

## Rethinking Development, Sustainability, and Gender Relations

Shelley Feldman

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/cjlpp>

 Part of the [Law Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Feldman, Shelley (2013) "Rethinking Development, Sustainability, and Gender Relations," *Cornell Journal of Law and Public Policy*: Vol. 22: Iss. 3, Article 4.

Available at: <http://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/cjlpp/vol22/iss3/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Scholarship@Cornell Law: A Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Cornell Journal of Law and Public Policy by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Cornell Law: A Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [jmp8@cornell.edu](mailto:jmp8@cornell.edu).

# RETHINKING DEVELOPMENT, SUSTAINABILITY, AND GENDER RELATIONS

*Shelley Feldman\**

*The ideas in this paper were shared as the opening frame for discussion at the Conference, “Women, Sustainable Development, and Food Sovereignty/Security in a Changing World,” Cornell University Law School, March 30–31, 2012.*

I. INTRODUCTION .....	649
II. UNPACKING CURRENT MEANINGS OF DEVELOPMENT .....	650
III. ECOLOGICAL, ENVIRONMENTAL, AND SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY .....	655
IV. WOMEN, GENDER, AND GENDER RELATIONS .....	659
V. WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE FOOD SECURITY AND FOOD SOVEREIGNTY DEBATE? .....	663
VI. FINAL REFLECTIONS .....	664

## I. INTRODUCTION

I was asked to open the conference, “Women, Sustainable Development, and Food Sovereignty/Security in a Changing World,” with a set of comments that might set the stage, and focus the themes, that brought those in attendance together as a group of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. I accepted this challenge and framed my remarks around this question: how might a discussion of the processes of development, an interest in sustainability, and a commitment to understanding women’s place in these processes benefit from engaging the ways in which such broad but different themes overlap, are in tension, and might benefit from being reimagined? To begin, I thought it useful to draw attention to some of the taken-for-granted assumptions that undergird how we often employ these overlapping and contested processes. Revealing not only such assumptions but also the nominal categories we use to understand these processes and relationships can make us more alert to how our research, programmatic efforts, and outreach endeavors often produce unintended consequences or more narrow understandings of aspects of development, sustainability, and gender relations than we intend. With

---

\* Shelley Feldman is the International Professor of Development Sociology and Director of the Feminist, Gender, & Sexuality Studies Program at Cornell University. She also is a Visiting Fellow at Binghamton University.

this purpose in mind, my opening remarks focused on the meanings that we generally associate with the four critical concepts that shaped the conference: development, sustainability, women, and food sovereignty/security. In offering a written record of these remarks, I hope to assist in continuing discussions on these critical themes.

## II. UNPACKING CURRENT MEANINGS OF DEVELOPMENT

What do we mean by development? I surmise that we can all agree that development refers to processes and interventions associated with purposive and progressive change. In general, development references an intention or movement to modernize and improve the everyday lives of the world's populations, especially the majority of its poor. Current estimates suggest that the poor include almost half of the world's population of over three billion people, who live on less than \$2.50 a day.<sup>1</sup> Efforts to change people's lives include a commitment to understanding the causes and consequences of planned intervention as well as the contingent processes that have a direct or indirect impact on their social lives and everyday security.

Development practice and the discourse of development, as it is currently imagined, entails a primary commitment to economic growth, to programs that are assumed to enhance people's health, education, and welfare, and to initiatives to expand opportunities that contribute to enhancing economic security.<sup>2</sup> This focus presumes that economic growth will stimulate other aspects of the economy or society while generating increases in labor market opportunities and purchasing power. Together, these changes, understood as the "development project," refer to the organizing principle promoting global capitalist expansion during the Cold War, and with the shift toward neoliberalism, emphasize policies and programs that seek to deepen and extend global trade and market interdependence.<sup>3</sup> Efforts to expand interest and participation in education, in the use of health and nutritional resources, or make choices that improve overall individual and household welfare are shaped by initiatives that create market citizens. Development interventions (such as cash transfer and food-for-work programs) may be deployed as ways to contribute to

---

<sup>1</sup> Anup Shah, *Poverty Facts and Stats*, GLOBAL ISSUES (Sept. 20, 2010), <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>.

<sup>2</sup> See Gustav Ranis, Frances Stewart & Alejandro Ramirez, *Economic Growth and Human Development*, 28 WORLD DEV. 197, 197–219 (2000). See also Rahul Mukerji, *The State, Economic Growth, and Development in India*, 8 INDIA REV. 81, 81–106 (2009) (discussing a study of the policy environment and its link to development outcomes, addressing both economic growth and human development).

<sup>3</sup> Shelley Feldman, *Social Development, Capabilities, and the Contradictions of (Capitalist) Development*, in CAPABILITIES, POWER, AND INSTITUTIONS: TOWARDS A MORE CRITICAL DEVELOPMENT ETHICS 121, 134 (Stephen L. Esquith & Fred Gifford eds., 2010).

realizing these development goals; particularly, as we shall see, when women become the target of a significant number of development interventions purported to contribute to realizing these goals.<sup>4</sup> Micro-credit lending programs and other schemes to promote small-scale and off-farm employment opportunities also are examples of initiatives that are central to current development practice.<sup>5</sup>

These development goals and practices entail both deepening and extending a country's participation in global markets, as well as strengthening and securing trade relations within a world community. Comparative advantage is the common term deployed to illuminate a focus on trade, and while the term has lost its nominal currency in favor of the term neoliberalism, its importance lies in a move away from the logic that accompanied an earlier development goal premised on national self-sufficiency and import substitution.<sup>6</sup> At the national level, this deepening and extending of market relations is revealed in programs to enhance the individuation of everyday life and responsibility through such means as access to credit (currently the focus of a growing number of micro-credit programs) and the privatization of public goods (whether of productive resources including water, oil, and gas, or social resources and services, including health care, immunization services, or education).<sup>7</sup> Nongovernmental organizations, too, have privatized services that were once disbursed free of charge to their constituents. Evidence from Kamal, Hadi, and Chowdhury, for example, reveals the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee's (BRAC) move from a free and extremely successful immunization program to a fee-for-service one.<sup>8</sup> To respond to the lack of support for a fee-for-service program and to the risks that might arise for the health and welfare of children, the authors suggest that increased parental education may enhance the willingness to pay for such services;<sup>9</sup> however, they agree with others that when private market

---

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Magen et al., *Can Cash Transfer Promote Food Security in the Context of Volatile Commodity Prices? A Review of Empirical Evidence* 9 (MSU Int'l Dev., Working Paper No. 96, 2009); Sarabeth Harrelson, *Food Security of Refugee and Displaced Women: Best Practices* (2011) (unpublished issue-specific briefing paper, University of Denver), available at <http://www.du.edu/korbel/criic/humanitarianbriefs/sarabethharrelson.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> *What is Microcredit*, THE MICROCREDIT SUMMIT CAMPAIGN, [http://www.microcreditsummit.org/about/what\\_is\\_microcredit/](http://www.microcreditsummit.org/about/what_is_microcredit/) (last visited Nov. 3, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> As I shall suggest later, this shift has important consequences for thinking about the distinction between food security and food sovereignty.

<sup>7</sup> Firoz Mahboob Kamal et al., *Differentials of the Immunization Programme in Rural Bangladesh and the Issue of User Fee*, REGIONAL HEALTH FORUM WHO, SOUTH-EAST ASIA REGION, available at [http://web.archive.org/web/20090103120406/http://www.searo.who.int/EN/Section1243/Section1310/Section1343/Section1344/Section1351/Section1684\\_7191.htm](http://web.archive.org/web/20090103120406/http://www.searo.who.int/EN/Section1243/Section1310/Section1343/Section1344/Section1351/Section1684_7191.htm) (last visited Feb. 8, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

forces play a role in providing immunization, there is an overall decline in coverage.<sup>10</sup>

The important point I want to emphasize is that the current discourse and practice of development transforms the collective good, community wealth, and the family wage by placing an emphasis on the individual and individual choice rather than on the commons and collective rights. The discourse supports, as well, a growing dependence on women's labor along with the obligations placed on individual women to ensure family sustenance. To be sure, the shift from the collective to the individual can be emancipatory as well as subjugating—an opportunity for mobilization or defeat—but the point to highlight here is the discursive shift that brings into play a specific set of policy options and institutional practices from funders and development practitioners alike.<sup>11</sup> As a consequence, the choices, policy options, and specific programs that currently shape development assistance emphasize individual initiatives that are usually offered as universally recognized and technical solutions aimed at enhancing development outcomes across diverse locales.<sup>12</sup> While programs that address individual rights and gender justice are critical for enhancing the place and opportunities of women, when modular solutions are promoted as appropriate for all contexts they often challenge existing forms of sociality that generate local support as well as opposition. Such programs also may fail to become fully operational because of a lack of institutional fit, even though the discursive power of the program has general appeal in building the values of a global citizenry.<sup>13</sup> In these contexts, the local and the particular, the history of place, and the specificity of cultural practices are usually subordinated in favor of an idealized notion of development, progress, and modernity.

One could contrast these development goals, policies, and strategies of intervention with an understanding of development held prior to the mid-1970s that was realized through policies and practices focused on a commitment to national food self-sufficiency,<sup>14</sup> land reform, subsidies for productive inputs, and broad-based social welfare schemes. These investments were assumed to increase economic and social security, especially regarding agricultural production and rural producers, and to

---

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> See generally, Lamia Karim, *Demystifying Micro-Credit: The Grameen Bank, NGOs, and Neoliberalism in Bangladesh*, 20 *CULTURAL DYNAMICS* 1, 5–29 (March 2008).

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> See DAVID MOSSE, *CULTIVATING DEVELOPMENT: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF AID POLICY AND PRACTICE* (2005).

<sup>14</sup> This contrast is not to presuppose a past that was necessarily better or unproblematic, but rather to underscore the importance of thinking historically in ways that make us attentive to how opportunities and options may be shaped by broad-based understandings and assumptions about what is meant by development.

thereby increase economic growth.<sup>15</sup> The point here is not to explore these differences, but rather to recognize what they suggest for how we interpret the concept of development. Development does not refer to open-ended change (although contingent consequences always unfold) but to a historically specific moment in world history and the world system. This suggests that a more apt term to capture this specificity, even when unstated, is neoliberal capitalist development.<sup>16</sup> Identifying the current historical juncture in its specificity enables attention to the fit between policy prescription, program development, and desired goals and outcomes.

The specificity of the current period of globalization suggests the privileging of corporate rights over the social contract under the presumption that sustained growth, best realized through corporate enhancement, will trickle down to consumers who, with enhanced income through self-employment, will be able to purchase, rather than produce, their subsistence needs.<sup>17</sup> Through these processes, consumers become new market citizens who are able to participate in a global marketplace. Thus, development is best assessed by market power, rather than by the security of diverse forms of production and relations among producers. This means that development processes, or the economic and social changes made possible by development initiatives, are shaped by temporally specific decisions about how such changes are realized and by the goals envisioned. I offer this interpretation of development not as an evaluative claim, but, instead, as an empirical one to help understand why certain changes acquire value and secure substantive support and financing, while others are either absent from our imagination or considered infeasible or unlikely to secure funding. Importantly, as we will see, such an historical understanding of development helps to situate and shape current meanings of sustainability and gender relations.

What themes are shaping current development discourses? In brief, they can be summarized by key ideas that include: participatory democ-

---

<sup>15</sup> It is useful to consider economic security as only one form of social security, especially since development often links, even when implicitly, economic and social security in their view of expected outcomes. The connection between economic and social security also is signaled by the human development index, and is elaborated in Sen's capabilities approach. See Amartya Sen, *Editorial: Human Capital and Human Capability*, 25 *WORLD DEV.* 1959, 1959–61 (1997).

<sup>16</sup> See MAJID RAHNEMA & VICTORIA BAWTREE, *THE POST DEVELOPMENT READER* (1997); see also ANKIE HOOVELT, *GLOBALIZATION AND THE POSTCOLONIAL WORLD: THE NEW POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DEVELOPMENT* (2d ed. 2001); Leslie Sklair, *Transnational Practices and The Analysis of the Global System*, in *GLOBALIZATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY* 15, 15–32 (Alex Hulsemeier ed., 2003); Feldman, *supra* note 3, at 121. See also Amartya Sen, *The Concept of Development*, in *HANDBOOK OF DEVELOPMENT ECONOMICS* 9, 9–26 (H. Chenery & T.N. Srinivasan eds., 1988).

<sup>17</sup> See HOOVELT, *supra* note 16, at 131–34.

racy, human rights, gender justice, sustainability, micro-finance, migration, land titling, and human capabilities.<sup>18</sup> Each of these themes helps to shape how we think about development initiatives and the kinds of support given to programs, activities, and other development interventions. I focus here on only three themes that frame our conference discussions—sustainability, gender relations, and food sovereignty/security—but before doing so, I reflect further on the central role that the individual plays in our thinking about social interventions. The centrality of the individual displaces an earlier notion of community and village development that stressed a multiplicity of social groups as targets of development assistance. For example, while micro-credit may use group formation to promote an individual's obligation to others, and to the collective pressure that a group concerned with ensuring repayment may bear so that a subsequent loan can be forthcoming, loans are dispersed individually, and individuals are held responsible for repayment. Even in cases where it is clear that wives have taken loans on behalf of their husbands, where a husband controls the loan against his wife's wishes, or where a husband uses the loan inappropriately, the individual woman is held accountable for repayment.

Similarly, land titling may give individual ownership rights to men and increasingly to women through programs that support women's land entitlement.<sup>19</sup> While struggles to ensure women's right to own land is

---

<sup>18</sup> There is a vast literature on each of these topics. For examples of literature exploring human capabilities see MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM, *WOMEN AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT: THE CAPABILITIES APPROACH* (2000); MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM & JONATHAN GLOVER, *WOMEN, CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT: A STUDY OF HUMAN CAPABILITIES* (1995); Shelley Feldman & Paul Gellert, *The Seductive Quality of Central Human Capabilities: Sociological Insights into Nussbaum and Sen's Disagreement*, 35 *ECON. & SOC'Y*, 423–52 (2006); Amartya Sen, *Capability and Well-Being*, in *THE QUALITY OF LIFE* 30, 30–53 (Martha Nussbaum & Amartya Sen eds., 1993); AMARTYA SEN, *DEVELOPMENT AS FREEDOM* (1999).

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of land titling as a complex social intervention that cannot be resolved as a technical matter, see Harold Lemel, *Land titling: conceptual, empirical and policy*, 5 *LAND USE POLICY* 273 (1988); Peter Ho & Max Spoor, *Whose land? The political economy of land titling in transitional economies*, 23 *LAND USE POLICY* 580 (2006). For a discussion of women in relation to land use practices and titling, see Bridget O'Laughlin, *A Bigger Piece of a Very Small Pie: Intra-household Resource Allocation and Poverty Reduction in Africa*, 38 *DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE* 21 (2007). O'Laughlin suggests that Burkina Faso's current poverty reduction strategy emphasises individual land titling, micro-credit, and the expansion of cotton production but does not address its relationship to men's mobility and off-farm activities as a necessary part of rural livelihoods. *Id.* at 38. This case shows changes from customary and collective usufruct rights and ownership patterns to individual land titling. For an alternative conceptual understanding, see WORLD BANK, *HELPING WOMEN ACHIEVE EQUAL TREATMENT IN OBTAINING LAND RIGHTS: GENDER IN LAND ADMINISTRATION AND LAND CERTIFICATION PROJECTS* (2011), <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTPREMNET/Resources/Results2011-PREM-SB-new-Gender-LandTitling.pdf>, where they note that “engendering land administration programs show increases in economic opportunities, entrepreneurship and better household dynamic . . . . [And.] [g]iven its proven positive effects on women's economic empowerment and economic development outcomes, the Bank will continue to include gender

critically important, such individual land rights also can be contrasted with collective ownership patterns that extend usufruct rights to members of a group.<sup>20</sup> To be clear, these examples are important to point out the intersection of assumptions that undergird development practices and how they exist with the specific programs and activities that are likely to garner the support of lending agencies, policymakers, and program and project advocates.

### III. ECOLOGICAL, ENVIRONMENTAL, AND SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

What do we mean by sustainability? As above, it is useful to note that this concept is often “adjectivized,” and its most common use is in reference to environmental sustainability. To be sure, environmental sustainability is a critically important focus that concerns land degradation and nutrient depletion, particularly in the aftermath of the Green Revolution, the introduction of chemical fertilizer, decreases in lands left fallow, salination, and the loss of wetlands. But, the widespread acceptance of this usage often obscures other important questions about relations of sustainability. For example, what other relations and conditions have declined, sometimes in parallel with those of the environment and at other times differently from them? How have changes in livelihoods and employment opportunities led to unsustainable market relations that once secured social sustenance? How has the central role of the family and community changed the networks that once ensured livelihoods and social support, in both times of celebration and of need?

One of the important changes emerging from an earlier focus on ecological sustainability is the relationship between people and their environment, an implicit move away from the idea that people can control their environment and natural resource base. The earlier assumption was that human knowledge and technological intervention can overcome natural and environmental limitations, a view that was centered in the promise of the myriad processes by which capitalism, industrialization, and modern science co-determine social life.<sup>21</sup> While this belief continues to frame much of development thinking, interest in sustainable development has benefited not only from the connection between environmental

---

considerations in land administration programs and support programs that provide women with equal and equitable access to land.”

<sup>20</sup> Clearly, individual land titling for women marks an important way to secure women’s rights to land that also recognizes women as productive citizens. My point here is not to challenge this intervention; but rather to identify the sensibility of this intervention in the context of particular assumptions about social change and the specific programs that are envisioned to support the realization of neoliberal development goals.

<sup>21</sup> See JOHN S. DRYZEK, *THE POLITICS OF THE EARTH: ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSES* 49–51 (1997); Bill Hopwood, Mary Mellor, & Geoff O’Brien, *Sustainable Development: Mapping Different Approaches*, 13 *SUST. DEV.* 38, 38 (2005).

and social sustainability but also from an awareness of the global links between mounting environmental degradation (including emergent crises in agriculture), socio-economic issues (particularly the continuing challenges posed by poverty as well as wealth), and a growing concern with climate change. Further, while the Brundtland Report called for a focus on the link between global environmental and sustainability issues more than a quarter of a century ago,<sup>22</sup> new today is the unsettling of the certainty of technical responses as solutions to emergent and increasingly more serious problems and their consequences.<sup>23</sup>

Yet, as with our concern raised about development and earlier notions of sustainability, the meaning of sustainable development is not self-evident. Rather, sustainable development is open to interpretation, and, depending on one's definition of the term, invites a range of interventions across interest groups.<sup>24</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that almost every multilateral or bilateral institution, U.N. webpage, or nongovernmental organization claims a commitment to sustainable development, even as they advance projects or programs that are unlikely to fulfill the promise of sustainable development. The openness of the term leads Haughton to offer five principle objectives of sustainable development:

[F]uturity—inter-generational equity; social justice—intra-generational equity; trans-frontier responsibility—geographical equity; procedural equity—people treated openly and fairly; [and] inter-species equity—importance of biodiversity. These principles help give clarity to the ideas of sustainable development, link human equity to the environment, challenge the more bland and meaningless interpretations and provide a useful basis for evaluation of the different trends of sustainable development.<sup>25</sup>

Rather than detail the synergies and contestations of Haughton's summary or engage the long and complex debates that currently shape discussions of sustainability,<sup>26</sup> I instead offer a brief comment on Ecofeminism, given its salience in the field of critical gender studies,

---

<sup>22</sup> See GRO HARLEM BRUNDTLAND, *OUR COMMON FUTURE* 45 (1987).

<sup>23</sup> Shelley Feldman & Stephen Biggs, *The Politics of International Assessments: The IAASTD Process, Reception and Significance*, 12 J. OF AGRARIAN CHANGE 144, 148–49 (2012).

<sup>24</sup> The Brundtland Report was similarly open to interpretation, making it possible for multiple stakeholders to endorse its general claims. See BRUNDTLAND, *supra* note 22.

<sup>25</sup> Hopwood, Mellor, & O'Brien, *supra* note 21, at 40; see Graham Haughton, *Environmental Justice and the Sustainable City*, 18 J. OF PLAN. EDUC. & RES. 233, 235–36 (1999).

<sup>26</sup> For an excellent review of some of the key issues and debates, and a mapping of the various approaches to sustainable development and the interventions that they help to highlight, see Hopwood, Mellor, & O'Brien, *supra* note 22.

which frames the collective interests that bring us to this conference. I begin by asking: how might we understand the place of feminist critique, gender relations, and the role of women in discussions of sustainability, where there is a strong commitment to social equity that depends on the connections between ecological sustainability and more equitable access to livelihoods, good health, natural and social resources, and economic and political decision-making? This question is particularly relevant given a decline in the numbers of people able to control their lives and resources in ways that lead them to believe that inequality and environmental degradation are inevitable.

Furthermore, how might we think about sustainability in relation to livelihoods and communities? How are resource scarcities and the lack of attention to environmental sustainability issues that need to be addressed in discussions of social sustainability or of individuals, families and households, communities, world regions, and the global economy? How might this attention to scale help us to see the connections between environmental and social sustainability? More pragmatically, how do patterns of inequality and poverty (to tie this issue more directly to the notion of development) shape strategies that seek to promote both ecological and/or environmental sustainability and social sustainability? In the practice of development programs, how might these processes and relations work together, and how might thinking about them offer new insights about the kinds of intervention strategies that lead to changes in people's lives and livelihoods, senses of security, and control over their decisions about environmental change?

Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, the connection between sustainability and women is often framed by debates about ecofeminism, an approach and movement that draws attention to the historical, symbolic, and political relationship that exists between the denigration of nature and patriarchy. Ecofeminism, in its multiple formulations, has built on broad-based feminist critiques of science and development, offering important criticisms of the environmental movement for its masculine bias and its lack of attention to the gender dimensions and inequalities of particular models of development.<sup>27</sup> In other words, many ecofeminist approaches ground their understanding in the connections between cultural and biological processes and a social analysis of development, often concluding that women have a special affinity with nature and therefore are natural stewards of the earth. For Shiva,<sup>28</sup> ongoing strategies of capitalist "maldevelopment" destroy sustainable environments, including social institutions and relations. This is especially the

---

<sup>27</sup> See VANDANA SHIVA, *STAYING ALIVE: WOMEN, ECOLOGY AND SURVIVAL IN INDIA* 5 (1989).

<sup>28</sup> See *id.*

case since Shiva argues that Western development models are inherently patriarchal and, as such, inattentive to both nature and to women's subjugation.<sup>29</sup>

Following in the tradition of ecofeminists who question objectivity, Shiva offers a critique of capitalist development and raises issues about the costs of the increasing centralization of power and control in the hands of huge corporations that challenge local control of the environment.<sup>30</sup> Shiva also assumes a universal subject along with a commitment to a return to women's organic relationship to nature.<sup>31</sup> As Mies and Shiva explain:

'[M]odern' civilization is based on a cosmology and anthropology that structurally dichotomizes reality, and hierarchically opposes the two parts to each other: the one always considered superior, always thriving, and progressing at the expense of the other. Thus, nature is subordinated to man; woman to man; consumption to production; and the local to the global, and so on.<sup>32</sup>

This critique assumes that women have a different idea about nature, community, and family than men and, pragmatically, suggests that women are likely to be more attentive to creating livable and sustainable lives in concert with their environment. Shiva also suggests that the lost connection between women and nature has led to a host of aggressions not limited to the earth, since other forms of insecurity and processes of accumulation emerge in relation to this lost connection.<sup>33</sup>

The relationship Mies and Shiva draw between women and nature builds on an essentialization and dichotomization of women as tied to nature and of men as tied to culture that has provoked debate among feminists as well as those concerned with sustainability.<sup>34</sup> This leads to asking: how might we engage the debates about and within ecofeminism in a productive way to illuminate critical issues in development policy? How might attention to ecofeminism's assumed essentialism alert us to

<sup>29</sup> See MARIA MIES & VANDANA SHIVA, *ECOFEMINISM* 5 (1993).

<sup>30</sup> See SHIVA, *supra* note 27, at 7.

<sup>31</sup> See MIES AND SHIVA, *supra* note 29, at 5.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.*

<sup>33</sup> See *id.*

<sup>34</sup> MIES & SHIVA, *supra* note 29, at 5. Mies and Shiva also tend toward essentializing and disembodiment of capital and processes of accumulation, even as they claim to move beyond such a position. The epistemic ground of their position is critically important to fully appreciate the complicated character of their claims, which are often determinist, causal, and essentialist. Unfortunately, a full elaboration of their argument here is neither appropriate nor possible, but one that is crucially important as we move toward alternative understandings of the relationships between women and nature, women and patriarchy, and women and capitalism.

its consequences for program planning and the expectations that policymakers and practitioners often hold about women's roles in development processes? How do the important critiques made by third-wave Feminism reveal the limitations of ecofeminism's essentialism? How, in short, might we acknowledge the criticality of the ecofeminist interventions while remaining mindful of the idealizations that undergird its claims and political practices?

#### IV. WOMEN, GENDER, AND GENDER RELATIONS

Let me now briefly turn to the concept of women and gender relations to ask: how might we think about women differently from and in relation to gender relations? What does the difference mean, and why might it matter? How might an awareness of the distinction between women and gender relations contribute to shaping development policy and practice, as well as understandings of sustainability and food security or food sovereignty? These questions, particularly as they relate to contemporary policy discourses, respond to the ongoing interest in "bringing women into" the development process. While this interest recognizes women as subjects of development practice, and, in some cases, acknowledges that women's interests, needs, and desires may differ from those of men (although one ought not assume that women share interests or needs or have common desires), bringing women into development presumes that unless women are the direct recipients or targets of intervention, they necessarily are "left out" of development. Such a framing also presumes that developmental interventions primarily consist of targeting resources, programs, and new practices to particular constituents,<sup>35</sup> rather than to structural reforms to the national economy or to changes related to the country's location within the world economy. To state this point differently, since women always reproduce themselves and their conditions of life and livelihood within a changing development context, it is absurd to imagine that women could be left out of development simply because they are neither the direct beneficiaries of new resources nor the targets of a specific planned intervention.

These presumptions are grounded in two additional claims. First, it is only recently that the specific effects on women of changes in the political economy, particularly those following in the wake of structural adjustment lending programs, have been acknowledged. Worth noting here is that this acknowledgement follows the demands from broad-based international women's movements, the U.N. General Assembly's declaration of 1975 as International Women's Year, the holding of the

---

<sup>35</sup> These claims are among a host of others that shape how some policymakers, researchers, and practitioners think about women in the development process.

first World Conference on Women, and, following the Conference's success, the affirmation of a U.N. Decade for Women (1976–1985).<sup>36</sup> Numerous world conferences that have been held since then and sustained mobilizations continue to shape popular protest against financial crises and food shortages. But, importantly, recognition of women as victims of change does not acknowledge them as subjects of development. For example, recognizing that the denationalization of enterprises or the privatization of water has affected women in myriad ways suggests that development processes are always consequential for women; yet the ways that women are active agents in change may still go unrecognized. Thus, even when the distinctive ways that women benefit from economic reforms or create opportunities that showcase their creditworthiness are acknowledged, they may still be viewed as victims of development rather than as subjects of history.

A second type of development intervention affecting women involves resource allocations that can reproduce old or instantiate new social divisions of labor, even when they fail to address women's long-term interests.<sup>37</sup> Examples include current policies and programs offering micro-credit and the extension of health, nutrition, and education to families that target women without accounting for their costs in terms of women's labor time. This is because women are presumed to be responsible for family welfare, are better risks in terms of loan repayment and use, particularly when they have independent control of the loan, and have been shown to use new resources to improve family welfare. The Grameen Bank Project inaugurated by Nobel Laureate Mohammed Yunus, for example, is built on women's presumed creditworthiness in ways that often ignore the re-divisions of labor that may follow, the increased demand on women's labor time that result from such loans, and the multiple incomes currently necessary to meet subsistence needs.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, while in most contexts women do hold responsibility for the health and nutrition of the family, and thus are the target of many programs concerned with enhancing nutritional status and family health, such interventions often reproduce unequal household divisions of labor. They also may create new divisions of labor around food consumption, for instance, when they ignore the role that men in some cultural contexts play in holding responsibility for weekly food shopping.

---

<sup>36</sup> See *Global Issues: Women*, UNITED NATIONS, <http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/women/> (last visited Nov. 3, 2012).

<sup>37</sup> See Maxine Molyneux, *Mobilization Without Emancipation? Women's Interests, the State, and Revolution in Nicaragua*, 11 FEMINIST STUD. 227, 232–33 (1985).

<sup>38</sup> See GRAMEEN BANK PROJECT, [http://www.grameen-info.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=16&Itemid=112](http://www.grameen-info.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=16&Itemid=112) (last visited Nov. 3, 2012) (97% of Grameen Bank's borrowers are women).

Similarly, the general success of conditional cash transfer programs to enhance the educational attainment of girls, including attendant nutrition and health training components, likewise show excellent results when women are the target population.<sup>39</sup> But, they also reveal similar contradictory outcomes. On the one hand, women clearly do benefit from their greater control of resources, their increased status within the family, and the importance of these differences in household decision-making, including, but not limited to, the education and health of the family.<sup>40</sup> This author's experiences have shown that benefits also include women's increased autonomy, particularly important with any change in marital status, as well as women's increased ability to access the labor market or to migrate to urban centers for employment.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, these new opportunities—including credit to initiate small business enterprises or control of the cash distributed as part of cash transfer programs to assist women's support of their girl children's school attendance—can also increase the length of women's workday and labor time.<sup>42</sup> These programs can also contribute to women working in relatively unhealthy and unsafe environments, as when they work in unregulated domestic enterprises or enter the export-manufacturing sector, often in the lowest paid ranks of these enterprises.

Thus, to make these contradictory consequences of development projects and programs evident, it is useful to focus on gender relations rather than on women, since the contingent and consequential character of change become more evident when understood in a relational context. Moreover, when viewed in relation to men, families, and communities, women's labor time that is not spent in the formal labor market is more likely to be recognized. This means that programs premised on taking advantage of women's so-called free time would be required to acknowledge women's critical roles as unpaid laborers who are responsible for

---

<sup>39</sup> See generally Maxine Molyneux, *Conditional Cash Transfers: A "Pathway to Women's Empowerment?"*, PATHWAYS OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT (2008), available at <http://www.pathwaysofempowerment.org/PathwaysWP5-website.pdf>.

<sup>40</sup> Michelle Adato & Shelley Feldman, *Empowering Women to Achieve Food Security*, Policy Brief 11, INTERNATIONAL FOOD POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE (August 2001), available at <http://www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/publications/focus06.pdf>; Agnes R. Quisumbing & Ruth S. Meinzen-Dick; *Empowering Women to Achieve Food Security*, Policy Brief 1, INTERNATIONAL FOOD AND POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE (August 2001), available at <http://www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/publications/focus06.pdf>.

<sup>41</sup> Shelley Feldman, *The Social Construction of a Working Class in Bangladesh*, Senior Fulbright Award, Grant No. 83-006-IC (10-3-83), 1984 and field notes from 1998; 1999; 2010; 2011; 2012 (on file with the author).

<sup>42</sup> See *id.* at 41 ("In addition, in some municipalities beneficiaries are 'informally' expected to 'volunteer' a set number of hours of work in support of the programme or community, typically cleaning schools and clinics, tidying cemeteries, or clearing rubbish. While this requirement is discouraged by programme officials it continues in some municipalities.").

carrying out the free household or domestic work necessary to reproduce the social unit.

To reiterate my earlier point, from a gender relations perspective, it is critical to think about the diverse ways in which women are always and already included in development processes whether or not they are the explicit targets of development programs. For instance, particular interventions may exclude women from direct access to resources or inputs, but in the process, women may have to adjust to new social conditions and relations in their everyday lives. Exclusion in these circumstances, in other words, actually positions women in particular ways within the development process. Consider, for example, the dramatic changes in women's rice processing work with the introduction of mechanical rice mills. Prior to this intervention, women's control over rice milling included their labor as free household workers and as domestic workers in the homes of others. But, with the introduction of the rice mill, women not only lost their previous source of income, but also had to adapt to other changes in household resources, including the loss of available rice straw that provided fuel for cooking and to the rice husks that provided chicken feed.<sup>43</sup> While the loss of rice straw and rice husks required that women seek new ways to secure these resources and often extended their labor time, this unpaid family labor often went unacknowledged.

These examples reveal how, as relations in the production of everyday life change, so also do other relations between and among family and community members. This is especially obvious when petty entrepreneurial loans offered to men challenge the organization and allocation of household labor, often with direct consequences for women's labor despite their exclusion from access to these same resources. Stated differently, as patterns and relations of exclusion position women (and others who are excluded) in particular ways in relation to resource access, presumptions about the availability and use of household or free labor may nonetheless be an implicit requirement for realizing the outcomes envisioned by policymakers and planners in making the initial intervention. Furthermore, targeting particular resources to women also may contribute to excluding their participation in other activities, thus keeping invisible the range of ways that women contribute to social reproduction.

---

<sup>43</sup> See Gloria L. Scott & Marilyn Carr, *The Impact of Technology Choice on Rural Women in Bangladesh: Problems and Opportunities* (The World Bank, Working Paper No. 731, 1985), available at [http://www-wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2003/10/03/000178830\\_98101903431796/Rendered/PDF/multi0page.pdf](http://www-wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2003/10/03/000178830_98101903431796/Rendered/PDF/multi0page.pdf) (“[A woman’s] contribution is undervalued, if at all counted, because it is considered domestic labor. Modernization and the introduction of technology is displacing many of these opportunities, especially in rice processing.”).

## V. WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE FOOD SECURITY AND FOOD SOVEREIGNTY DEBATE?

Food security and food sovereignty are key themes in current development debates. Food security emerged as part of a development approach that sought national food self-sufficiency and, as in the discussion above,<sup>44</sup> arose in relation to questions of land reform and household security prior to the mid-1970s. These discussions were in partial response to food insecurity at the individual and household level, but they were also reproduced in national policy arenas. The 1980s changed the assumption of how such security could be fostered, moving from questions of land ownership and small-scale production to support for corporate agriculture.<sup>45</sup> Boyer identifies this shift in Honduras:

For most Hondurans, US official pronouncements on food security during the “lost decade of the 1980s” must have possessed a particularly hollow ring. By this time, USDA had issued its definition to the world: food security for a household meant access by all members at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. The definition purposely ignored how or where food is produced.<sup>46</sup>

Such a proclamation reinforces the notion that people should be able to purchase affordable food rather than simply worry about having access to the resources to enable them to produce it. This distinction—between production and consumption—reflects a commitment to improving individual incomes in order to increase purchasing power while supporting large-scale corporate production for a global market, a shift that contributes to the making of the consumer or market citizen. Food riots and collective kitchens organized by women, as was popular in Latin America during the 1980s, clearly showcased the criticality of the conditions of production as changes in development policy took hold.

The food sovereignty movement has similar roots but, in contrast, the ways of ensuring food security is part of a discursive formation and practical politics grounded both in countering the global corporate agro-industrial food system and embracing agrarian-centered reforms. This means that the key elements of the food sovereignty movement include prioritizing local agricultural production with assurances of access to

---

<sup>44</sup> See Jefferson Boyer, *Food Security, Food Sovereignty, and Local Challenges for Transnational Agrarian Movements: The Honduras Case*, 37 J. OF PEASANT STUD. 319, 322 (2010).

<sup>45</sup> Shelley Feldman & Stephen Biggs, *International Shifts in Agricultural Debates and Practice: An Historical View of Analyses of Global Agriculture*, 2 ISSUES IN AGROECOLOGY: PRESENT STATUS AND FUTURE PROSPECTUS 107 (2012).

<sup>46</sup> *Id.* at 324–25.

land, water, seeds, and credit by peasant and landless peoples.<sup>47</sup> Assuring such conditions requires, among other things: land reform and the safeguarding of water as a public good; securing the right of farmers, including women farmers, to produce food; the right of consumers to be able to decide what they consume, and how and by whom it is produced; and the right of countries to protect themselves from extremely low-priced agricultural and food imports, recognizing that agricultural policy choices should be made through democratic decision-making. Together, these elements offer a radical rethinking about sustainability, labor use, and how communities and households see themselves, not as victims but as subjects of change. As Patel makes evident, “There is, at the heart of food sovereignty, a radical egalitarianism in the call for a multi-faceted series of ‘democratic attachments.’”<sup>48</sup>

Similar to the broad-based national and international women’s movements, the food sovereignty movement and peasant calls for food security also share important claims for recognition and rights as well as to democratic and equitable access to the conditions that can secure social reproduction.<sup>49</sup> Further, like aspects of those concerned with women’s place in development and sustainability, the focus includes not only environmental and ecological sustainability, but also recognition as well of the criticality of social sustainability, of lives, livelihoods and communities.

## VI. FINAL REFLECTIONS

In conclusion, let me briefly turn to the work that researchers can do together to enhance both our understanding and our practice in response to the issues raised about sustainability and gender relations with practitioners. First, it is a useful reminder that researchers build on changes on the ground and respond to change by identifying issues, problems, and processes after they have occurred. This means that most social science analysis is post hoc, more interpretive and suggestive than predictive. It also means that practitioners are the people on the front line, creating and experiencing processes of change as they happen, often as mediators, as creative resources, and as enablers or deterrents to specific practices. Second, information and knowledge exchange does not flow in one direction, as a relation among practitioners and researchers that either provides data for researchers or ideas for practitioners. Rather, the

---

<sup>47</sup> See *The International Peasant’s Voice*, VIA CAMPESINA (Feb. 9, 2011), <http://via.campesina.org/en/index.php/organisation-mainmenu-44>.

<sup>48</sup> Raj Patel, *What Does Food Sovereignty Look Like?*, 36 J. OF PEASANT STUD. 663, 670 (2009).

<sup>49</sup> See *id.* at 663 (“In many ways, Via Campesina’s call for food sovereignty is precisely about invoking a right to have rights over food.”); VIA CAMPESINA, *supra* note 47.

relationship is more appropriately understood as a synergistic one in which, collectively and by the very fact of coming together, we engage productively and learn from each other. Thus, the relationship between these interlocutors is a recursive one; we learn from both practical experience and research while also reflexively identifying and creating the issues and problems worthy of study.

Recognizing these synergies and exchanges also changes how we think about information flows and about the various ways that development opportunities emerge from the places where they are enacted, tested, and employed, and from sharing experiences across similar as well as different contexts. This acknowledges change as coming from multiple directions, not merely from the West and North to the South. Such an acknowledgement also helps to highlight, among other things: the benefits of integrating environmental studies with critiques of science and the experiences of those living under environmental threat; understanding colonialism and modernity as embodied in how we understand development; making explicit a broad view of the meanings of sustainability; and how working with a relational view of gender offers a critical venue for creative thinking and program, project, and policy formation.

I close by proposing that although we are positioned to share experience and take advantage of an opportunity to think outside of our individual habits or boxes, the perspectives—on development, sustainability, and gender relations—suggest that we avoid attempts to come up with a universal model for developing programs for women or for sustainable development and food sovereignty. Rather, I suggest using the opportunity afforded by this conference to mine our individually, historically, and spatially specific experiences and contexts for thinking anew about building programs, identifying critical research issues, and contributing, however differently across landscape, to creating sustainable lives, livelihoods, and ecologies.

