

# **'We are also Human': Identity and Power in Gender Relations**

Michael Drinkwater (CARE International)<sup>1</sup>

Paper submitted to the conference  
'The Winners and Losers from Rights Based Approaches to Development'  
University of Manchester  
21-22 February 2005

## **Introduction: Into the Heart of Gender Inequity**

There are two principal strands of human rights approaches today. Traditional human rights organizations remain concerned chiefly with the relationship between the individual and the state, and the state's ability to protect, prevent abuse and fulfil the human rights of the individual. The rise, however, of rights based approaches in developmental organizations in the last half dozen years has brought a different perspective to human rights. Concerned much more with issues of social injustice and exclusion, developmental organizations use of human rights has been within a context of the perennial question of how to deal more effectively with the endemic social problems of poverty, marginalization and discrimination.

The single most important feature of the latter perspective on a rights based approach to development is that it starts from the premise laid out in Article One of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that we are all equally human. Article One states: 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.' Sadly, it is one of the most remarkable and persistent aspects of human cultures that amongst the diverse peoples in every society today there are substantial numbers who inevitably regard other groups as being less human than they are. Wherever people are regarded as less human, they will be discriminated against. And globally, the largest group of all routinely regarded as less human are women. They are thus the largest category of people who experience throughout their lives a variety of forms of discrimination.

Women's movements, and attempts to promote the empowerment of women, have now been around for many decades. The debates and discourses around feminism and its interface with development interventions are diverse and intricate (see Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead 2004). One of the challenges of all continuing efforts to focus on gender equity issues is to avoid its 'mainstreaming' to a quiet complacency. This has also tended to happen with the use of participatory methodologies – everybody does it, but after early breakthroughs, levels of challenge and change plateau out at new comfort levels that still do not necessarily tackle the underlying nature of power relations.

My argument is that adopting a rights based approach (RBA) to development can further the ability of work seeking to address the more pervasive factors that perpetuate gender inequality. Before the advent of RBAs, practical attempts to empower women often missed this simple, social justice starting point: that until men accept women as equally human, attempts to promote the empowerment of women will necessarily always be limited in the scope and longevity of what they achieve. Gender and development approaches have stressed the importance of having relational approaches to women's empowerment that require the involvement of men as well as women, but one of the consequences of the mainstreaming of gender equity initiatives has been the depoliticisation of the goals in this regard (Goetz 2004).

---

<sup>1</sup> With thanks to Elisa Martinez who commented on the original draft.

In moving forward with approaches that aim to further women's empowerment, questions of how to change social relations, and thus many of the basic systems, values and patterns that structure human societies today, need to be returned to. At the heart of this lies the way in which men perceive themselves and cast their own individual and collective identities. Until men are able to construct their notions of self differently, and change the way they feel capable of achieving status and respect for themselves and their families', women's status as sub-humans will persist. Women also play a role, since as mothers and mothers in law, sisters and aunts and neighbours, they too play a major part in keeping other women stigmatized and discriminated against.

In this paper it is thus argued that a rights based approach is essential to the improvement of the situations of women and their families, especially the kind of RBA being adopted by CARE, that is, a relational approach to rights that sees us all as moral beings who possess equally rights and responsibilities. For women, especially those who experience daily conditions of poverty and vulnerability, to act to improve their own lives and those of their children, requires their ability to advance their status as citizen's who regard themselves, and are regarded by others, as having equal rights to men and other higher status social groups. This requires, in any kind of work that seeks to further the interests of women, a much sharper focus on processes of social and cultural change, and in this context, dealing with the culturally deeply embedded factors that sustain the status of women as less human subjects.

Illustration of this argument will be undertaken through the use of material drawn largely from analytical and programmatic work undertaken on issues of gender equity within CARE International. The experiences referred to are diverse and drawn from a range of African and Asian cultural contexts. In most cases, the learning generated is through reflection on programs designed to intervene in the lives of women, and to some extent the men whose power influences their lives.

For this discussion the specific projects are a backdrop, and the commentary is not one on the efficacy or otherwise of CARE's programs, but of some of the learning that is taking place in the organization as it struggles to come to grips with what an organizational strategic objective of promoting work addressing issues of gender inequity means. In 2004, CARE developed a 'unifying framework' that aims to show the interrelationship of different programmatic approaches the organization has used in its evolution of a 'good programming framework' (McCaston 2004). Like all forms of evolution, this one has been characterized by differently perceived trajectories and understandings. The unifying framework is an effort, valuable in its simplicity, to illuminate the interrelationship between different program frameworks and approaches CARE has used since the mid-1990s – a livelihoods approach, partnership and civil society, a growing emphasis on gender equity, and now a rights based approach, which has also led to an expanding focus on themes like inclusive voice and governance. In its essence the unifying framework states that all CARE's work should be seen as contributing to three outcome areas – changes in human conditions, social position, and the enabling environment – and that it is with respect to these three outcome areas the organization should be assessing the impact of its work. CARE has a wide range of programs, of a sectoral, thematic, and more or less holistic nature, that should all be demonstrating contributions to impacts in these three outcome areas. And in the way they do this, it is also envisaged programs should be addressing the brave notion of a selected core set of underlying causes of poverty, which the organization believes are critical and it is some capability of addressing. Whilst debate remains on the definition of two of these causes, one that has been commonly identified across all analyses of underlying causes undertaken to date in the organization, is that of gender inequality.<sup>2</sup> Thus one intention of the paper is to assist CARE in its diverse forms with its own thinking on what addressing gender inequality as an underlying cause of poverty entails, and in so doing to contribute to broader debates on how gender work can still be edgy enough to make a difference.

---

<sup>2</sup> A second is poor or weak governance, whilst a third most commonly deals with the link between macro and micro economic factors and unequal rights of access to resources and services, and a fourth, broader forms of social exclusion.

## **The notion of equity – and why it matters**

In pondering different ways of starting this paper, it seemed to me the best way to do so was with the three incidents that in particular made me realize that it does make a difference to approach women's empowerment by specifically talking about human rights and its central notion that we are all equally human.

The first of these incidents was during a review of the gender component of, for its time, an effective livelihoods improvement project in south-west Zambia – the Livingstone Food Security Project, which thrived through the latter half of the 1990s (Turner 2000). Critical to the project's impact was its institutional development strategy based on a simple formula of self-formed village management committees (VMCs), and their constituent cell groups, which began to share drought tolerant seed varieties. If seed was the early catalyst for forming the VMCs, when after a few years some 20,000 farmers were organized in VMCs that had established federated area management committees (AMCs), they began to look at a broader agenda to secure agricultural input and output services. The gender component was initiated as a response to a gender analysis that brought out some of the conflicts between men and women. These had emerged in particular in a meeting where men and accused their wives of 'stealing crops', and issues of control over surplus produce and household income had emerged (Sitambuli 1998).

It was established that the social roots of men's control over crop surplus decision making lay in the fact that in this matrilineal but patrilocal context, men's families pay dowry, so the man controls income, whilst children 'belong' to the wife who is then responsible for their health, food, clothing, education and so on. At this stage, with gender being something new in the project as well as the community, the gender officer who had initiated this analysis decided it was best to tackle practical needs first, using this as an entry point to changing attitudes and behaviour. 'Talking about gender in a community was seen as dangerous and provocative'<sup>3</sup>. At this point, the gender officer worked on both staff attitudes – for example, some of the Tonga male staff also did not regard women as people, cancelling a meeting if 'no one turned up', which meant that no men had showed, even if there were women. She also decided, with the support of additional women staff who were recruited, that to change attitudes in the community it was better to look at the issues from a male perspective, and convince them of how they would benefit. Thus a better trained and nourished women would be able to work better and earn more income, which would benefit the whole family.<sup>4</sup>

The gender program activities that followed focused on raising women's incomes, largely through providing them with financial and business literacy training, and then working with the village institutions already established to create the space for women to engage in income generating activities more successfully. One area where women raised their incomes substantially was with respect to beer brewing, where traditionally women 'lost' much of their income through the giving away of free beer for various reasons – to the chief, to their husbands, to those helping fetch water and fuelwood, and for tasting. By controlling this, women were able to increase their profits several times over and this extra income gave them the ability to meet a range of household needs.

In 2002, I participated in an evaluation of this gender component. It had clearly been effective, but our interest was in the extent to which the gender work had influenced social change. There had been change. Those interviewed remarked how much more men and women cooperated together, and even how the petty jealousies of old had been reduced: "It took at least two years for people in the village to be able to mingle, and for a man to be able to sit close to another woman and people not to be thinking that there was something going on between these two' .<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> 'Notes of meeting with former LFSP Gender Officer (Emma Sitambuli)', Caroline Pinder, interview notes for Pinder 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Notes from Drinkwater and Sitambuli interview with Marron Mungara, 21 February 2002.

The changes that had taken place were acknowledged in most of the interviews as due to the improved leadership in the villages, as a result of the formation and training of the VMCs.

But in the gender work there was a crucial limitation, and this was the absence of a discussion on human rights (or dignity) and the premise that men and women are equally human. This was borne out in the interviews that were conducted with some of the main participants in the gender work. One woman, the chairperson of an area management committee (AMC), the federated VMC structure, when asked about her relationship with her undoubtedly, extremely supportive husband remarked: 'This is just a position, so when I go home I need to remember that I am just a wife. I am married, and so I have to respect my husband, so I am very glad that he has allowed me to accept this position.' And when asked in a separate interview about their relative equality, her husband responded: 'I look at my wife as an equal, because she is able to do what she wants to do, and I can do what I want to do. Other men stop their wives from participating in all these development activities. I can even allow her to go and attend a course (in Livingstone) for a week...'<sup>6</sup>

The similarity of a headman and his wife's comments on the subject of feeling equal show how the project may have altered the gender roles of men and women to some extent, but left the underlying factor of women's unequal identity untouched because of their subservient position in local kinship structures:

Mary: My husband commands a lot of respect, so I have to respect that too and support him. No, we are not equal as people, as he is a headman, and is accorded a lot of respect, and I am just a wife and a woman.

Amos: The respect of a headman is seen in the wife. If she does not behave well, I will not be respected. So if she makes mistakes, I have to control her and speak to her. When I married, I married a person, so I understand I need to respect her as a person. And I believe that if there is any misunderstanding that I need to sit down and talk with her as a person.<sup>7</sup>

I have dwelt on the Livingstone project, because it was an innovative program of its time that piloted much that was new and far reaching in farmer led extension methodologies and local institutional development approaches that were inclusive of women. So, despite a great deal of innovative work on seeking means to improve gender relations, its limitations in respect of the promotion of women's empowerment, are typical of livelihoods programs of its generation that possibly incorporated a limited women's group solidarity approach, but did not incorporate a notion of gender equity. This can be contrasted, for example, with CARE Niger's Gender Equity and Household Livelihood Security Project. This began in 1999 and was a deliberate shift from previous livelihood security projects in the country towards an approach that focused more on gender equity and rights issues and sought much more explicitly to change the nature of power relations between men and women. (Johansson 2001; Doka and De Boodt 2003; Sayo 2002).

The second incidence was of marked contrast to the Zambian case and occurred during a visit to a day drop in centre for sex workers in Bangladesh in January 2002. This had been established as part of the support CARE was providing to the agenda of a self-help association established by the sex workers, *Durjoy Nari Shanga* – the 'difficult to conquer women' association. When asked how their association had helped them, the first woman to reply stated, 'we realised we are also human beings'. Recognising their innate equality with others has not reduced the risks the women face, but has equipped them to deal with the risks more effectively. An example they provided is that they are less afraid to tell the police to stop harassing them, and confident enough to say, like you, we have an equal right to have an income (Drinkwater and Bull-Kamanga 2002). Theirs has

---

<sup>6</sup> Notes from Drinkwater and Sitambuli interviews with Maria and Marron Mungara, 21 February 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Notes from Drinkwater and Sitambuli interviews with Amos and Mary Chalaba, 21 February 2002.

been a struggle against various forms of male power, and discrimination and stigmatization by women as well as men as 'bad', 'fallen' and 'unclean' (Magar 2005).

In its early days the SHAKTI project did work with the women in enormously creative ways, but only because staff themselves went through a profound change process. To begin with, the project – originally just a DFID funded project aiming to increase contraceptive prevalence rates – piloted in the Tangail brothel, a community that includes some 800 sex workers and their children. Staff engaged in interactive discussions with the sex workers that often went on late at night and involved the kind of critical social and self analysis required for staff to understand the role their own attitudes played in perpetuating the discrimination and stigma against the sex workers (Magar 2005). In an early participatory exercise, the sex workers were asked what their priorities were. Top of their list emerged, the ability to wear shoes out of doors.<sup>8</sup> In the Tangail neighbourhood with its complex network of social relations, the *samaj*, modeled after traditional village councils, and consisting of landlords and originally two *sardanis* or madams, wielded tremendous power and control over the sex workers (Magar 2005). *Mastans*, local male gangs allied to local politicians and landlords, act as enforcers, regulating local economies and exploiting, through the use and threat of violence, vulnerable groups in a variety of ways. Forbidding the sex workers the right to wear shoes was a way of marking out their status as lesser beings for all to see, and restricting them to the Tangail locality.

It wasn't just the opening statement that marked that day for me, nor the simple but powerful utterances these women then made whilst talking about the things of importance to them they were striving for – education for their illegitimate children, savings as pensions for themselves when they could no longer work, and always less illegal harassment from the police and the government agencies supposedly responsible for their welfare. It was also the juxtaposition of the courage these actions required with the visual evidence in the day refuge of their vulnerability, as well as the understated eloquence with which a woman field coordinator from CARE revealed much of this to me – a hand gesture, or a quiet comment, and the space she created for all the women present to speak from their hearts. The rear of the drop in centre was where the women slept during the day. A hand movement showed me the tiny lockers where they stowed away their possessions. On the floor, thin bodies huddled under blankets regaining energy; at the back a kitchen provided the nutritional part of this. Here, unmasked, the women looked only vulnerable. In the front of the centre partitioned from the rear was the meeting area where we had the discussion. Some women came from the rear and joined us, but then one came through, more purposefully, and not looking at us as she walked out the front. Passing, I realized she was in uniform, her make up symbolic of the mental mask she had also put on, as she went out to work.

It is extraordinary what these women have achieved, with some guidance, but largely of their own initiative. Their first activity in Tangail, with Shakti's support, was to establish a clinic. They contributed money to the clinic's establishment and were part of the management team that ran it (Magar 2005). Years and many achievements later, Duroj Nari Shanga would still like to do more to prevent the exploitation of women, both in terms of the abuse they constantly receive, and to prevent women from being forced into sex work against their will.

The third incident was during a visit to a *mahila mandal* – women's group – in the Durg district of Chhattisgarh state in India in July 2004. This meeting took place during a program quality audit exercise being undertaken using a reflective practice methodology with Rachna, a massive health and nutrition program of CARE India's working with some 9 million people in 10 states in the country. The program is seeking to expand its emphasis on gender equity issues concerning health and nutrition practices, but as the women noted: 'Even in key messages for INHP, changes are not happening. It is not possible for women to rest during pregnancy, or to improve their diet. Men still think that they are men – they still feel that they cannot get involved with household work'.

---

<sup>8</sup> 'We feel humiliated when we go to the market without shoes on our feet. Everyone looks, hurls slurs and spits on our bare feet in front of all to see...' Magar (2005) quoting one sex worker.

We then asked what changes they would like to see, and one of the leaders of the group, who is a representative on the village's local *panchayat* structure, made her feelings clear:

"We would like to see nothing less than total gender equity... we want to be seen as equals, and to know what our rights are. The state should be more responsible for teaching us these rights. Why do we have 33% reservation in the PRI? It should be 50%, (since otherwise, men will still make the decisions). Also, whilst we have 33% reservation for women here, this is not the case at national level. We still have very few women there. We need more women who can represent women's interests. We would like to demand equal wages for men and women. The panchayat is an important vehicle for our issues to be addressed... We don't have enough information on things, there should be a women's centre in the village, where we can get help if needed.

Some men are really behind times. We would like to challenge traditional roles more. We work both inside and outside the home, yet society still says that men are superior to women. Why does this happen? It really needs to change. It is hard to think of a program to change men. Men are intelligent enough to know that they should change, but their hearts do not allow them. Men have to make personal decisions to change. We don't know what programs can achieve this. They always quote their parents and say, things have been done this way for generations, so why should we change now?" (Drinkwater, Singh and Hora 2004).

These are good questions. As our discussion continued, case after case emerged of women who had been beaten and harassed by their husbands. So why does this happen? Why do men – and some women - continue to play this role of stifling women as mothers and daughters, of seeing them still as less equally human and holding back their ability to contribute more effectively to the lives of themselves and those around them? And what about men too, what does this perpetuation of gender inequality do for men too? The women had some answers to their own questions, but more on that later, as these questions are explored in the following discussion.

### **Women as less human**

The material drawn upon in this section is somewhat eclectic. My aim is only to explore some factors central to social and cultural definitions in specific contexts of women as being less than fully human and the cultural texts that play out behind this. The intention in doing this is to provide a basis for exploring in the final part of the paper some of the implications for future initiatives that seek to address issues of gender inequity.

The factors that will be explored here are those related to attitudes and ways of thinking of men and women, and hence to the use of especially male power in gender relations. And second, it will explore how in some instances these attitudes go to the core of how men perceive themselves, and how their identities are constructed or structured over time – Giddens' term (1984) for the way in which our own behaviour is at once influenced by social structures, and in turn is influencing of it.

### ***Women without names***

Women are regarded as less than men in diverse ways in different cultures. Turning back to Africa for a while, the ways in which women are regarded as less than fully human are varied, but all tend to have the common factor of depriving women of their identity as people. In a PRA exercise in the Central Province of Zambia in the mid-1990s, a polygamous Lenje man with many wives declaimed 'women are like livestock' (Central Province ARPT 1992), meaning many things. They can be bought and sold, as cattle can, and they are a productive asset, as cattle are. To this man women were extremely important – his cattle certainly were – but they had the sub-human status of a commodity. In a recent interview in a matrilineal Lamba area north of the foregoing, an elderly woman when asked the name of her daughter-in-law neighbour of more than 11 years,

could not supply it. To her she was only *vana* so and so, the mother of her first born son. As commented in a report on a project working with adolescent girls in India, they are often seen only as 'temporary people', who will cease to be (at least for the father) once they have disappeared inside a marriage (Mehrotra 2003).

This view of seeing women only in terms of the men they are tied too is taken to extremes in Lesotho and Swaziland. In Sesotho, an old saying is that, 'A woman is the child of her father, her husband and her son' (in Goering 2004). Even the Lesotho constitution treats women's as minors, incapable of making decisions of their own. Thus Mpeo Mhase, despite being a lawyer, a member of parliament and minister of justice, needs her husband's permission to open a bank account, take out a loan, use contraceptives, run for public office, and own or inherit property (Goering 2004). This is at a time when the whole system of migration is shifting in the country, from a system when men were the income earners that went out to work in mines in South Africa, to one where it is women who are moving to the lowlands in search of jobs in the textile industry – since January 2005, now in collapse – establishing new forms of household that often don't have a 'permanent' male in them (Wason 2004). Within the law, these households thus do not exist, which heightens the vulnerability of these women a great deal further. Not surprisingly, says Mahase, 'without change our future is non-existent' (Goering 2004).

### ***Women as contributors to men's identity***

This loss of identity and the devaluation of women's own subsequent sense of self that it entails, can be traced back to the nature of socialization practices in such cultural contexts, and how in particular they pass on social identities of men as being sexually dominant and women as sexually subservient. In a study looking at gender power relations in the Central Region of Malawi, for example, the widespread practice of *Gulu Wamkulu* initiation rites for boys and girls, as preparation of young people for marriage, was reported for both the two main ethnic groups in the area, the Chewa and Yao. These ceremonies, it was argued, lead to 'many of the behaviours and mindsets in households and communities that lead to unequal gender power relations', as well as degrading and risky sexual activities and the encouragement of a high prevalence of sex outside marriage. Women 'felt their male children were taught bad behaviour and language through the songs of this tradition and that they lost respect for women as a result. Boys are taught that once they have been initiated they automatically become adults and as such deserve respect from their mothers and society'. The *dambwe* cult dance, for example, which comprises men and boys of 9+ years encourages violent behaviour against any one not initiated into this institution, which is why there is pressure on young boys to be initiated. Young girls and women who are caught by the *dambwe* may be harassed and raped by the dance participants. These traditional institutions are regarded as the training centres for today's youth to become tomorrow's leaders, and the general teaching of these institutions is that women should sexually please and listen to their husbands – "he knows best" and is head of the family (Chalimba and Pinder 2002).

Whether or not initiation ceremonies are still widely practiced, in most African cultural contexts women remain sexually dominated by men, as now seen widely in women's frequent powerlessness to protect themselves against HIV/AIDS (Win 2004). Even educated, middle class women are frequently powerless not only to negotiate safe sex but to have a say at all in decisions about sexual practices. Men, for example, taught to prefer dry to wet sex, encourage urban wives to use herbs that will cause dryness (and more pain), whilst preferences for women who have 'hot' rather than 'cold' vaginas, can lead men to prefer women who are HIV/AIDS positive (whether known or not), since they are seen as being 'hot'. As my informant here remarked, dealing with these issues is not just about dealing with gender and power, but cultural perspectives on sexuality.<sup>9</sup> Definitions of sexuality need to be changed, including what is termed to be pleasurable. Seeing women as equally human and entitled to pleasure too, rather than just vehicles solely for reproductive purposes and for men's satisfaction, would however turn upside down men's conceptions of themselves.

---

<sup>9</sup> Loveness Makonese, in notes on visit to CARE Zimbabwe, 16 November 2004.

Thus the notions men develop about sexuality go to the centre of how they see themselves; their core concepts of self. Changing sexual practices requires men to reconstitute their identities. This is extremely threatening. The greatest threat of all lies in the re-evaluation required of women's status vis a vis men. If men are to see women as equally human they are required to rethink their own power in the world in a completely different way. Not surprisingly this represents enormous challenges.

### ***Women as contributors to male dignity***

Nowhere are these deeply rooted notions of sexuality and identity clearer than in cultures where the notions of honour and shame are paramount. As Rozario notes for Bangladesh, and the cultural context within which *Durjoy Nari Shanga* is struggling for the rights of sex workers:

'Anyone who has any real understanding of Bangladeshi patriarchy will appreciate that making an effective challenge to patriarchal ideologies in Bangladesh is extremely difficult. The ideology that supports patriarchy in Bangladesh centres on concepts such as izzat (honour, focusing in particular on the control of women's sexuality), lajja-sharam (shame) and parda (purdah, restrictions on women's mobility). These concepts pervade the whole society and indeed support the class structure of the society, since the practicalities of survival mean that the poor are less able to meet the demands of honour, shame and parda than the better-off. What this means in the present context is that all those who stand to gain from the hierarchical class structure of Bangladeshi society, women as well as men, feel threatened by any attack on these principles.' (Rozario 2004).

Beginning to address gender inequality in such contexts requires breaking down the cultural construction of women as less than equally human. This means trying to deconstruct the intertwined effects of religion and culture, an exercise that gradually CARE staff in another country office, Niger, developed the courage to undertake. From the late 1990s a growing amount of work has been undertaken by CARE Niger on gender. Despite this, and partly because wealth ranking had lain at the basis of the country office's targeting and monitoring systems, it was still a shock to participating staff in a participatory urban appraisal exercise in the eastern city of Zinder when an exercise to rank women's social status did not coincide with an early livelihood status ranking. When mapping social status against economic status, a Bell curve was produced instead, with women's status lowest amongst the wealthier economic groups – where they were virtually prisoners in their own homes – and amongst the poorest groups. Women from the more middle income households were much more likely to be contributing to that income, and thus have a better status outside the household and within it, where they played more of a role in decision making (CARE Niger 2003).

Although the staff 'knew' the issues around women's status, the shock of realising that their lengthy use of wealth ranking as a monitoring tool was an inappropriate means of understanding change in women's status prompted a day of debate, including on where lay the roots of this view that women served men's dignity best the more subservient they were. The population was predominantly Muslim, but the nature of cultural practices was influenced heavily by traditional conservatism. West of Zinder in the south central Maradi Department, a gender equity and household livelihood security project wrestled with whether religion could be used to address some of these gender inequities. The project decided to work with the Union of Moslem Women in Niger (l'Union des Femmes Musulmanes du Niger – UFMN) in order to reach the most influential *marabouts* in Maradi. A group of three *marabouts* were mandated to identify two focal point *marabouts* per village and to produce a guiding document summarizing all the '*sourates*', '*hadiths*' and verses of the Koran that address the rights of women on issues such as marriage, divorce, inheritance (including of land and other productive assets), cloistering and access of women to training, information and education (Sayo 2002).

Nevertheless, where Islam still lacks women's voice and mixes with deeply conservative cultural environments in contexts where any discussion of human rights remains an invasive western phenomenon, women retain a status that is a long way short of fully human. In late April 2005, a

woman, the second in two weeks, was stoned to death in a remote Afghan village, simply for being in the company of a younger man to whom she was not married. Even her mother was "proud and happy that she [Amena] was killed, because she undermined the honour of the village" (IRIN 2005). Though the new Afghan constitution upholds the equal dignity of women as well as men, a recent Amnesty International report on the justice system in Afghanistan is headed, 'No one listens to us and no one treats us as human beings'. The report documents the still widespread violence against women that takes place in the country, often as a result of practices still predominant such as the forced marriage of girl children. It notes how the criminal justice system remains, 'too weak to offer effective protection of women's right to life and physical security, and itself subjects them to discrimination and abuse. Prosecution for violence against women, and protection for women at acute risk of violence is virtually absent (Amnesty International 2003).

In the focus group discussions that were held in the production of the Amnesty report, women perceived the difficulty in getting help as rooted in their subordinate status and lesser worth. Even in just seeking help from a government body, an abused woman can be seen as, 'a bad girl who doesn't obey her father or brother'. In focus groups women said, 'We just want to be treated as human beings.' The statement by one participant, 'No one listens to us and no one treats us like human beings,' sums their predicament as well as provides the Amnesty report with its title. In the early days of CARE's own gender work in Afghanistan, the country office is experimenting with forms of women's only and mixed *shuras*, or community councils, particularly in Kabul, as it seeks to effective ways of including women's voice in local decision making processes. The country office also has an emerging focus on women's economic empowerment; but how to proceed more broadly with work that addresses deep seated cultural norms of gender inequity remains an embryonic challenge.

### **Developing women's solidarity, engaging men and changing culture**

The final section of this paper summarises some of what has been learned from CARE's experience so far about the kinds of approaches that are needed to begin to address these culturally deep rooted causes of gender inequality. Reference has already been made to some of this experience. Where successful learning and practice has taken place, it has occurred through exploratory processes that have been intense, often traumatic, and have involved those engaged in the work themselves undergoing profound transformation. There is nothing formulaic in these experiences; indeed the levels of commitment required in many of the programs referred to have only been achieved over a limited period, and the extent to which they have resulted in instances of social transformation that will continue beyond the artificial frame or reference of a specific project, are limited. The Shakti project in Bangladesh and the Nigerien experience are two such that have transcended their boundaries, but to date they remain extremely rare.

One huge challenge is that transformatory projects of this nature will automatically sit on the edge of organizational culture. There have been several pilot projects that have made promising starts but foundered on the unresolved discomfort they have created in the organization, and with partners and donors, because of their edgy character. When a gender based violence project, PROVAW, in Tajikistan was reviewed shortly after it had ended, the reviewer encountered both considerable passion and strain in many of those he interviewed, for what to some had been a 'troublesome' project (Robinson 2004). But through its formation and work with nominated Women's Unions in each village, the project had transformed the lives of many women affected by domestic violence so endemic it had been accepted as part of the natural order. As one Women's Union member commented, marking the importance of a rights based approach that emphasizes the right to equal dignity of all:

Now I feel our freedom always. I feel free because before gaining this knowledge on my rights on independence on equality I was afraid of everything. I was afraid of first of all gossiping and other people's rumours but now I think that I became more strong and

free... and I feel that even if I have to stay alone and live without a husband I can do it'.  
(Robinson 2004).

In a set of Gender Equity Building Blocks developed by CARE USA a few years ago, the term conscientization is defined as follows:

The gender gap is not empirical, but is a belief gap: the belief that women's inferior position and condition is part of the natural order. Empowerment entails sensitization to such beliefs and their rejection; it means recognizing that women's subordination is not part of the natural order of things but is imposed by a system of discrimination which is socially constructed and can be altered. (CARE USA 2002 in Robinson 2004)

This definition raises the question of the extent to which empowerment based approaches in fact challenge the natural order of things. This is a profoundly uncomfortable course to take, and for projects like the gender equity one in Niger, it had taken half a decade of experience with livelihoods and gender programming for the level of courage that was ratcheted up in the work with the *marabous* to be displayed. More typically attempts to pursue women's empowerment have tended to start from the natural order of things, and then founder if they come to question the inequities in this natural order more systematically. In contradistinction, a rights based approach to women's empowerment requires the challenge to the natural order to be posed at the outset: we are also human and require to be treated as such. And whilst attempts to pursue women's empowerment that do not start from the rights based principle of women's equal humanity, may still achieve a great deal, it is much less likely that such efforts will confront gender inequity as an underlying cause of poverty.

This raises questions though about what is required to promote such work, and the feasibility of doing this. Again the Shakti experience is illuminating. Practically, the Shakti project and the Durjoy association did not pursue a confrontational approach. But their collective starting point of recognizing the sex workers as equally human, whilst critical to the project's success, was also immensely difficult for the project staff to cope with, especially at the outset. Magar (2005) notes that in the early days of Shakti, no other large Bangladesh NGO would work with CARE, and within CARE itself Shakti was considered the 'laughing stock' of all projects. Shakti staff, whilst being marginalized, had to overcome their own prejudices, which they did through an ongoing process of critical reflection and consciousness. For women it was easier to identify with the oppression of the sex workers, men had to overcome their feelings of the women being 'dirty' (Magar 2005). At first the sex workers did not trust CARE either, but as they felt the process was helping them open their own eyes, they did learn to trust more. So, the key process was one of interactive, critical reflection, whereby both staff and sex workers learned together. The woman coordinator referred to earlier who so impressed with her non-judgemental awareness, had a masters degree in marine biology. When asked how she had learned to work this way, she laughed and replied, 'learning by doing'. Her learning by doing had taken her way beyond the cultural stereotypes, ideologies and practices within Bangladeshi society which systematically favour men and devalue women to a space where she was as equally human as the sex workers – and I could feel privileged to be allowed to enter that world, even if only for a brief moment.

If gender inequity is to be addressed in a way that gets at its root causes, we then all face the challenge of having to deal with the definition of the self that we grow up with and the resulting social stereotypes in a manner that goes beyond them to a realm where we are all equally human. As was shown in Shakti, an effective project requires a mutual exploration process, and an approach grounded in the evolving solidarity and consciousness of the women concerned. This is the process for women to become equally human citizens in the many contexts in which presently they are denied this recognition.

It is more than just a process of building the solidarity of women's groups. Since it is their identity that is most at stake, as took place in both Shakti and Niger, men too need to be engaged in such struggles to change the kinds of discourse societies and cultures are built upon, even if the beginnings are local. The women in the gender equity project in Niger were scared stiff to

approach the marabous, but they did because they had worked out that if they could convince the marabous of the desirability of presenting an alternative message, this was the only real form of influence they could use that just might be able to change men's behaviour. And they did. Men are vital to all attempts to address gender inequity. The core barrier to be overcome is for men to see themselves as winners too in this process. In Niger, the breakthrough that occurred was signalled by one woman who commented that it is now the men who are calling upon other men to defend the rights of women (Sayo 2002). This was also noted by the women we met in the mahila mandal in Chhattisgarh, India. As one woman stated: 'We don't want a confrontational approach, but want to change things in more subtle ways. For example, the notion of "family pride". A woman does not want his wife asking for help when he is beating her, since this affects "his family's pride". But his wife can say, is a family's pride dependent on a wife accepting to be beaten?' (Drinkwater, Singh and Hora 2004).

It is noteworthy that in cultural contexts where the notion of good and bad girls is used as a means of discrimination, it is never similarly applied to men. Men who engage in wife beating are rarely seen as bad men. This is a problem of a principle of inequality is that it follows far too inevitably that abusive and degrading treatment of the unequal is not inherently seen as 'wrong', and therefore does not attract a great deal in the way of sanction. In all the countries referred to in this paper, violence against women typically occurs as a routinised phenomenon, part of the 'natural order' of things, as remarked in the Tajikistan study (Robinson 2004). This is a key response to an argument that in certain contexts women could remain better off as subjects rather than citizens, because their well being and protection as a gender lies in the respect and entitlements they are due as women; that men perforce are obliged to recognize and abide by these. But as shown, without the principle of equity, very frequently this is not the case.

This provides one answer to the relativist critiques of a rights based approach to development that it is a framework developed by western cultures and is now being imposed by them on other cultures with quite different traditions. Usually though, these arguments against a rights based approach being used universally, because of its cultural imperialism, as it were, are made by those who the unequal power relations favour. When they do have the ability to exercise their own voice through collective solidarity, the message that women have expressed by women is clear: we want to be treated as also human – the equal of men.

Stating this does not presume there is a single way for addressing women's inequality. Rather, ways appropriate to different cultural contexts need to be found. And since men should not be the sole arbiters of 'culture', this means men and women in relations of dialogue to explore how women can become fully human.

In concluding, I'd like to let two women have a last say. The first is Dhanvanti Sohvani, a member of the Chunkatta mahila mandal and village gram sabha, Durg district, Chhattisgarh. She told her personal story, something she said she had not done before.

I was denied the same education as my brothers. Even though my father liked me, he still would not challenge traditions. I have a husband now who drinks, and who contributes little. When my father died, his land was taken by the sarpanch and others. I now work on it and receive a wage, but my health is not good and I don't know how long I can work. My brothers, who are engineers, don't want to do anything about it. Even when they come to the village, they don't want to visit me, because they know I will ask them uncomfortable questions. Women don't have property rights. Who will help me?

I have a daughter who did her first year of college, but then I got her married and she left. But my son-in-law drinks too and beat her, so I called her back home and now have an additional burden. But my sons are good.

You have to talk about equity before we can talk about health. I would love to become more involved in these things. We would like to learn more about empowerment

processes, how these have happened in other places. Women's experiences can be so powerful, and we can really learn from each other, so that we don't need to be educated to be able to generate solutions to our problems. I want to introduce the concept of rights for men and women in my village.

Men have to face certain realities... realize that they have to give up some power in order for things to change for the better. (Drinkwater, Singh and Hora 2004)

The second voice is that of Regina Mongala, a widow from Siafwiimpa village, Livingstone, Zambia. Regina made it clear she had no desire to remarry since she thinks married women are suffering. She had been through a personal empowerment training course and improved her beer brewing business, though this was now in decline since more women were now producing. If the worst came to the worst, however, she would buy second hand clothes and barter them for maize, some of which she would use for food and the remainder to brew further beer. In closing her interview she chose to say: "I feel free at heart now, so secure. I know it all. I have overcome it so I feel free now."<sup>10</sup> It is clear for Regina that the realm of psychological change, the way in which she is able to see herself and her position in the world, is the most important dimension of empowerment to her.

In a strategic impact inquiry that CARE is now conducting on the theme of gender and power, an adjusted definition of empowerment is being employed based on 'our growing recognition that sustainable empowerment for women relies on a combination of changes and interactions affecting social positions, material conditions and the broader structural environment' (Martinez and Glenzer 2005). This notion of empowerment assumes that processes of empowerment require changes with respect to, first, women's agency, in terms of their own aspirations, resources and achievements, second, the broader social structures that condition women's choices and chances, and third, the character of the social relationship through which women negotiate their needs and rights with other social actors, including men (Martinez and Glenzer 2005). The addressing of gender inequity will require both individual and collective change. But amidst these domains of change, most fundamentally, if we are to address gender inequity and its root causes, we have to address the definition of self that we all grow up with and to deal with the resulting social stereotypes in a manner that goes beyond them to a realm where we are all equally human, and where the psychological and structural dimensions of change are seen as being at least as important as the material.

## References

Amnesty International, 2003, 'Afghanistan - No one listens to us and no one treats us as human beings': Justice denied to women', ASA 11/023/2003, London.

CARE Niger, 2003, 'Rapport HLS Zinder (Draft 01), CARE International in Niger, Niamey.

CARE USA, 2002, 'Gender Equity Building Blocks', Atlanta.

Central Province Adaptive Research Planning Team, 1992, 'Mpunde Rapid Rural Appraisal, November 1992', Kabwe, Zambia.

Chalimba, M. and Pinder, C, 2002, 'Gender Power Relations Study and the Impact of Safety Nets in Malawi: Vol 1 Summary of Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations', Central Region Infrastructure Maintenance Programme, CARE International in Malawi, Lilongwe.

Cornwall, A, Harrison E. and Whitehead, A, 2004, 'Introduction: Repositioning Feminisms in Gender and Development', IDS Bulletin, Vol 35, No 4, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton.

---

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Caroline Pinder, 21 February 2002

Doka, M. and De Boodt, K, 2003, 'Study on Evaluation of Empowerment in the Project Area: Gender Equity in the Maradi Region, CARE International in Niger, Niamey.

Drinkwater, M. and Bull-Kamanga, L, 2002, ' Giving People a Voice: Moving towards participatory governance and the building of a rights based urban program in CARE Bangladesh', CARE International in Bangladesh, Dhaka.

Drinkwater, M, Singh, A. and Hora, G, 2004, 'Change from the Heart: Unlocking the Potential - Report on the Chhattisgarh Reflective Practice Exercise', CARE India, Delhi.

Giddens, A, 1984, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Goering, L, 2004, 'In Lesotho women hope for control of their lives', *Chicago Tribune*, 17 October, Chicago.

Goetz A-M, 2004, 'Reinvigorating Autonomous Feminist Spaces, *IDS Bulletin*, Vol 35, No 4, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton.

IRIN Asia, 2005, 'Afghanistan: Woman executed for adultery', [www.IRINnews.org](http://www.IRINnews.org).

Johansson, K, 2002, 'CARE Niger Gender Initiative: Wayé Kaye', CARE Danmark, Copenhagen.

Magar, V, 2005, 'Shakti', draft document, CARE USA, Bangkok.

Martinez, E. and Glenzer, K, 2005, 'Proposed Global Research Framework for CARE's Strategic Impact Inquiry on Women's Empowerment', CARE USA, Atlanta.

McCaston, K, 2004, 'Moving CARE's Programming Forward - Summary Paper: Unifying Framework for Poverty Eradication and Social Justice and Underlying Causes of Poverty', CARE USA, Atlanta.

Mehrotra, D.P, 2003, 'Key Learnings and Insights for Integration of Gender Concerns in a Reproductive Health Program', CARE India, Delhi.

Pinder, C, 2002, 'Gender Empowerment and Change Processes in CARE Zambia's Programming Work', CARE USA, Atlanta.

Robinson, V, 2004, 'Responding to Gender-Based Violence: Lessons learned from CARE Tajikistan's PROVAW project', CARE USA, Atlanta.

Rozario, S, 2004, 'Building Solidarity Against Patriarchy', Rural Livelihoods Program, CARE Bangladesh, Dhaka.

Sayo, H, 2002, 'Gender Equity: Involving Islamic leaders. A case study from the Gender Equity and Household Livelihood Security Project', CARE International in Niger, Niamey.

Sitambuli, E, 1998, 'Gender Status Report, 1994-1998, CARE Zambia, Livingstone Food Security Project', CARE International in Zambia, Lusaka.

Turner, S.D, 2000, 'Extension that Works: Lessons learned by the Livingstone Food Security Program, 1994-2000', CARE International in Zambia, Lusaka.

Wason, 2004, 'Evolving Livelihood Strategies of Rural Basotho, 1993-2002', CARE International in Lesotho, Maseru.

Win, E.J, 2004, 'Not Very Poor, Powerless or Pregnant: The African Woman Forgotten by Development', *IDS Bulletin*, Vol 35, No 4, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton.