

Trotter Review

Volume 12
Issue 1 *Women of Color and Economic
Development*

Article 9

January 2000

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Recommended Citation

Ani, Carlos (2000) "Women and Poverty," *Trotter Review*. Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 9.
Available at: https://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol12/iss1/9

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Women and Poverty

By Carlos Ani

The issue regarding relationships between the status of women, economic health for all people, and social justice is a challenge in every society today. Until fairly recently, poverty and under development were assumed to put all members of affected households - men, women, and children - at an equal disadvantage. "Households" were regarded as static entities where labor and resources are pooled and equally shared. The implicit conclusion was that changes thought of as beneficial for development would be neutral in their effects on the different members of the households. Empirical evidence reveals, however, that the costs and benefits of development are often disproportionately distributed, depending on an individual member's sex, age, and relationship to the household head. Particularly in traditional societies with a pronounced gender-specific division of labor, which accords women and their work lower status or social importance, it cannot be assumed that females will automatically benefit from an increase in the "household" income. At best, the provision of goods, for which men are traditionally responsible, improves.

Experience shows that getting through to women means that children are also reached. Although today there is a wider recognition of the importance of women in the process of development, the prevailing nature of interventions toward them is welfare-oriented rather than income-generating. Social welfare projects or "female" components in projects (for example, maternal and child health, family planning, hygiene, nutrition, home economics, and kitchen gardening) focus mainly on the domestic role of women as homemakers and child rearers, succumbing to the fiction of a constant "household" with a male breadwinner. Such interventions, as important as they are, meet with little success in getting women out of poverty, nor do they alter the fundamental problem of women's dependence on conjugal ties for access to resources.

Income-generating projects, in contrast, try to create a situation that helps women support themselves and their families without welfare. They involve upgrading existing skills or teaching new ones, providing the resources needed to use the skills in the production of marketable goods and services, providing marketing assistance, promoting wage employment, raising awareness of the root causes of poverty, teaching functional and legal literacy,

and encouraging women to participate in community-level decision-making.

Of course, the "status of women" as well as the factors that confer status vary considerably across regions. A woman's status is often described in terms of her income, employment, education, health, and fertility, as well as the roles she plays within the family, the community and society. It also involves society's perception of these roles and the value it places on them. The status of women implies a comparison with the status of men, and is therefore a significant reflection of the level of social justice in a society. The United Nations Development Program's Human Development Report 1995 reveals how things look for women in this respect: "Men generally fare better than women on almost every socio-economic indicator (except life expectancy since, for biological reasons, women tend to live longer than men)."

Gender disparities exist in every country. While in industrial countries women get less than two-thirds of the employment opportunities and about half the earnings of men, gender-discrimination in developing countries is much more broadly based. According to the report, it occurs not only in employment but also in education, nutritional support and health care. Illiteracy is always higher for women who make up two-thirds of the illiterate population. And neglect of women's health and nutrition is so serious in some countries, particularly in Asia, that it even outweighs women's natural biological tendency to live longer than men. Considering these early deaths, as well as those from the infanticide of girl-babies, some studies estimate that up to 100 million women are "missing."

Sharing the poverty but not the power, women are the Third World's powerhouse. They produce a staggering 60 percent of all food, run 70 percent of small-scale businesses and make up a third of the official labor force - in addition to caring for families and homes. Yet their status rarely reflects this enormous and vital contribution. By any measure - income, education, health, land ownership, legal rights or political power - women get a raw deal. The poorest of the poor are usually women because discrimination cuts off their escape routes from poverty - education, health services, equal pay employment, access to land and finance. It is becoming increasingly clear therefore, that there will only be sustainable development in the Third World when women play an equal part in decision making. No developing

country can afford to ignore women's existing and potential economic contribution, or their pivotal role in determining the health and welfare of a nation's children. All the evidence points to one conclusion: economic growth and improvement in the quality of life for everyone is faster in areas where women's status is higher. Women constitute a disproportionate share of the poor: of the estimated 1.3 billion people living in poverty, more than 70% are female. Any serious commitment to poverty alleviation must reflect this reality.

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