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Participation of Women in  
Grassroots Development  
Interventions:

Reflections on the experiences of  
development projects in Sudan

Nawal El Gack



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Participation of women in grassroots development interventions: reflections on the experiences of development projects in Sudan

Nawal El-Gack

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Institute of Development Studies  
School of People, Environment and Planning  
Massey University  
Private Bag 11 222  
Palmerston North  
New Zealand  
[[www.dev.massey.ac.nz](http://www.dev.massey.ac.nz)]

## Abstract

This paper is based on an empirical study, conducted in 2005/06. It provides reflections on gender and development approaches employed in development projects in Sudan and identifies the challenges that development providers need to address when they plan for future interventions. It argues that addressing gender issues requires an in depth understanding of local values, and women's needs and interests.

*Keywords: gender, participation, community, development, organisations, projects, values, Sudan.*

## Biographical Note

Nawal completed her PhD in Development Studies at Massey University in 2007. Her thesis examined the experiences of participatory development projects in Sudan. She is currently lecturing in Development Studies at Massey University (as well as running the IDS Seminar Series).

Nawal El-Gack [N.El-Gack@massey.ac.nz]



## Gender Issues: historical profile

Within the field of development studies there has been a continuous critique and debate about some groups who have been excluded because of gender, ethnicity, class or religion (Kothari and Minogue 2002). Specifically, the mainstream development approaches have been accused of neglecting women and gender relations, as women's work has been considered invisible and under evaluated (Cornwall 2003). According to Brohman (1996:278), during the first two post-war decades women were ignored by development theory and practice. Women's needs and interests have also been ignored by macro-economic programmes, despite the fact that the majority of 'Third World' women were involved in productive activities (Brohman 1996; Snyder and Tadesse 1997). This could be related to the influence of feminist theory which focuses on analysing gender inequality and aims to promote women's rights and interests. However, since the 1970s, the gender dimension of development activities has gained a lot of attention and focus from development agencies.

Koczberski (1998) traces the efforts of large aid agencies in integrating women into their development plans and national economies of their countries. According to Koczberski (1998:396), the idea of integrating 'Third World' women into development plans emerged in the early 1970s when development practitioners and researchers in the United States of America began to push for their representation in development programmes. Since then various initiatives have been undertaken by development agencies and national governments to establish 'Women in Development' (WID) units and hire gender experts. These actions have created recognition of women's roles and encouraged more debate on their involvement. The WID framework emphasises women's access to education and employment, which requires reforming legal measures and changing attitudes to integrate women into the modernisation process (Brohman 1996:283-4). Further, efficiency joined equity to frame the WID approach. According to Koczberski (1998:400) the efficiency argument was based on an understanding that women were not contributing to development and therefore WID efficiency policies of the 1980s focused on encouraging women to work harder in development initiatives.

Within the WID framework there is also a focus on anti-poverty programmes. The anti-poverty approaches emphasised meeting women's practical needs without threatening social change (Moser 1989). Accordingly, the integration of 'Third World' women into development processes, through the WID approach, was viewed by the radical feminist perspective as a way of increasing exploitation rather than liberation (Kabeer 1994). This perspective emphasises gender division of labour and devaluation of women's work and insisted on distribution of power between men and women. This framework claimed that 'Third World' women were disadvantaged because of gender divisions (Boserup 1970) and as a result of these criticisms of WID, the Women and Development approach (WAD) emerged, which was based on Marxist and dependency frameworks. It focused on women's relationships with development and sought clarification for why women were excluded. This view encouraged the revision and adjustment of the WID approach and hence Gender and Development (GAD) emerged in the 1980s. The use of the word 'gender' instead of 'women' directed the attention to social relationships between men and women. GAD addressed power relations (Young 1997:51) and viewed women as agents of change. GAD specialists argue that women need sufficient economic and social bargaining power in order to exercise their choices (Jolly 2000:49). According to Young (1997:53) the GAD approach, especially in the Third World, supports the dual role of

the state as employer of labour and allocator of social capital. In this regard, Young points out that there is a need for state support as most women in the Third World have minimal political power.

In summary, the WID approach focuses on women's disadvantages in a male-dominated society while GAD emphasises power relations between women and men. Nevertheless, the different approaches for integrating women in development have offered different ways for viewing and practicing development. These approaches focus on 'Third World' women, but their problems and needs were identified by women in development experts and consequently their influence over development process was restricted (Koczberski 1998:395). Koczberski (1998:406) asserts that the problems of the mainstream development practice, misrepresentation and generalisation, the use of rigid project frameworks, and limited space allowed for 'Third World' people to define and control their own lives, have remained in both the WID and GAD approaches. Koczberski (1998:396) critiques the approaches for integrating women into development as a way of incorporating them into existing development practice under orthodox notions of development.

Moreover, within the participatory development approaches the formation of separate organisations for men and women or having both in the same organisations is still under debate. Uphoff (1991) asserts that separate organisations for women would enhance solidarity and outcomes. Cornwall (2003) argues that although it might be necessary to open up space for women's voices by installing them in the existing committees, this may not be enough if female participants are not concerned about other women or their perceptions and concerns are not valued by male members.

By reviewing the theoretical perspectives and approaches regarding gender in development, we can understand why national governments and international organisations continuously address and assert their willingness to incorporate gender and development approaches into practice. The question should have been asked 'are women willing to hold on to those opportunities?' And 'how do men feel about that?' Does the new space create any change in people's understanding and standard of living? If so is it sustainable? Answering these questions could help understanding women's perceptions and their interaction with externally promoted ideas and funded development projects. It could also help in identifying factors that might influence their participation in development projects.

### *The Sudanese Government's efforts to integrate women into development processes*

The Government of Sudan adopted a ten year Comprehensive Development Strategy (CDS) from 1992 to 2002 (Government of Sudan 1992). The strategy was committed to ensuring growth with self-reliance and food security, combating poverty, reducing distributional inequality, improving social services and increasing people's choices towards a better quality of life. The CDS emphasised a fair distribution and provision of resources and opportunities for both men and women. It identified women's needs in a special section. It called for bridging the gap for women by allocating 15% of the development budget to specific women's programmes and a 25% quota system to ensure women's participation in parliamentary political life (Kuku and Jamal 2002:232). However, in 2002 the percentage of women in parliament and in social and popular committees were only 10%, 5% in the state councils of the Northern states, 11% in Khartoum state and 8% in the assemblies of the Southern States

(Kuku and Jamal 2002:232-3). At the national level, the government implemented new rules regarding property rights. The law even favours women over men in case of divorce, as land is put under a woman's name and in joint title to land if she is married. In general there has been an effort to integrate women in development processes as specific women's development directorates were established in some ministries.

All development projects in Sudan, particularly in the 1980s, adopted the Women in Development approach (WID) (GCRT 2003:6). Women's programmes were implemented as a component of development projects, which were basically focused on utilising women as a human resource and aimed to provide them with basic needs as mothers and housewives. According to the Gender Centre for Research and Training/ Khartoum/ Sudan (GCRT 2003:8) WID was criticised for not addressing women's situations within the society as influential citizens. Therefore in the 1990s the Sudanese government, through its comprehensive development strategy and its associated development projects, began to adopt the concept of Gender and Development (GAD), which aimed at tackling and challenging customs and traditions that impede both men's and women's development.

In this regard, the participants, who shared their perceptions with the author of this article, have challenged some of these perspectives. At the national level, research participants indicated that opening new spaces for women and/or challenging male domination are no longer an issue or a problem in the urban areas. However, it was evident from some participants' responses that there is concern about the actions, inputs and performance of women who hold key posts in the government and other influential institutions, agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which are concerned about women's issues.

The following responses represented a common view recorded during interviews and focus group discussions at the national level. A former UN employee and a businesswoman argued:

We in the Sudan, particularly in the cities, did not experience any oppression or exclusion because of being women. Unfortunately, our local women NGOs followed the foreigners' organisations in repeating the same scenario about women's exclusion and suppression, just because they wanted to get support from international donors. However, I own and manage factories and enterprises, supervise male technicians and workers, travelled abroad to arrange for purchasing some material, and never face any problem. Women have not enough confidence to develop themselves. These resources, which were wasted in arguing over gender issues, if directed to development, could lift African's women from their misery (*Focus group discussion, Khartou*).

A female academic at El-Azhari University, who had previous working experience in rural areas, explained:

Most of those women who hold senior political and administrative posts have failed to present good models. They are either arrogant or aggressive and never care about women's issues. Rural women are suffering because of illiteracy and lack of services. If that changed they would enjoy the same



opportunities like urban dwellers (*Focus group discussion, Khartoum*).

These responses raised important issues: it questioned the development providers' (government, donors, international organisations and NGOs) accountability and contributions. Moreover, it raised a concern about the impact of women's education and the role and contribution of educated women at national level.

To have better understanding of these issues this paper looks at the experiences of the White Nile Agricultural Services project and North Kordofan Rural Development project situated in the central and western regions of Sudan. The most important development players in these projects were the local community organisations and the project primary participants who expressed their willingness to share their experiences.

## The Experiences of the White Nile Agricultural Services Project

The project was implemented by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Government of Sudan during the period 1996-2001. The White Nile Project was located within the irrigated area of the White Nile State and covered 24 schemes. The schemes in the White Nile State were normally small in size, accommodating between 300-900 families. Each scheme was formed of a village surrounded by agricultural land and the total number of farmers in each scheme ranged from 60-950. Men and women work together on farming operations, such as planting, weeding and harvesting. Women might also engage in trade. Similar to many other traditional African societies in Sudan, women's work was valued and viewed in a non-competitive division of labour (Snyder and Tadesse 1997:76). Working and earnings from rural activities are limited to time of farming and harvesting of agricultural crops. Employment opportunities do not exist for young men or those who have families to support. However, women are not expected to find jobs outside the schemes or provide money for families to survive as this is considered a man's responsibility, whether he is a husband, father, brother or close relative. The schemes of the White Nile State are an example of rural-out migration. After the harvest all of the men leave the villages, except a few who are elders and those who have rural businesses, such as traders.

In general, this area was characterised by high illiteracy (more than 76% (IFAD 2002: 10)) and also suffers from lack of physical infrastructure, poor roads, weak markets and poor social services. In order to improve this situation the White Nile project intended to facilitate the transition of smallholder irrigation operations into viable farmer-controlled institutions, in which farmers are responsible for their own technical, financial and managerial decisions. This strategy was meant to create independent tenants, who could act as entrepreneurs (IFAD 2002: 4). The objectives of the project as well as its strategies were based on empowering farmers' institutions. It was assumed that these institutions would involve both men and women. Within this frame, farmers' associations, such as Farmers' Unions and Production Councils, were expected to provide and support the public services in their villages, such as schools, health service and youth clubs.

## *Participation of women in community organisations*

In general all women in the White Nile schemes are fulltime homemakers. However, in each scheme there are some girls who go to school in the cities and some women who graduated from universities and work as teachers or government employees in the large cities. Despite this situation gender division of labour is very much in evidence within these communities. This form of division could be observed when grassroots organisations are formed. Due to the existence of irrigated schemes in this area, there are semi-formal organisations, such as Farmers' Unions, the Production Councils, Village Popular Committees and Cooperatives, which have resources and links with state and financial institutions. In addition to that people in the White Nile State formed different services-oriented grassroots associations, some of which are managed by men and provide services to the community through managing education and religious affairs, while others are managed by women such as social groups and women's *Sandug* (revolving fund). These grassroots associations are much more localised and work on their own. Mostly, they do not have any links with the regional and national civil society organisations or any relationships with government institutions.

Women's groups exist in the scheme and are concerned with different issues such as savings, group weddings and fund raising for the schools and mosques. Women operate the *Sandug*, a well known rural institution for interest free saving. This kind of saving is created and managed by women all over rural Sudan. Through the *Sandug*, women form a group and choose one of them as a leader, called a treasurer or the head of the *Sandug*, who makes proposals of how much everyone should pay per week or fortnight or every month for those employed in formal sector. The leader ensures the *Sandug* maintains and achieves its goals. She also collects the money and gives it to one person at the time of collection. The members agree among themselves on who would be the first and who would be the last. Always there is consideration for each other's circumstances. The ideology behind the *Sandug* is to have access to a lump sum of money that can be used for something useful. This practice had formed a basis for applying a microfinance system that was introduced by development projects and locally was given the same name.

In this area women are not involved in education and religious associations or committees, which are considered by outsiders as influential organisations. Therefore the designers of semi-formal organisations (Farmers' Unions, Village Popular Committee and Cooperatives) intended to guarantee the representation of women. The government designed the constitutions of the Popular Committees and the Farmers' Unions, while for the Cooperatives they were prepared by the White Nile project and the State Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Resources and Irrigation. The designers of these constitutions were fully aware that men, especially in rural areas, might not voluntarily open space for women to participate. Hence the constitutions of all semi-formal organisations, such as Village Popular Committees, Farmers' Unions and Cooperatives, insisted that women should be at least represented by two members. Therefore when the White Nile project started it was decided to rely on these semi-formal organisations. However, in some communities, especially those of one tribal identity, women do not mix with men in public meetings; their selection for these semi-formal organisations was just a formality and a matter of applying rules. Female members in many schemes revealed that they heard about their selection for the Cooperatives but were not invited to attend meetings or informed about the cooperatives' role. They also confirmed that even if they had been informed and

asked to attend they would not have done so, because it is not socially accepted. A female social worker, who was selected as a cooperative member explained:

I have been selected as a member in the cooperative but I never attended any meeting. No one asked me to come; even if they asked me to come I will not do that. I am a social worker, work in the city and mix with men but the situation in the village is different. Mixing with men during meetings does not look right. The *Umda* (village leader) and others do what they want to do, no one can dare to ask them or criticise them (*Focus group discussion, Wad-Ashaana* ).

The names of two women were always mentioned in the records of these organisations, but in reality no women were involved in decision-making or in implementation of any related activities. This has been attributed to social traditions and customs that view the existence of women and men in the same committees as unacceptable and/or of no value if 'men can do the job'. A village leader in *Wad-Ashaana* confirmed that:

We have elementary and secondary schools, most women are literate; many of them are university graduates, working as teachers in the village or in the nearby cities. However, they do not attend the public meetings nor are they involved in these organisations. We record their names according to the law but we do not ask them to come because they do not need to come, the men can do the work (*Semi-structured interview*).

However, for people themselves, gender differentiation is not concerned with the exclusion of women or men. It is about concepts and understandings, especially when there are different social organisations, practices and customary law. Based on long working experience as a development worker in Sudan, Osman (2002:24) asserts that development organisations should not be surprised if they face resistance to such interventions, especially in communities with strict gendered codes of behaviour. Reflecting on Oxfam's experiences in Sudan, Osman (2002:23) asserts that the main challenge facing development organisations is that gender-sensitive poverty eradication policies and strategies are context-specific.

During the White Nile project's time, women's participation in public activities and semi-formal organisations was slightly different in heterogeneous communities where many tribes live together in one scheme. In this case local organisations were formed by a fractional electoral system, through quota, meaning that each tribe was represented according to its size. The existence of heterogeneous groups in this scheme impacted on people's interaction and negotiations with the project. Some women, especially the educated ones, participated in the assemblies and committees as effective and influential members. Involvement of women in decisions about community affairs, especially in heterogeneous communities, seemed to be an outcome of internal conflicts. It was a tool for accessing the project resources and having a bigger share in local organisations. In other words, involvement of women in the local organisations supported by the project (cooperatives, farmers' unions) did not indicate that women in heterogeneous communities were in a better condition or more empowered in comparison to homogenous ones.

## Introducing a community development component

When it became clear that women were not truly involved in semi-formal organisations, and in response to this situation, the White Nile project introduced what is called a 'community development programme'. It hired female staff, established women's groups and provided them with some financial and technical support.

At the beginning the project provided women with loans through the Agricultural Bank of Sudan and the Farmer's Commercial Bank. These loans were aimed at generating income through activities such as dairy cows, poultry, carts, goat rearing and food processing. This component also included nutrition, food processing and literacy classes. The project used women's groups and two women agents in each scheme as voluntary facilitators.

The women agents received more training in order to work as facilitators and maintain the sustainability of the programme. The project targeted women within the age range of 15-45 years old. The project records showed that 44 women's training centres were established (IFAD 2002:22), and various activities, especially training and lending, were implemented. Hundreds of women participated in these activities. The project provided the schemes with trainers, ingredients, and food processing and kitchen equipment to conduct the women's training programmes. The participants in this study indicated that they had enjoyed and benefited from new information and the social interaction. They also revealed that after the project stopped all equipment was distributed among the members of local organisations.

The community development programme was conducted in community centres that were established to carry out the intended activities. In *Wad-Ashaana* (homogeneous community), an old government building was used as a women's centre while in *Um-Ahani* (heterogeneous community) a donated house was used for that purpose. However, by the time of this study the women's centres no longer operated. After the project stopped women ceased participating in local organisations. If these women's groups had been sustained and the women initiated their own programme it could have been said that there was a real change within the community and women were truly empowered. However, this did not occur. Clearly, the development agency brought women to the project but it cannot be claimed that this outcome will open a space for women within the existing organisations or contribute to transformation of the social relations of gender at the community level.

## North Kordofan Rural Development Project (NKRDP)

The rural areas of North Kordofan are characterised by widespread poverty, little or no adequate basic human needs and support infrastructure, high dependence on subsistence agriculture and lack of job opportunities. Most villages in the area suffer from shortage of water, limited or poor education and health services, and lack of markets and storage facilities. In order to improve the situation, the NKRDP was implemented by IFAD and the Government of Sudan for the period 2001-08. The project worked in two localities (*Um-Ruwaba* and *Bara*) and targeted 139,000 households. The overall goal of the project was to improve the living standards of targeted communities, assure their food security, and enhance resilience to drought and any natural disasters they may face (IFAD 1999:1). Specific objectives included increasing the capacity of village committees to plan, execute and manage

development projects, establishing support systems to assist communities in promoting communal natural resource management and creating sustainable participatory financial institutions.

Regarding women's involvement, the project employed a gender and development approach. In North Kordofan, women were not involved in what are seen as influential organisations such as the Native administration, *El-Goodeya* council (Conflict Resolution System) and the education committee. However, similar to the situation in the White Nile State, women have their own social organisations.

### *Involving Women in the Village Development Organisations (VDOs)*

The North Kordofan project focused on involving women within the community network and not in isolation. Therefore it insisted on establishing mixed, new Village Development organisations (VDOs) and having female members in its committees. It was observed that when the projects' staff talked about women they used the term 'gender' and implicitly referred to women. This explains why people in the project area used the word 'gender', the English term and not the equivalent Arabic word, when they spoke about women's involvement. Forming new organisations was presented as a condition for providing assistance. The idea of involving women in the same committees with men created tension among many communities, especially at the beginning. Some villages even refused the project interventions for a while before deciding to join again when they heard from other communities about the project's assistance.

According to a senior gender specialist, the first meeting between the North Kordofan project and the villagers in *Dar-Asalam*, was attended by men only. The *Sheikh* (village leader) informed the project staff that men and women would not form a mixed committee. The project management came out with a plan that included a comprehensive awareness programme. Female staff, particularly fieldworkers, were assigned to stay in the villages during these campaigns. After intensive awareness sessions the *Sheikh* and other leaders invited women to attend a general assembly and select two members to join the VDO. Later the two female committee members were given specific tasks; one as a secretary and the other one as credit accountant. The project staff believed that this plan had changed the locals' views about having women in the same committees. Some research participants revealed that people began to accept the idea when they saw respected and educated women travelling from towns, leaving their families or children, and coming to stay for days in the villages. As a result they started to accept the idea of having men and women in one committee.

Despite these efforts and outcomes it appears that this form of participation is not in the best interests of women, nor does it address their concerns. The perceptions below, illustrate how the two development actors, the project staff and the 'beneficiaries' conceptualised this critical issue. The project gender specialists believed that women should not be seen as hidden resources but must be given a chance to present their perceptions and views on the things that concern them. A senior gender specialist described the project ideology and plans when dealing with women's involvement:

We were very tough about having at least two women on each committee, because if we left that as optional, women would never get a chance in these new organisations. Therefore, when

some villages refused these requirements we stopped our activities. After a while and when they found that we were very serious about this, they returned back and accepted the project conditions. Our main purpose was to encourage women to participate in all decisions that affect the community. In fact men have diverse knowledge and experiences, through the interactions in these committees. Women will learn from them and build their capacities (*Semi-structured interview, Bara*).

A female fieldworker in *Bara* locality added:

The project wanted the women to be dependent on themselves through learning and taking loans from the banks. However, we knew that if we asked them to come for literacy classes they would not come; therefore, we introduced something they liked, such as nutrition and food processing. Therefore we mixed what we wanted to do with what they preferred (*Focus group discussions, Dar-Asalam village*).

This understanding has shaped the project's plans and activities for creating changes within the communities. The staff intention to empower women and open space for them within the society was undeniable. This intention was constructed around the project's vision rather than people's own visions. The following statement by a female member of a VDO (established by the project) represented a common perception that was recorded during interviews and discussions:

Having women in the same committee is not bad and not having them is also not a big deal. We can form our own groups and do better, and feel better about it. We are suffering like men who are forced to leave the village and travel away to provide money for their families. Improving the services and reducing the burden on us is most important than focusing on meetings and talking about gender (*Semi-structured interview, Um-Ruwaba*).

In fact, women are not concerned or anxious about participation in the same committees with men. They are satisfied with their own groups and mainly focus on immediate problems of survival rather than these philosophical conceptions around gender issues. However, enforcing certain approaches has led some communities to respond in different ways. The villagers in one of *Um-Ruwaba's* villages learned from others' experiences and decided not to waste time. They informed the Project's Technical Unit that they had prepared the house, which would be a community centre and selected two people from each grassroots organisation to form the VDO's committees. Women representatives were selected and a women's committee was formed. In this village 160 people were registered as members of the VDO, 66% of them were women. The VDO focused on asking what could be provided by the project rather than what they actually needed. A member of the organisation explained:

The project is concerned about gender issues and obviously cannot do what people are asking for. They only do what they came to do. Therefore we encouraged women to attend the meetings, be part of the committee and attend the training courses. Why do we have to waste time talking about

something they cannot do or accept? We need this revolving fund and the training (*Focus group discussion, Um-Ruwaba*).

Having women in the VDOs does not mean that there was a real change in people's perceptions about the composition of community grassroots organisations. Moreover, the formation of the VDOs themselves did not mean that the old organisations were dissolved. Both men and women were not convinced of the project's vision. They maintained their old organisations, such as the education committee, native administration and *El-Goodeya* council. They also continued to conduct their collective activities through traditional practices. A village leader in *Um-Ruwaba* explained how they responded to project ideology:

Having women in the Village Development Organisation is not bad. We know that IFAD wants that. The project staff keep talking about gender, gender. So we understood that they wanted the women and men to work together. It is not a problem, but yesterday I invited the men to participate in the *Nafir* (traditional mobilisation practice). Thirty-four men came and worked for three hours on my farm. I do not want to call the women to help me. We should help them, not ask them to help us. The female farmers did the same; they invited their sisters for *Nafir* (*Focus group discussions, Um-Ruwaba*).

Nevertheless, many research participants confirmed that the establishment of these mixed organisations has created new understandings about women's roles and knowledge. It also influenced peoples (men's and women's) interaction. During a focus group discussion, in *Um-Ruwaba*, a female participant reflected her view:

It was a dream to hear what men say during 'meetings'. Before the project we could not enter the village centre, where men usually meet to discuss serious topics, but after that we were able to enter inside, sit and even talk. Men have more knowledge and ideas than us because they travel and listen to outsiders, but we also have our concerns and we all agree about some important issues. Even if the VDO stopped, things have changed. We have started within our communities and households to talk about different topics and men come and tell us what they say here and there (*Focus group discussions, Um-Ruwaba*).

Despite the variation in extent and quality of women's participation from one village to another, it was observed that women from various categories, old and young, married and single were participating in public meetings and the 'project's committees'. This was confirmed to be a new experience. It started with the project interventions and was encouraged by the existence of female staff. However, village leaders and men treat women who finished secondary school, university or work as teachers in the villages, differently. Educated women discuss and exchange information about the community, make contributions through participating in various events and encourage other women to join development programmes. They also have a say on all internal affairs within the household, such as children's education, home construction and repairs, production and marketing of products.

Although women's participation in the committees has created new insights and helped in creating appreciation for their knowledge, in general, it did not change men's perceptions about gender roles and rights. Involvement of women in the

project committees and activities did not challenge the traditional division of labour at household level. Because of the traditional gender division of labour, especially in rural areas, men find it hard to contribute to housework if women decide to participate in all the project activities. Although all of the male interviewees had no objection to women participating in any outdoor activities, they find it embarrassing to do the 'women's work' at home, guided or taught by women.

## The Literacy Programme

The North Kordofan project introduced an adult literacy programme that aimed to teach the participants literacy and numeracy. It contained some education material about morals, values, family and communities' rights and obligations. This programme was implemented under the supervision of the Directorate of Adult Education. The project provided the teaching materials, motivating the communities and paying incentives for the teachers. The literacy course continued for six months, two hours a day, six days a week. In each village two women were given more training and selected as volunteers to sustain this programme after the first year. The literacy programme cannot be organised during the rainy season because no one will sacrifice his/her farm to attend the course, while organising the course during the off season prevents most men from attending as they will be outside the villages. The attendance rate varied between villages and gender: 95% of those who attended the literacy programme were women (IFAD 2005). Men usually leave the villages after harvesting to seek jobs in the cities. However, many of the men who stayed in the village did not join the literacy programme. Some were busy in their work and some refused to join a class where the teachers were women.

The literacy programme was stopped after the first group graduated. This was due to the fact that the two female literacy teachers, who were offered more training in order to sustain this programme, lacked confidence and explained that people did not trust them and refused to attend their class.

Nevertheless, the experiences of the projects indicated that the presence of female staff had encouraged rural women to participate in various activities while the projects were functioning but it did not address and resolve the main challenges relating to power relations, poverty, traditions and ethnicity (in the White Nile). In general, male out-migration created further hardships on all women in both project sites. Deterioration of the natural environment put more burdens on rural women who had to walk longer distances and spend more time and energy collecting fuel wood, fodder and water. Due to these circumstances women focused on their daily needs. It appears that the women's problems and concerns are about access to the means of development. The poor services in rural areas have a negative impact on the livelihoods of rural women. Women are left behind to manage the scarce resources and to deal directly with difficulties. Lack of employment opportunities in villages has forced almost all young males to migrate outside the villages to the nearby cities and the national capital, especially during the dry season (January-June). Many younger men remained vulnerable because of limited opportunities and unemployment, and the focus of projects on women despite their concern and emphasis on gender issues may be inappropriate. Cornwall (2003) points out that the voices of marginalised men, their gender issues and concerns, were absent from the participatory development process.

With these circumstances participation at community level might not be an issue, therefore when development projects employed Women in Development (WID) or Gender and Development (GAD), women's responses and interactions were



influenced by their concerns and interests rather than what kind of approaches were employed.

## Conclusion

The literature emphasises women's strategic interests, such as political representation, participation in decision-making processes and access to opportunities as there is a claim that these interests are ignored by mainstream development interventions (Cornwall 2003). Accordingly, special focus on gender issues is perceived to be very important when dealing with participatory development.

As a result of this, international development organisations, as part of their efforts, seriously addressed gender issues and placed women in the centre of their development process. Women were offered opportunities to have a say and present their ideas on community affairs, and participate in planning and managing some activities. However, this paper argues that the experiences with Women in Development and Gender and Development approaches as well as enforcing the formation of mixed organisations have proved that legislation alone would not create change, especially if it challenges some cultural norms. Women's programmes, especially the externally designed ones, might face resistance or hesitation even from women themselves who are influenced and/or restricted by dominant traditions. Moreover, local women's responses and interactions with development projects might be influenced by their concerns and interests rather than what kind of approaches were employed.

Development planners need to have clear ideas about women's identities, interests and resources, and the capabilities and constraints that they might face in order to create effective development initiatives (Brohman 1996; Cornwall 2003). It is important to understand the origin of prevailing values and traditions, and the logic or justification for adhering to them. Developing the means and tools to address these complicated social issues requires a greater knowledge of communities' ideologies and beliefs as well as the ability to develop diplomatic ways to handle them. Therefore, there is a need for a practical framework that adopts suitable features of many approaches by taking into account people's values, needs, interests as well as challenges and constraints.

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El-Gack, Nawal

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