

23

Gender and REFLECT**Kate Metcalf and Geni Gomez****• Why is gender so important?**

In the past different popular education projects have often failed because they have not addressed the issue of gender relations and gender oppression. Crucial questions about power, access to and control of resources, gender violence and the sexual division of labour have been overlooked. A gender analysis provides the theoretical and practical framework to address these issues. A gender analysis is a holistic approach which subsequently does not exclude from its analysis other types of oppression

Gender has become fashionable in development circles. As a buzz word, gender has frequently become meaningless, overused and distorted. At times, the term 'gender' is used as a synonym for 'women'; we work with the theme of gender because we work with women. Or it is seen as a concession given to women; they are taken into account in our work, resources are invested in them. Or it is a term used in the jargon of institutions, organisations and development projects, like any other technical, neutral and apolitical concept. In all of these cases, the full potential of a gender focus is lost, and with it the subversive, transformative meaning underlying a gender perspective.

A gender focus implies the redistribution of social powers in order to create a more democratic distribution of power. To work with a gender focus implies deconstructing: to develop a critical vision, to distance ourselves from our culture, our values, our ideas and concepts, our ways of thinking and feeling in order to construct a new culture based on relations of equality and equity between men and women. One cannot simply add on a gender perspective to what we already know.

It is necessary to dismantle our way of thinking and construct a new vision of the world.

Key issues in a gender perspective

A gender analysis provides a framework to explore the totality of interacting influences, such as gender, class, ethnicity, caste, age and the macro and micro environment and culture, which affect women's and men's lives in different ways according to the context. A gender analysis is a feminist analysis. Central to a gender approach is a gender disaggregated examination of roles and control of and access to resources. Thus the household is deconstructed so as to reveal the differentiation within it; the gender inequalities and intra-household divisions.

The category of 'women' needs to be disaggregated, as women are not homogeneous but rather have multiple and contradictory identities. There is no universal experience of gender oppression because it varies according to the cultural context and other interacting influences, such as class, race, age and ethnicity.

Fundamental to a gender approach in REFLECT is the need to be context specific, given the multiple manifestations of gender oppression. Thus the oppression of one particular group or person needs to be understood without negating or overlooking another's experience of oppression, which may have similarities and differences. Evidently, this approach recognises the fact that different levels and types of oppression are present in the REFLECT circle, hence one cannot assume a false similarity of experience and unity if it does not exist. Oppression must not be

simplified, but rather made more specific so as to understand its complexity.

Ultimately, then, a gender approach in REFLECT starts with an analysis of women's and men's reality and subsequently examines it so as to understand the wider processes and structures that contribute to and cause their subordination. Instead of imposing one 'universal' method to bring about a gender consciousness, it is an approach which incorporates feminisms. Distinct gender approaches, then, will be suitable for different contexts. In the end, it must be the participants who decide what type of gender focus and method is best suited to their situation. This flexibility is at the heart of REFLECT. It is hoped that from this truly 'critical' analysis, women and men will look for solutions to their oppression. To transform oppressive structures, women and men must organise themselves to take collective action, elements at the heart of REFLECT. REFLECT is a learning process which develops skills needed to first analyse and, if appropriate, organise.

How to deal with conflict

Gender relations universally favour men and disadvantage women. However, analysing it from a different perspective, gender relations also harm men. The prescribed masculine gender roles constrain men: they often restrict men's role in child rearing, nurturing and caring roles. This is men's loss, as these roles, if shared, can be rewarding. Thus, the construction of masculinity and femininity is constraining for both men and women. This is not to ignore women's oppression in society. Men have a great deal to gain, not just power to lose, in re-negotiating/transforming gender relations.

The call for gender equality needs to be framed in this positive way without negating the focus on women's disadvantaged position. We need to think in terms of constructive conflict. Conflict is inevitable when one deals with negotiating power and we should not shy away from it but rather face it head on. But there seems to be a gender-bias in the types of conflict people are willing to tackle. Gender relations are often deemed too difficult and problematic to address due to arguments about cultural sensitivity. It would appear that the

argument of respecting 'traditional culture' is conveniently used by male representatives of that culture whenever their power is threatened. The 'traditional' culture is defined by them and represented by them. Although women are also complicit in this, as oppression is often internalised, there are always voices of dissent within traditional cultures. The issue of poverty is clearly not viewed in the same way as gender relations. Tackling poverty is often seen as an a-political and a-cultural issue, unlike gender relations, and therefore unproblematic.

The challenge is how to make conflict positive and constructive. Perhaps by asserting that men have also been disadvantaged by subscribed gender roles, albeit in a different way from women, the debate can become more constructive. For example, taking an equal share in child care is a rewarding and important role (see Figure 1). Domestic and 'reproductive' tasks are crucial for the functioning of society and should be valued. Equal partnerships between men and women are beneficial for both parties. The construction of both masculinity and femininity needs to be analysed and challenged.

Strengthening the gender approach in REFLECT

At a recent international workshop to revise the REFLECT mother manual (London, March 1998), there was an overriding consensus that the gender perspective in REFLECT needs to be strengthened. What are the implications of this? Change involves using a gender focus at all levels in the REFLECT process. This would mean applying a gender analysis to all PRA exercises in the REFLECT circle. This cross-cutting gender approach would also mean that the gender dimension of all exercises/discussions should be discussed and analysed. This gender analysis should be an implicit part of the REFLECT process. Facilitators need to gain an understanding of gender and how they would apply it in their work with REFLECT.

A gender analysis does not stop here however. Facilitators and promoters need to examine their own lives from a gender perspective. We cannot expect participants to change and be

open if the facilitators and other staff are not willing to analyse their own behaviour in the private and public sphere. The funding or implementing agency is also part of this equation. The staff need to understand and internalise the implications of a gender analysis. This would involve an analysis of the way the agency works and also the personal and professional relations of the staff.

Figure 1. Finding time to learn is a struggle for women with multiple burdens (Photo: Ghana Shyam Chhetri)



As a result of the workshop mentioned above, it has been agreed that a gender focus is now a central aim of REFLECT, and any organisation implementing REFLECT that overlooks gender is not doing REFLECT. There is a need to define criteria for the selection of facilitators, trainers, and organisations that we work with to ensure that they are gender sensitive or are open to learning more about gender. Gender as a cross-cutting issue should be present in:

- the basic principles and theory of REFLECT;
- training at all levels;
- background research;

- selection of facilitators (quotas for equal numbers of male and female facilitators);
- selection of language;
- who the programme is aimed at;
- monitoring and evaluation;
- organisation of the circles; and,
- composition of the circles.

In order to strengthen the gender focus in REFLECT, on-going training on gender issues for all levels of participation in REFLECT is required. Whilst women-only circles may be important in many cultural contexts, they should be matched by parallel men's circles which address the same range of gender issues. In mixed circles it is necessary to guarantee that women can participate equally with men; to talk, express themselves, defend their opinions, and identify their priorities.

There are different strategies for empowering women. One of these is the opportunity for women to meet in circles, to talk and to gain a collective strength. The circle can also be a space for women and men to analyse these inequalities and how they affect them in different ways and what changes can be negotiated. Above all it is essential to focus on the private sphere, not just the public one. Debate in the public sphere can be moved into the private arena. For example, if we speak about democracy, we should also focus on democracy in the relations between women and men or gender democracy in general.

REFLECT, with its highly participatory focus, proposes that participants start by recognising the knowledge and capabilities that people already have. However, in our patriarchal societies, women's and men's knowledge and capabilities are valued differently and unequally. Working with REFLECT, therefore, involves a revival and revalorization of women's knowledge, experience and words. Working with REFLECT could allow new priorities to be established in the development agenda of a community. There exists a tendency to consider the masculine as the norm. Therefore, it is important to reiterate that the needs, interests and order of priorities could and should be different. The topics addressed in the circles and the resulting actions should revolve around interests and needs in both the public and private sphere.

• How to strengthen gender in PRA exercises

This section highlights some ways in which a gender perspective can be promoted in the PRA exercises in REFLECT.

Local proverbs and songs about men and women can be collected for discussion of gender roles.

Land Tenancy Map

What is the gender dimension of land rights? What are the existing laws and customs?

Market Prices Calendar

Who controls the income gained from selling crops? Women or men etc.? Why? What are the implications of this?

Flow Diagram on Deforestation

Explore gendered relations and how this impacts on the environment and deforestation. Who decides which trees to plant? Do poorer women and families depend more on the forest for fuel? Do women plant trees for food and fodder? Do men plant trees for cash? Is this a reflection of gender roles? What is the impact on girls' schooling?

Community Organisations and Evaluation Matrix

Are there equal numbers of women and men in community organisations? What are their positions within the organisation? What discourse is used and what are the implications of this? Is it a male discourse? How are the meetings conducted? What are the times of the meetings? Does this exclude people? Who sets the priorities in the organisation?

Chapati Diagram of Informal Social Structure

Look at the gender dimension of power. Are women more powerful in the home? Are men more powerful in the public sphere? What are the differences amongst men and women?

Well-being Ranking

The focus should be on individuals not households. Intra-household inequalities should be explored. What are the differences amongst women, for example land owning women may be better off than landless women but still may suffer as women? The issue of domestic violence could also be discussed.

Social/Cultural Calendar

What are the positive and negative aspects of these cultures? What are the gender, class, race and religious perspectives? Who represents the 'culture' to the wider society?

Table of Human Rights Violations

Are there different violations for women and men? To what extent is police / army brutality gendered? Is rape used systematically as a form of torture for women? What are the connections between the military's violence towards women and the generalised gender violence in the wider society? Rape should be a category on a human rights violations matrix.

Box 1 shows an example of how Grupo Venancia (a grassroots women's organisation, based in Matagalpa, Nicaragua) has promoted a gender perspective in one of its REFLECT units. Grupo Venancia is currently in the process of developing more participatory methods to use in REFLECT in order to work with subjectivity and the private sphere in general, particularly the intangible notion of self-esteem and confidence. Sexuality is a key issue with regards to empowerment and a subject which has often been avoided in the more community focused use of PRA. Grupo Venancia has considerable experience dealing with this issue, which we hope will also be useful in our REFLECT programme. Obviously the subject of sexuality needs to be dealt with carefully as it is a sensitive topic. In June this year, Grupo Venancia is co-organising an international workshop with CIAZO in El Salvador and ActionAid UK on Gender and REFLECT. The workshop will focus on strengthening the gender dimension in REFLECT. A series of discussion papers will be published after the workshop outlining strategies and key issues emerging from the workshop. It is hoped that specific participatory methods will be developed in the workshop with a particular focus on the private sphere and subjectivity.

BOX 1
AN EXAMPLE FROM GRUPO VENANCIA

We have been developing PRA exercises with a strong gender focus to use in our REFLECT programme. One example of this is the 'Wheel of Relationships' unit, which analyses the relationships with various people. It focuses on issues such as - From whom do we receive support, love, companionship, understanding etc.? From whom do we receive criticism, abuse, no love etc.? Initially the current situation is looked at and then how people would like it to be. We could imagine how our lives would be if those people with whom we have the most conflict were more distant in our lives. Also, we explore what it would be like if the positive influences were closer to us. Each person then examines how this could be achieved. As it is sometimes difficult to identify negative relationships, we have found that it is more constructive to focus initially on what you like or dislike about each person and then what you would like to change about that person. The next stage can be to list the pressures that people place on you, e.g. people who criticise you, people who ignore you, who make you feel guilty etc. After this individual analysis there can be a wider group analysis to identify commonalities and differences and the implications of these.

action, this could mean a change in attitude or awareness, something intangible and difficult to evaluate, but which is often just as important as concrete 'community' actions. A gender analysis helps us to understand the nature of gendered processes at different levels, women and men as inter-related gendered agents. Only by analysing and understanding the complex reality of gender oppression and its relationship to other types of oppression can action be taken to transform it.

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• **Conclusion**

A gender approach in REFLECT is not just about making women equal to men but transforming the whole structure of society and social relations. It is missing the point to look for equality on men's terms. It is important not to have the idea of a fixed binary structure of oppressors and oppressed but rather to gain an understanding of the complex web of relations of domination. Clearly, women and men have multiple identities and interests, occupying different lives and gendered worlds. As a result, a gender analysis resists both rigidity and formulas; it is constantly evolving and is itself shaped by contexts, just like REFLECT.

A gender approach in REFLECT offers the possibility of bringing about change on the individual and collective level. Individual transformation is equally important to collective transformation, particularly with regards to gender. *Concientizacion* implies action to transform the oppressive reality, but this is no easy task. With relation to gender