



Gender: Empowering Women for Development

Development is not just about offering the opportunity of a livelihood and access to basic social services: it is also concerned with creating an environment where people can realise their rights and participate meaningfully in society.

The obstacles to development are enormous for many women and girls, with particular challenges in poor countries, and the figures bear this out:

- ★ Two-thirds of the world's illiterate are women, which makes it harder for them to earn an income, take advantage of opportunities available in their societies, and protect their interests and rights;
- ★ Women are society's primary carers, yet some 500,000 women die each year due to preventable pregnancy-related complications, often as a result of not having access to health care; and
- ★ An estimated one-third of all women have been violently abused.

Women have a **central role to play in development processes**, but their particular needs and rights are often not reflected in development policies and practices. Very often, **policy-makers overlook key issues** such as women's right to own and inherit property, female genital mutilation, gender-based violence, access to reproductive health, the freedom to decide on the number and spacing of children, and equal representation in government and other decision-making bodies.



Women perform much of the world's agricultural work, producing food for their families and surpluses for sale, but often cannot own or inherit the land they work or the homes they live in.

Gender roles - Perceptions can be changed

Women and women's groups are trying many different things to improve their own situations, but they are often held back by the attitudes, behaviours and practices of those who hold power. The situation of women is often especially hard and dangerous in developing countries. Absolute poverty, inequality, social attitudes, illiteracy and violent conflict present particular challenges. And the obstacles to women improving their circumstances are often very high.

This is why many development organisations try to tackle gender inequality, the impact of unequal gender roles on how people live and use resources, how they experience poverty and inequality, and whether they are free to make decisions about their own lives.

The United Nation's Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) clearly stated that development goals cannot be achieved without gender equality:

"Only if unequal social and institutional discrimination is eliminated, and women and men can participate in the development process, can human development goals be attained."

What are Irish NGOs doing about it?

In whatever work they do and whatever sectors they may concentrate on (education, health, agriculture, etc), most Irish development organisations have some focus on the empowerment of women.

- ★ Irish NGOs **work with people and groups** who strive to eradicate gender inequalities at all levels, and particularly try to strengthen the capacity of women to control their own lives and futures;
- ★ Among other means, NGOs work to enable women and girls get better **access to resources and services**; secure them the **education** that can set them up for a better life; help them make **use of health services**; and try to get access to the **credit** that can allow women start, or build up, enterprises and improve their own lives;
- ★ Irish NGOs **support smallholder farmers**, in Africa and elsewhere, who make up a majority of people working in agriculture in developing countries, but also carry the responsibility of looking after the home, the young and elderly, and the sick;
- ★ NGOs seek to **address particular gender-related issues that arise in violent conflict and emergency situations**, when women and girls are especially vulnerable to exploitation and sexual violence as well as facing increasing burdens in providing food, water and shelter for their families;
- ★ Irish development agencies **challenge attitudes and actions** among those who hold power, in an effort to ensure that inequality and injustice is not perpetuated; and
- ★ NGOs work to transform their own organisations and relations with others, because gender equality and empowerment are issues for all of us in our daily lives. NGOs strive to be aware of the implications of their decisions, to better target activities and spending, and to take specific account in their work of the needs and rights of women and girls.

In just one example of why NGOs emphasise the importance of women in development (above and beyond the core reasons of rights and justice), evidence gathered over 30 years shows that **educating women is the single most powerful weapon against malnutrition** - even more effective than improving food supply.

With global poverty affecting women and children especially, everyone interested in the well-being of all people must pay special attention to removing the obstacles that face women and girls in achieving equality, development and peace.

