WOMEN ENGINEERS IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: 
OPPORTUNITIES AND OBSTACLES

Rita Klees, Ph.D. 
Director of Technology, CH2M HILL International 
Environmental Policy and Technology Project 
1919 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W. 
Washington, D.C. 20006

Introduction

Throughout the developing world, a deteriorating environment and the depletion of natural resources pose significant threats to the social, environmental, and economic welfare of billions of people. As an environmental engineer, I have found a challenging career in applying my skills to the alleviation of these threats in the international arena. As a woman, I have found additional challenges in addressing the needs of Third World women in development projects. In this paper I describe the background of concern with women in development projects, opportunities and obstacles to careers for women, and steps for action. Since I am an American, this paper is written from the comparative perspective of an international career versus working for a U.S. organization.

Women use their engineering skills in a variety of settings in the international development arena. They may be employed by bilateral donor agencies such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID); multilateral donor and lender organizations including United Nations (UN) organizations, e.g., World Health Organization, UNICEF, UN Development Program, World Bank; nongovernmental organizations, e.g., World Wildlife Fund, Oxfam; and a host of others. I began my career working for the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), the organization that seconded me to USAID. Currently, I work for the private engineering sector on a U.S.-funded environment program in the former Soviet Union. The women engineer in international development is concerned ultimately with the improvement of some aspect of the host country beneficiaries' lives.

Women engineers have the opportunity to extend their skills beyond the technical and effect fundamental change in the way development projects are conducted. This is due to the increased recognition of Third World women's needs and benefits received (or lack of them) and the importance of including women to ensure project success. Women engineers have the opportunity to extend their skills beyond the technical and effect fundamental change in the way development projects are conducted. My belief is that the attempt to integrate Third World women into development will be enhanced by the increased participation of women engineers in development organizations.
Background

Unequal pay, burdensome work, cultural and legal discrimination, the lack of opportunities, and poverty are equally at play in Third World countries as they have been in the United States. Burdened with obstacles, the Third World women's plight is exacerbated by inadequate influence over the development process that espouses to bring them relief. In many countries women's social, economic and health status has deteriorated as their country's economy grew.

The complaint that Third World women are excluded from development first began to be heard in 1970 by Esther Boserup. She presented the negative effects of development on women and their significant but unrecognized role in economic production. Five years later the UN declared a UN Decade for Women (1976-85). At the opening conference in Mexico, speakers denounced the fact that women had been ignored in development policies. One answer to women's continued slide into economic poverty was therefore seen to lie in making them more central to development projects and planning. If this was done, it was expected that the benefits supposedly accruing to men in the Third World would also flow to women.

Some argue that this attempt to integrate women into development, although it is a genuine effort by women to raise the issues of discrimination and inequity, is based on false assumptions. It is argued that these false assumptions include that women in the developed world have progressed further than women in the Third World toward equality with men.

Like many women in international work, I have found that it is easier working with host country officials and professionals than their counterparts in the U.S./international organizations for which we work. It is not unusual for me to attend an international conference in Washington, D.C., where the participation of women is less than 5 to 10%. This is particularly true in sectors that are traditionally male, e.g., energy, civil engineering. On the other hand, when I was living in Thailand and working for USAID, I worked with women engineers in government and the private sector on a daily basis.

Conferences and workshops I attended while I worked in South East Asia always had more professional host country women than do similar activities I attend in the United States. Working and living overseas as a woman engineer I was less lonely and had more women colleagues than in the United States. At the conclusion of the UN Decade For Women in 1985, the position of women in both the Third World and the first world had worsened.

It is not so much that women have been excluded as that they are invisible to development planners, policy makers and government officials. Yet their participation in projects is critical to success.

In 1987, USAID carried out an evaluation of its experience with women in development between 1973-85. It found that those projects that included a careful analysis of the sexual division of labor and responsibilities and were designed to realistically reflect the contacts within which men and women worked, ultimately were more efficient in meeting developmental goals.

The evaluation found that 40% of projects did not mention women. Results
showed that projects that take women into account from the very beginning have a higher efficiency level and are more likely to succeed.

Women in Third World countries are organizing, and have been for years, to garner support for the issues they have identified. Moser has identified three roles for women beneficiaries as they interact with the development process -- as managers, rehabilitators and innovators in the use of appropriate technology. Unfortunately, these roles are often closed to Third World women, and they appear to be invisible to planners of development projects in both the donor country and the developing country.

One project in my office is related to drinking water and public health needs in several Central Asian republics. After about 40 hours of research on the topic, I finally found one reference on a group of central Uzbekistan women scientists who had organized to plead with decision makers for attention to their plight. Reference to their organization was buried deep within an article from an obscure journal -- inadequate attention to a group that could serve as the backbone of development efforts in the region.

Why the disregard -- because they are women? It is important to note that a recent scientific and policy delegation to the United States from the same region represented by the women scientists group included 23 men and no women -- perhaps that is why these voices go unheard.

Opportunities and Obstacles

With the increased attention to improving the participation of women in the development process, one might think that opportunities would be increasing in the organizations responsible for development. However, many organizations pay only lip service both to increasing the number of women in their own ranks and to empowering Third World women in the development process.

As an example, the World Bank in relation to women notes that "no country can afford to underutilize and under equip more than half of its human resources." Given the attitude this seems to reflect, one might expect career opportunities for women at the World Bank.

Not so. The World Bank's record for "utilizing and equipping" women professionals, including engineers, in their organizations is dismal. In 1990, of the World Bank's 18 Presidential staff, all 18 were men. Of the 22 Executive Directors, again, all were male. Higher level women are under-represented in the World Bank; the higher the grade, the greater the imbalance. Of the 4,409 regular- and fixed-term higher level staff, only 26% are women. Also, according to a recent report, higher level women and female consultants are paid less and placed in lower grades than their equally qualified male colleagues.

On the positive side, Women in Development (WID) programs have been created in most international organizations. As a response to the UN Decade for Women, on the international, governmental and nongovernmental levels, women's units were created, women's projects funded and women's advocates were appointed to advisory positions.
Numerous organizations looked seriously into their programming and came up with approaches to increasing the involvement of Third World women in development projects. Some organizations have looked seriously into their programming and come up with approaches to increasing the involvement of Third World women in development projects\(^9\).

The main goal of including women in project design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation is to assure that they have access to benefits that they value and that they are able to manage the resource base in a sustainable manner.

In one example from my practice, I participated on a team to determine health impacts from small dams in West Africa. We used focus group discussion in remote villages to determine drinking water source and use practices. Typically, upon arrival into an African village, the village elder (male) would gather a group of village men to participate in the survey.

We had to make quite a point in order to gather the women together for a similar discussion. Since it was the women who collected the drinking water supply and monitored its use, and it was the women who were most aware of children's health conditions, we felt it was important to interview them as well. We found that the village men gave inaccurate information regarding water use and health. Thus, the inclusion of women in this work was critical in determining important health linkages.

As a result of the influence of WID activities, WID concerns are expressed in most project designs\(^6\). However, in my experience as a proposal reviewer, it is clear that these concerns are at best expressed in one paragraph -- and that paragraph is frequently lifted from one proposal to another. To make the effort to include women in the development process more than lip service, and to truly integrate the needs of women into the development process, clearly women need to have more involvement on both sides of the development process -- donor and beneficiary.

How do we fare here? Not very well. Despite the increase in the number of women in WID units, the issue of gender has not been satisfactorily incorporated into the wide diversity of planning disciplines that are concerned with the lives of low income communities in the Third World.

There are a number of reasons for this but one is that many authorities responsible for development planning only reluctantly recognize gender as an important planning issue. Decision making powers continue to remain male dominated and gender blind in orientation.

It is astounding how blind development organizations can be. In one recent Asian Development Bank (ADB) quarterly review\(^1\) the cover photo shows Third World women at a training session and is entitled "The Role of Women is Changing in Asia." Maybe so, but the role of women within the ADB doesn't seem to be showing much progress. Inside the quarterly, two more training pictures, including a technical training session, show only men. Worse, of a total of five pictures in the quarterly review showing ADB decision makers at work or discussing projects, all depict only men for a total of 21.

It should be obvious that distributing a publication -- worldwide and in 1994 -- with such a high level of blatant sexism highlights the lack of awareness on women's issues in international development organizations.

\(W\)

**WOMEN IN ENGINEERING CONFERENCE: EFFECTING THE CLIMATE**

1994 WEPAN National Conference
Conclusion

Development organizations must get beyond lip service and really encourage the participation of women in their own ranks. These institutions should take advantage of this opportunity to influence through example. No one should take for granted the power of the messages sent in the leadership and staffing of overseas assignments.

Here are some helpful suggestions:

- recruit more women into the organization;
- assign women to be team leaders;
- train junior and senior support staff to women-led teams to ensure she has full support;
- provide easy access to information on customs, climate, mode of dress;
- assume what you know is a misconception unless it has been ground truthed by women with experience in the field;
- make sure your human resource director or person in charge of staffing overseas assignments proactively recruits women;
- when hiring men, investigate their awareness of gender issues, experience working with/for women, experience dealing with discrimination in internal settings, ideas on how to handle sexist behavior in internationals settings;
- provide assistance to relocating women in finding jobs for spouses; and
- provide assistance in arranging child-care for women traveling with children to assignments.

Once in these institutions, women engineers need to influence the development process to afford women in Third World countries the same kind of empowerment we are striving for in our own countries. We can help to empower Third World women to influence the development process of their countries while we empower ourselves to demand equal access to international careers.

References


