females' access to resources and constrain the building of human and social capital. In traditional societies, such as some areas in Turkey, where girls are married between the ages of 12 and 15, parents may be unwilling to invest in the education of their daughters because they will leave the household early, and the return on investment will be low. In some cases, education of girls may decrease marriagibility, turning education into a negative investment.

In the short term, the World Bank recommends taking active policy measures or finding specific entry points for gender-appropriate policy interventions to level the playing field. Such policy interventions may include for example, addressing parental concerns about female modesty or safety in designing education policies; making sure that financial institutions account for gender specific constraints so that women get micro-credit, offering affirmative action employment programs and childcare services, gender appropriate social protection, and quotas for women in politics. (World Bank, Engendering Development, 2000) Such policies try to incorporate existing gender discriminatory norms into policy design in the hopes that over time women who receive women's human rights education, or girls who are bussed to girls' only schools, or women who receive micro credit to make candles to sell or to set up a kindergarten will become agents of cultural change themselves.

In short, even though I believe creating legal and economic institutions that are favorable to women's empowerment is extremely important, and even though short term measures to level the playing field are also necessary, I think we are ignoring something very important and skirting around it, and that is 'masculine domination' as Pierre Bourdieu put it in his famous book. Instead we are making culture, traditions and religion the 'boogeyman', but culture and traditions and religion are, in many cases, being used by male elites to justify the perpetuation of inequalities. And arguments for cultural sensitivity in development programs sometimes also serve to pay homage or perpetuate those inequalities. An open discussion and dialogue, bringing in all the diverse positions and actors on cultural, traditional and religious gender norms could pave the way to an enabling environment for women rather than working around them, or avoiding them altogether. This point is all the more important because in many developing countries, there is a strong contestation of values and norms held by different sectors of the population: between the elites, and by the rest of the people, between the dominant ethnic groups and minorities, or between those that espouse Westernized and secular and those that claim traditional and religious norms and values. Too often gender equality issues get caught and manipulated within these black and white world views (secularism versus

Islam, modernity versus tradition, individual rights versus collective rights and community values). They become tools and ammunition for contesting elites to attack each other with. Women's empowerment issues gets hijacked by donor fears that they may be accused of 'cultural imperialism' and by clever developing country elite arguments that they don't want Western feminist ideas imposed on their women, and that their cultural and religious practices must be protected.

A current example of donor fears comes from Paul Wolfowitz, the President of the World Bank who recently told a journalist: "I have sympathy for someone who says that the Swedish model or the American model of relatively advanced feminism is not something that even women of other countries want...But there is a point at which it is more than just a cultural thing, and that is a fundamental violation of human rights and a fundamental denial of equality of opportunity". (Financial Times, Sept. 24, 2005) Wolfowitz went on to say that "we are not talking about a particular cultural way of male-female roles, but you can tell when women are denied equal rights and equal opportunities and that is not only unfair to them, it is unhelpful to the whole society". This statement represents the resistance and fear on the part of donors to 'interfere with cultures', while in reality, discrimination against women cannot be dealt with without facing 'the cultural thing' or 'the particular cultural way of male-female roles' because gender inequalities rest on masculine and feminine identities that are constructions based on cultural, traditional, and religious norms.

Why this fear and resistance? For many years, social institutions and cultural practices were either assumed to be the domain of sovereign States that should not be interfered with by international actors, or that they were *not* primarily the responsibility of States but rather the product of embedded traditions which could only be changed over the long term. I think that the time has come for all international development agencies to realize that development assistance does interfere with cultures, by its very nature. I think the time has also come that such practices are considered the primary responsibility of State elites – who after all constructed them in the first place - because evading this issue has had major impacts on how international donor organizations have been structured, on the specification of procedures and the design of programs and projects. For example, since the domain of social institutions and cultural practices have not been viewed as a primary responsibility of States, State parties in the UN have resisted attempts to be singled out for any violations/discriminations against women. Can this be a major reason why the Commission on the Status of Women is not called the Commission on Women's Rights and has not been given the power to address itself directly to Governments and must couch its recommendations in general terms and in terms of trends? (Reanda, 1993) Could this also be why the CEDAW Committee refrained from singling out Governments who ratified CEDAW with reservations, based on culture and tradition arguments, even though such reservations threaten the integrity of the Convention? One UN agency that is working on how culture matters is UNFPA as there is now a clearer understanding on how reproductive issues and women's health is affected by cultural, religious and traditional norms. This is not just the case in terms of women's reproductive and sexual rights, but also true in access to education, and to employment, the themes of this Expert Group Meeting.

While donors have generally shied away from ‘interfering with cultures’, developing country Governments still make arguments to the effect that ‘Western style feminism contradicts with indigenous cultural, religious and traditional institutions and therefore should be rejected’. I think that it is hypocritical when developing countries claim that they don’t want to address gender equality issues because it is linked to Western feminist agendas, and that they want to ‘protect their cultural, traditional and religious practices’. These statements generally tend to hide a political agenda, bringing us back to the World Bank Development Report’s discussion on how elites maintain and perpetuate their power. Basically what is happening in my view is that men in power are couching their unwillingness to give up their power in various arguments such as: Women’s rights will destroy the family, Women’s rights are a Western agenda and will destroy indigenous norms; Our women are happy here; Individual human rights is a Western view that will destroy collective rights and community values. These are all black and white world views that hide the fear to give up power: I am afraid what we see here more is the fear of a potential loss of power on the part of men, arguments really based on economic and other self-interests but dressed up in the language of religious and traditional beliefs (Tripp, 2002, Kardam 2005). In reality, religious values are not inimical to modernity; individual rights and women’s empowerment do not necessarily destroy the family or the community. The fact is that in all societies where women have a status inferior to men, this inequality provides men with material advantages that they lose upon reform. In a few cases, there is an outright claim that providing more resources and rights to women will diminish men’s power: I have heard arguments, by Turkish male members of parliament who claimed that passing a law in favor of women, will diminish their (men’s) power, such as in the case of division of property equally upon divorce (in terms of wealth), or outlawing honor crimes (in terms of their ‘honor’ as men).

### *Change Strategies*

- *Creation of democratic values, and respect for human rights through formal and informal education, media and other channels*

Women’s participation in development depends on the creation of norms that a) respect democratic values and human rights, in this case respect for women and value them as human beings with rights; b) has a commitment to a just and equitable society.

An enabling environment can only be created when the reforms towards greater gender equality and women’s empowerment acquire ‘legitimacy’. When reforms touch the private lives of citizens, and challenge or contradict inheritance rules, polygamy, genital cutting, or male authority over women, they are seen as interference. Also, in many developing countries, the rules are contested. For example, religious leaders may see polygamy as acceptable, and the domain of the family under the authority of the husband, rather than the authority of the State. Government’s influence in rural areas in many poor countries may be very limited. Thus, democracy alone may often not be sufficient to reform social institutions, which brings us to the next strategy.

- *Establishing Cultural Legitimacy for Women's Participation in Development*

Does a Government have legitimacy when it tries to change religious teachings, laws, traditions and the family code, all of which form an important part of the private sphere of citizens? Even if a Government forcefully adopts codes that go against religious teachings and traditions, as in Turkey, does that really mean that those laws will be legitimate in the eyes of the citizens? In countries with Muslim populations, the Qur'an should be referred and interpreted by Muslims themselves and local chiefs and religious leaders in rural areas must be drawn in and consulted.

- *Assisting in Changing Social Attitudes Towards Women*

Influence the media and communication channels; public opinion campaigns to change mentalities – street theaters, campaigns run by stars, singers with pro-women themes all could be considered.

- *Training for International Development Agency Staff and Prioritizing Research and Public Dialogue on Cultural and Religious Gender Norms*

International development agencies should not fear tackling cultural norms, values and practices. Most donors have not yet focused on the analysis of social institutions in creating an enabling environment so that women's participation in development can be realized. Donors must inform themselves about local attitudes, social practices, histories, religious affiliations and cultures and promote dialogue among different constituencies on gender norms.

- *Education and Public Discussion on Sexuality and Gender Roles and Identities*

Full scale formal and informal education on sexuality and gender roles should be launched where these issues can be openly discussed in different media, educational institutions, and community organizations.

- *Human Rights Education*

Successful women's human rights training should be duplicated and extended. Its positive effects on families and on men should be publicized. I have found out through an evaluation of a women's human rights program in Turkey that training for women's human rights, including training on successful communication and negotiation techniques, actually resulted in overall higher satisfaction in family life by the husbands of the trainees and less violence in the home (Kardam, Evaluation of the Women's Human Rights Training Program, 2003; please see <http://wwhr.org>)

Textbooks should be rewritten to eliminate gender discrimination and incorporate human rights. Such efforts would aim at offering a systematically egalitarian vision of gender relations in school texts, starting from grade school.

- *Changing Men's Attitudes Towards Gender Equality and Respect for Women's Rights*

Focus on men not just on women, ignoring the crucial influence of men on the outcomes of interventions. Interventions should be designed to tackle potential male resistance from the outset. Project staff should come from a cultural background similar to their clients.

I think that it is time that *men* become the focus of education and training programs, and public campaigns that directly aim to promote gender equality, and respect for women's rights among men.

The incentives for men in respecting women's rights and supporting gender equality should be emphasized, for example by pointing out the benefits of gender equality for the whole society including men. The central role of women for economic development and ultimately the wealth of men have to be articulated better. For example, a literate woman can better feed and educate her children, including boys. Women who have access to resources and gain economic independence contribute to household revenue and raise the social status of the household. Financial contributions to funds granting compensation to men for their perceived losses can help Governments to avoid their resistance

Incentives to cover losses from the reforms: Governments can provide families compensation in cash or in kind because families often refuse to educate their girls in order to retain their labor. Examples from Bangladesh show that such measures helped to increase the female schooling rate; this was also the case in Turkey.

- *Policy Intervention: Quotas*

More equal participation of women in elections, reserve quotas of seats for women in parliaments. In India, Pakistan and Argentina, a third of municipality seats are reserved for women, who can bring forward women's concerns and interests such as support for primary education, access to family planning and health care or acting against domestic violence.

- *Policy Intervention: Gender Sensitive-Budgeting*

Barbados, Fiji, Mozambique, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Uganda have started gender-sensitive budgeting processes that allow systematically tracking the impact of budgets on women. Women's associations play a crucial role and need to be supported at national and local levels.

- *Fostering Partnerships between State and Civil Society*

An enabling environment could be created by fostering partnerships between State and civil society, focusing on complementarities between them. An example from Turkey is the partnership between Women for Women's Human Rights – New Ways and the Social Services Administration. While Women for Women's Human Rights provided the

expertise and trained social workers to facilitate the human rights courses, and monitored the program, the Government provided the space in community centers and made available the social workers across the country. As a result, the program achieved legitimacy and the support of the government, and it reached more than 3000 women in 28 provinces of Turkey.

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