WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT

A Progress Report on the World Bank Initiative
Women in Development

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The World Bank
Washington, D.C.
Contents

Foreword by Barber B. Conable  v
Acknowledgments  vi
1. Introduction and Summary  1
   The Importance of Women in Development  1
      Education  5
      Health and Family Planning  6
      Agricultural Extension  6
      Credit  7
   Other Measures  7
   The World Bank's Response  8
   Future Directions  12

2. Attention to Women in Lending Operations  14
   Projects in High-Priority Fields  15
      Education  15
      Population, Health, and Nutrition  15
      Agriculture  18
   Progress in High-Priority Fields  18
   Activity in Other Fields  21
   Conclusion  23

3. Attention to Women in Economic and Sectoral Work  24
   Incorporating Women's Concerns  25
   Conclusion  30

Boxes
  1. Education and Training for Women  16
  2. Population, Health, and Nutrition for Women  17
  3. Agricultural Services for Women  19
  4. Women in Agricultural Specialties  20
  5. Projects Modified to Address Women's Concerns  21
  6. Women and Natural Resources  22
7. Credit and Entrepreneurship 22
8. Macroeconomic Adjustment Operations 23

Case Studies
1. Nigeria: Girls' Education 25
3. Colombia: Community-Based Day Care 27
4. Jamaica: Women's Employment 27
5. Pakistan: Women's Employment 28
6. Mexico: Rural Women's Employment 28
7. Bangladesh: Women and Poverty 29
8. Bangladesh: Health Care and Public Expenditure 29
9. Brazil: Public Spending on Health Care 30
10. Rwanda: Women and Food Security 30
11. Indonesia: Women's Access to Credit 31
12. Zimbabwe: Female Farmers, Cooperatives, and Support Services 31
13. India: Agricultural Extension 32
Foreword

Improving opportunities for women is not only a matter of human justice, but also a sure route to faster and more sustainable development. Most people recognize that women have the right to participate in political and economic decisionmaking and to enjoy the fruits of social and economic progress. But in much of the world, they do not have the opportunity to do so.

Women in many parts of the world still lack access to education and training, to health and family planning services, and to information and resources. Often, their legal standing is inferior and they are unable to participate in politics and in policymaking. As a result, these women are denied choices in their own lives and also are prevented from contributing all that they might to family well-being and to national progress. There is a direct relationship between expanded opportunities for women and improved health and learning for children, slower population growth, and the easing of environmental pressures.

The United Nations Decade for Women (1975–85) helped focus public attention on the important role women can and do play in socioeconomic development. As a result, many governments adopted strategies to improve opportunities for women, thereby contributing to development and equality.

The World Bank also identified women in development as a priority and has integrated this concern into its analytical work and lending operations. As many as one out of five Bank operations approved in 1989 included specific recommendations for assisting women. Indeed, it is encouraging to note that some progress has been made in each area considered in this report on women in development.

This is a promising start, but only a start. I call on all governments, nongovernmental organizations, and development agencies to work toward the common goal of equal opportunity for all people—male and female—and to help transform this goal into a reality.

Certainly the World Bank will continue to intensify its own efforts for women in development.

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Acknowledgments

Introduction and Summary

During the United Nations Decade for Women (1975–85), governments and institutions, including the World Bank, adopted policies to enhance the role of women in development. Although progress was achieved, particularly in health and schooling, less was accomplished in other areas. In 1987, therefore, the Bank launched a stronger and more focused initiative to integrate attention to women in development through its analytical work and lending. This report summarizes the rationale for these efforts, describes progress in implementing the initiative, and outlines future directions. In general, the Bank is focusing on increasing women’s economic productivity by investing in human capital and improving women’s access to productive resources and the labor market.

The Importance of Women in Development

The rationale for any long-term effort by the World Bank is its potential contribution to economic growth and the reduction of poverty. The Bank’s women in development initiative is no exception. Expanding women’s opportunities, especially in ways that enhance their productivity and earning potential, will raise women’s own living standards and contribute to better economic performance, the reduction of poverty, and improved family welfare. Over time, it will also help to slow population growth. Because social and cultural forces influence women’s economic productivity, deliberate and thoughtful effort is required to involve women more effectively in the development process.

The economic contribution of women is known to be substantial. Women produce more than half the food in the developing world and as much as three-fourths in Africa. They play a substantial role in the storage, processing, and marketing of food and cash crops, and they often have charge of small livestock. Women constitute about one-fourth of the industrial labor of the developing world and an even
higher proportion in many of the expanding export industries of East Asia and Latin America. Women also work in the large and growing informal sectors of both rural and urban areas.

The economic contribution of women goes much further. Beyond their work in the formal and informal labor force, women usually have the primary responsibility for the care of children and the elderly and for many household chores. Women often spend several hours a day fetching household water and fuelwood (which constitutes 90 percent of the household fuel used in Africa).

Because much of women's work is done at home or outside the formal economy, it is not fully recognized in official statistics or by policymakers. But studies in Nepal and the Philippines suggest that, when women's production is valued properly, rural women contribute about half of the family's income. Moreover, many poor families are headed by women (for example, one-third of families below the poverty line in India, two-fifths of all families in Jamaica and rural Kenya, and one-fifth of those in Togo and urban Brazil). Thus women's earnings make a particular contribution to the alleviation of poverty; moreover, women perform such tasks as feeding the family, which directly relieve misery.

Women make a crucial contribution to the health and learning of children, which improves future economic performance. Many studies show that families depend heavily on women for nutrition and health care, particularly in low-income areas. A study in India shows a link between women's earnings and children's—especially daughters'—health, and several studies demonstrate the effect of maternal education on the schooling of children, especially girls. Evidence also suggests that the most effective way to slow population growth is to improve educational and earning opportunities for women while extending family planning services.

Women's economic options relative to men's vary widely in different cultures and at different stages of economic development. In the early stages of economic development, women tend to bear many children and to work in or near the home, whereas men are allowed greater choice of occupation. This tendency for both rural and urban women to remain inside the home and family is more marked today in parts of Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. By contrast, in much of East Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the rest of Africa, women are generally less confined. Needless to say, excep-