

# Women in development

by Zena Kamocki

**"Women perform two-thirds of all the world's work, and produce half of the world's food, yet receive 10 percent of the world's income, and one percent of the world's property," according to the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).**

Until recently, however, women's role in production has been highly underrated, particularly in developing nations. Many development projects have been planned and implemented almost entirely by men and for men; and consequently, such programs have yielded very disappointing results. According to Monique Landry, Canada's Minister for External Relations, "any effort that overlooks half the people involved is obviously in big trouble." Fortunately, many development organizations like CIDA, as well as independent volunteers, are beginning to realize that the full participation of women in development planning is necessary if such projects are to be successful.

Diane Spearman is the Director of the Food Aid Centre of CIDA. She has worked in the field of development assistance, mainly in Africa, since 1967. Anne McGillvery is a graduate student in Fine Arts at York University. She has lived periodically in Costa Rica for several years, and has worked independently with various women's co-op programmes in that country. *Excalibur's* Zena Kamocki spoke with both women recently about the problems facing women in development.

## Spearman



**Spearman: "In Africa, about 30% of the families are headed by women. So, if you think about the health, nutrition, well-being, and prospects of those families, it is directly related to the income earning capacity of the woman."**

**EXCALIBUR:** What are the major differences in feminist attitudes between women in the Western nations and in the developing nations (basic cultural differences aside)?

**SPEARMAN:** I guess I should start off by saying I don't come at this whole issue of women in development necessarily from the basis of feminism; I think as development professionals, all of us (men or women) come to the issue of women in development not primarily as a feminist issue, or an equality issue, or a cultural issue, though obviously it is all of those things. For us, the starting point is effectiveness; it's taken a lot of years, but we have eventually and belatedly come to the realization that social and economic change and development does impact on women; it impacts on them differently than men.

Certainly in recent years there has been a very much heightened realization of the economic role of women, of what they contribute, of how much more they could contribute if we only gave them half a chance, and the fact that maybe the reason a lot of things haven't worked as well as we would like is because we didn't think about women.

**EXCALIBUR:** One of CIDA's brochures states that women perform two thirds of all the world's work, produce half the world's food, yet receive only 10% of the world's income and 1% of the world's property. Is that for the world in general, or just Africa?

**SPEARMAN:** That's a general statistic. If you take food as the example—and that's a very central issue for women in development—if you consider Africa, the figure is much higher; between 75-80% of the food in Africa is produced by women. And, as you probably know, Africa is facing enormous food problems right now. As a development professional, I have to ask myself this question: if we had been more conscious of the importance of women as farmers these last 20-30 years, would the situation have been better? I suspect that the answer is, in part at least, yes, it would be.

Not that there's one easy explanation for everything. In Africa, farmers are women. But it's been very recently that planners realize that. Development projects for years and years have been planned by men for men. And women were making the invisible contribution; it didn't show up in the GNP; it didn't have a lot of technology attached to it; it was the so-called "subsistence traditional" sector not of the "modern cash" sector, and they didn't get noticed until much later than they should have been.

**EXCALIBUR:** What is women's role in development, specifically with respect to their actual contribution?

**SPEARMAN:** I've already partly talked about the role in agriculture and I think that's an essential one. Another important point, I think, is that in Africa, about 30% of households are headed by women. So, if you think about the health, nutrition, well-being, and prospects of that family, it is directly related to the income-earning capacity of the woman.

A daily schedule of a typical woman in developing countries usually adds up to about 16 hours of work. So at the same time that the woman has the major responsibility for the food crops—keep in mind the men may be producing cocoa, or cotton, or other cash crops—she has to go farther and farther every year to get water—and that leaves aside the question of whether the water's clean; farther and farther to get fuel; look after the children; so the whole question of saving time for that

woman in those tasks may be an important element of improving her productivity.

**EXCALIBUR:** How important is technology in improving women's productivity?

**SPEARMAN:** The issue of technology actually is an important one, in that it can have lots of different effects on women; if you want to know how the introduction of a specific piece of technology is likely to affect women, you have to know the situation very well. For example, in a lot of countries, people are starting to introduce small mechanical ways of hulling and husking (various grains). Depending on the situation, that might simply put a lot of women out of work; in the case of Bangladesh, many very poor landless women earn their living by doing that for others. In other situations, it might save the women an enormous amount of time, and therefore, free them up for other activities. In another circumstance it might mean now that there's fifty new technologies, the men take over that technology, and the income that technology represents. In other cases, maybe you have a technology, like a plow, for example, where it helps the man but it makes more work for the women. So when you look at the whole question of technology, it has a lot of dimensions.

**EXCALIBUR:** Is there a lot of conflict between the West and the developing nations, caused by a lack of cultural understanding, or the West pushing technology on the people?

**SPEARMAN:** No, I don't think there's a conflict. There is an increasing recognition virtually everywhere that women have an important role, and that they need more specific attention. There's certainly no conflict between a Third World country and a donor organization like CIDA about the importance of considering women.

All development involvement has a cultural and a social aspect. It is important to be sensitive and respectful of the cultural context in which one is dealing; if you want to be successful, you have to think of those things. I don't regard, and obviously governments of developing countries don't regard an interest in women in development as being inconsistent with

their culture, because they will handle it in whatever way is consistent with their culture. It used to be that men would say, well all this interest in women in development is a bunch of bra-burning women's libbers inflicting Western ideas on the Third World. Well, that's simply wrong. First of all, everyone knows that it's not a question of us telling them what to do; it's a question of being willing to listen to their women articulating their needs.

And secondly, it's not a question of ideology; it's a question of practicality. If you want to increase agricultural productivity, and most of your farmer are women, it's pretty stupid to ignore women, isn't it? It's just really common sense . . .

**EXCALIBUR:** When did this awareness actually begin?

**SPEARMAN:** It's been a real evolution. A million years ago when I started in this business, we noticed when we went into a classroom in Africa that most of the students were boys, not girls. There were programmes for women, but they were scattered, and they weren't very central to things. I think in the decade from 1975-85—the United Nations decade for women—we saw a real turning around. It was a decade that brought a lot of information about the role of women which surprised people enormously, in that it didn't show up in the GNP figures. People really didn't know how important women's role was. It was a whole decade of information gathering; of advocacy; of pilot projects, while we all learned a lot. I think we're now at the stage of being ready; it's a matter of gearing up and integrating our knowledge completely in development planning. We're already seeing some results, but I think we're going to see a lot more.

**EXCALIBUR:** What is CIDA's role in this, and what types of programmes do they put together?

**SPEARMAN:** I think our role is partly being aware, being interested, being willing to talk to recipient governments, and make it clear that we like the idea of responding to women's needs as well as to men; making it clear that when we support a training programme, we make sure that women are going to have access to it and be able to benefit from it.

Frankly, one of the roles that we've taken very strongly is pushing this very hard at the United Nations to encourage other development agencies to take this very seriously . . . I think among the donor agencies, CIDA was one of the ones that was pushing it first and hardest, and we're rather pleased at how well it's been accepted in CIDA and elsewhere. It hasn't hurt that the president of CIDA is a woman, and the minister responsible for CIDA is a woman, that her predecessor was a woman. That gave us a boost at the beginning. But now, it's regarded within CIDA that women in development isn't a job for women, it's a job for everybody.

In terms of our own programmes, I'd put them under two broad headings. Part of it is a matter of having special projects for women, a sort of 'catch-up' training for women. The rest of it is not a matter of saying to yourself, 'I'm going to do a project for women, or a project for men, but rather saying, we want to achieve a certain objective; how do we do that?'

**EXCALIBUR:** What specific gains have been made since you started?

**SPEARMAN:** Of course this depends a bit on the time perspective. Certainly there have been enormous gains made in literacy, among everybody, including women. In many countries, there have been some legal changes with respect to women's rights to own land, and so on. I think, for me, one of the bright spots is the enormously good results one can get from making credit available to women, sometimes for agricultural work, sometimes for small businesses. Invariably, across the board, the repayment rate for women is almost 100%, far better than for men. There's no doubt that women use this credit very wisely and very well. It gives them access to all sorts of things, whether it's poultry raising in Bangladesh, or small business in Jamaica.

One of the other things is related to the question of literacy. Some of the researchers have found that a few years of schooling for a girl has an enormous payoff as an adult . . . in terms of child health, family planning, nutrition, and so on.

**EXCALIBUR:** What's going to happen in the future? Do you see an enormous success, a change in the way things are done?

**SPEARMAN:** Well, I think we'll see some success that we wouldn't have had if we'd gone about things in the old way. We're already seeing some pay-offs, but I think we'll see more in the future as this whole question of women's involvement becomes more and more just an integral, automatic part of everyone's planning.

## McGillvery

**EXCALIBUR:** Maybe you could begin by explaining a bit about your work in Costa Rica with women's cooperatives.

**McGILLVERY:** I went down to Costa Rica about five or six years ago, more or less on my own. I had gone to school in Mexico, and then I went to Costa Rica to live, and I got involved with a women's sewing group through some friends who asked me if I would come in and look at the products that they were making. I went in and saw that the various things they were trying to make were not conducive to the craft market at all. They were making acrylic teddy-bears and wondering why they couldn't sell them to Canadian and American and German tourists. So I explained that we like cotton goods, and they should maybe try some things like tropical birds, and things that were much more integrated in the country, or in their life.

They didn't think that would work at first; they thought cotton is a cheap fabric, and that wouldn't sell. But we started producing a lot of kids' overalls, jumpers, and really exotic birds. And they did sell . . .

They were also doing piece-work, sewing Levi jeans together for 75¢ a pair; as well as having to do all the repairs on their machines, and look after their own social security—like medical payments—because they weren't on full-time work. So these crafts substituted for this piece-work.

**EXCALIBUR:** How have things changed for women in Costa Rica in the past few years?

**McGILLVERY:** Economics are making things change. The women are having to leave the home; they can't survive on just the one salary—if the man is working even, and if he is working, they need both salaries to survive. Plus, there are a lot of women-headed households, and single mothers. Most of the women that make these crafts have some kind of sewing background, so if they could put it into a much more economical-gain type of endeavour, it would really prove profitable.

**EXCALIBUR:** Are there quite a few such projects there?

**McGILLVERY:** Costa Rica is a very poor country—even though it's a democracy and it has a lot of good social programmes—way more so than any other country in Central or Latin America—and it just does not have money to put into things like that; so they really depend on foreign investment and foreign aid projects. The group that I'm working with has got Ford Foundation and other funding for their large sewing machines, etc.; but if they don't keep getting funding, then the project keeps sizzling out.

However, the infrastructure of the country is really good. They've got women social workers that work with them and try to form small co-ops in a lot of the villages. Because I've been involved with about four or five co-ops, I'd like to see a forum that would tie them together, so that there'd be a lot more inter-communication between the co-ops, and more unity. They want to know what other co-ops are doing, and they want to be able to participate; some co-ops are really good at one thing, other co-ops are better at another thing. The really industrious people have done things like form their own daycare. Even in rough times with no foreign aid, they've kept the projects going. When they do get money, they become full-fledged, and when they don't, they simmer down and go back to drawback work.

**EXCALIBUR:** Have they met with much opposition from the men?

**McGILLVERY:** Last week, Sophia Montenegro, who is a Nicaraguan feminist, talked here in Toronto, and she explained that it's the changes that are causing most and any of the friction, because the men don't understand really what's happening. In Costa Rica, the old standards that the women should be in the home are still there. If the woman is going out to make money to help run the family, she's still responsible for all of the rest of the household; they try to solve this by having extended families with grandmothers, aunts, and various other people helping out. There are definitely problems because the men often are resentful and don't believe that the women are actually going to sewing groups; they think that they're going out to have a good time, or to meet a lover—there's been a lot of accusations, and a big increase in wife battery.

**EXCALIBUR:** So the men don't necessarily believe that, by allowing women to do these things, they're helping themselves?

**McGILLVERY:** No, I think that's still a really much more middle-class understanding. I think in the lower economic classes it's very difficult for a lot of the men to understand that the women shouldn't be in the home, even though it's purely economic. Because then, of course, they're asked to participate in childcare, and housework.

I think it's improving, but you still keep bumping against the old attitudes all the time; in Nicaragua (there are new) laws that actually say women are equal—even the ERA doesn't have this in the States, where it says in the law that they can't discriminate; but that still doesn't help the resentment and the battering that's starting to happen. In a country where there are actually wife-battering centres being set up, there obviously is a problem with lack of communication.

**EXCALIBUR:** Has there been much concern from the people here that the Western World is moving in and trying to run the show?

**McGILLVERY:** There's a tremendous amount of influence. I think the aspiration of gain and improvement in life is to get to the point where you could actually go to the States, and go to Disneyland. You see all the middle-class younger kids running around with Disneyland t-shirts and little hats, and that's a sign of affluence, because they've made it. There are a great amount of retired Americans there, and a high percentage of tourists are Americans, Canadian and Germans.

There's not a lot of resentment because I don't think that

they realize what's happening. They're a very European-based culture to start with. Europe did what most other countries do to their native population: pushed them onto reserves, farther and farther away, until they've hidden out in the mountains, more or less, and they're not accepted as the background and history of the country; they are just the "Indians." But I think now the Costa Rican government is realizing that this is their past, and their history, and that they should do something about it. There's quite a large movement now towards the indigenous people, and trying to get them integrated into some of the co-ops and some of the crafts, so that they can reproduce their traditional crafts and make a bit of a living at it.

**EXCALIBUR:** Why have some of the co-op projects failed in the past?

**McGILLVERY:** Lack of funding is the biggest reason. I don't think it's lack of internal support, because the University of Costa Rica was supporting a lot of these projects, and the times I applied for my project, I had a really good back-up; a group of social workers from the University, willing to do all of the administration, and to continue it after the project was initially funded and started. Costa Rica is considered to be one of the richest countries with better social programmes; but it's all relative, because if the women there can't get their projects going, then they'll be as poor as in the African nations. If they can't support themselves, they're still going to be dependent upon somebody else, even though they do have water, or a house, so to speak.

I think another problem in women and development is that none of their projects were really taken seriously, and funding agencies tend to have had a bad background of funding, for one thing, and a failure in craft projects that don't keep going once the agencies leave.

**EXCALIBUR:** Have you seen any gains made, or is it too early to say?

**McGILLVERY:** I've seen a lot of really good things happen. In the project that I'm involved with where we're working with the crafts versus piecework, the women now understand that creative work and crafts are much better all around in the long run for them; they can produce things that they like to work on, and it encourages them to keep doing things, whereas the piece-work was just too mind-boggling. And they can also set their prices; they can become entrepreneurs. If the project keeps going, they could even get into exportation. The last time I was there I tried to re-establish tradition, because there are a lot of traditional crafts, whose designs could be incorporated into various other types of crafts, and then it would become like a Costa Rican product, rather than a replica of a Western one . . .

**EXCALIBUR:** What role has literacy played in this? Is the literacy rate low?

**McGILLVERY:** It's very high there. It's incredible. I think it's either the highest or the second highest in Latin America. There's free schooling, and a lot of really good social programmes for the younger people; and so all the children are now being educated, and a lot of the women, too, even though they may not have completed secondary school. I think Costa Rica gets its reputation of being much more affluent, because the middle class women are really into education, and university degrees, and not staying at home; doing it as a career, not necessarily economically, but also for something that they enjoy doing, and realizing that they too can partake.

But what I find so frustrating is that CIDA and other funding agencies tend to put it all into Africa, and I know that the need there is great, but it's relative to what the women's needs are, not how we see it from a Western point of view.

**EXCALIBUR:** Do you see these programmes having any application in Canada, for example, with our native people?

**McGILLVERY:** I've tried it in my own work, definitely. I see all governments and all other people becoming a lot more aware of what has happened to native people and to indigenous rights and ways of life, and I think as we progress, we're seeing that this had been really detrimental.

Most of my art is based out of having lived in Central and Latin America, and people say to me all the time, well, why don't you stay here and work with our native people; and trying to answer that has been a really good exploration for me, because I see myself as one of the "oppressive class": here I am, white middle class, and going into reserves, I would be seen exactly as other social workers: "oh, no, here comes another do-gooder . . ." Whereas, I think when you're more removed from the situation, and can help with another skill—for example I can help in Costa Rica with my organizational skills and my design skills. The women have a lot of their own skills, and when we put the two together, it seems to work really well. They think of it as a gain, and I'm also gaining, so I'm not seen as one of the "enemy."

**EXCALIBUR:** What role has technology played in helping women to gain their independence? Has it been an advantage or disadvantage?

**McGILLVERY:** Oh, it's definitely an advantage for them. Of course, talking in a more affluent type of environment, they are using their sewing machines to full advantage, and without sewing machines, it would be difficult for them to produce a lot of the things that they're doing. Technology has also made the women's lives a lot easier, with things like electricity, and water, and the buildings that they have for the daycare; so economically, if they have to go out and work, those kinds of things are easing their life, definitely.

One detrimental aspect of technology is television. In the villages that I've lived in for about five or six years now in Costa Rica, I don't have a TV, and that's really hard for the local people, women especially, to understand. But you see the women just glued to these televisions evening after evening, and all they're seeing is consumerism. I think this causes more unrest for all of the things that they'll never be able to buy. What also happens is that the family communication that use to happen in storytelling and myth-making and just sitting around talking has gone, as in our society. And so they're all gathered around the TV, communicating with no one, just plugged in.

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A DAY IN THE LIFE	
In rural Bangladesh, a woman's day begins at 5:00 a.m. and ends—maybe—around 8:00 p.m.	
5:00—6:00	Rising, washing and clearing the house and compound, releasing the poultry, collecting eggs
6:00—7:00	Preparing the early morning meal for the paid workers of the family before they go out to the fields
7:00—8:00	Milking, collecting fuel, making dung cakes, tending to kitchen garden, cleaning cowshed and compound, drying straw to burn it
8:00—9:00	Preparing food for the mid-day meal, grinding spices, peeling vegetables
9:00—11:00	Husking rice, winnowing and sifting, preparing rice products
11:00—12:00	Cooking
12:00—13:00	Washing clothes, bathing, fetching water, feeding the animals and the poultry
13:00—14:00	Drying jute and rice, putting other stores out in the sun to dry
14:00—15:00	Feeding her husband and family, then eating herself
15:00—16:00	Making articles such as baskets and quilts for home use or sale
16:00—17:00	Preparing and cooking the evening meal
17:00—18:00	Praying, bringing the children home, shutting up the poultry and animals
18:00—19:00	Eating the evening meal and cleaning up
19:00—20:00	Rest period