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Towards a gender-sensitive model for distance education planning

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Development projects are vehicles for generating change. Since last century, the world has experienced unprecedented economic expansion and more interest in the development with emphasis on the capacity-building and sustainability of projects. As a result there is a considerable increase of technological progress and more intense international competition. A common refrain in many circles is that gender principles are often discussed, but seldom applied.

The term gender itself is a subject of debate. The concept of gender did not become current among feminists until 1970s.Ann Oakley (1972) was first to make a distinction between the sex we are born and the gender we acquire (Jackson & Jones, 1998). Gender is a culturally specific set of characteristics that identifies the social behavior of women and men, and the relationship between them. Gender, therefore, refers not simply to women or men, but to the relationship between them, and the way it is socially constructed and culturally endorsed.

Looking broadly gender, education and development discourses are of considerable importance. Macdonald (1994) mentioned in his book *Gender Planning in Development Agencies*, since the mid- 1980s, there has been a gradual shift in thinking among scholars and developmental professionals about men and women in the development process. Previously, women and development (WAD) or women in development (WID) approaches have focused on the rights, roles and responsibilities especially of women in effort to correct their exclusion from the developmental planning. But integrating gender into the mainstream of development improves the position of women.

Being able to select an appropriate model or framework for change is the key to the development of a gender-inclusive planning framework. In the context of distance education, what is desirable is to look for a relevant model/framework which is more gender-inclusive to plan a sound programme. This would give answer to the question, for example would the proposed framework have the effects intended? "Like any other creative work, planning is often frustrating and time-consuming, but ultimately richly satisfying" (Boothroyd, 1991, p.8).

This gender-specific framework builds-in gender- and women sensitive considerations at each step and uses gender-based analysis as a key element. Harvard's and Moser's framework focus on concepts of gender roles, gender needs and approaches to gender and development planning. But it is important to realize that the power of this framework is limited. We need to be realistic about what can be achieved in the distance education. There is mechanism for analysis but they do not lead automatically to an improved set of conditions. The above mentioned framework is a practical instrument designed to integrate a gender analysis into distance education.

The framework would help a planner to gain insight into gender relations in the program area. It would also help to gain insight into whether institutions involved have the capacity to deal with gender issues in program planning and implementation in distance education. An initial and crucial step of this framework would help to identify different categories of women that would be benefited from the program designed. This highlights women of different class, age groups and marital status.

However, the program does have some scope for anticipating the negative effects. Gender analysis related to activities at the various stages of the development would be effective, however, unless it meets certain requirements.

Firstly a program of activities must be developed gradually. A sound institutional framework needs to be taken care of to allow smooth collaboration between partners. The programs' technical and social components' need to be properly matched. The implementation stage is quite crucial and the planner should keep in mind that effectively involving women in the program would take time. Therefore, collaboration with the partner organization would be effective if it focuses on concrete activities in which each party has a clear role to play. Moreover, a set of gender indicators for distance education must be developed for the program. Those using gender frameworks must not ignore cultural details. The foregoing framework should be viewed as a flexible but not a rigid tool. In that spirit we can learn together, and continue to work collectively in this process essential for the future progress.

References

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