

Gender Issues in Development

Guest speaker: Prof. Christine Walley (MIT, Anthropology)

Prof. Walley's background includes many years working in Africa, mostly Tanzania. Sub-Saharan Africa has become increasingly poor the past few decades, as agricultural commodity prices have fallen. People on the Tanzanian island of Mafia have made money from copra (coconut byproduct), but synthetic alternatives hit the market. Then they've tried fishing, but the number of fish have decreased in recent years.

Prof. Walley focused on Mafia Island and nearby islands (an archipelago), one of the poorest regions in Tanzania. This island "about the last place in the country to get a secondary school," in 1995; they also just got their first internet café. But access to education has been so difficult there that many people, particularly older women, are not literate. There are ~20 motorized vehicles on Mafia; most people get around on wooden boats. Walley spent most of her time on nearby Chole Is., about 1/3 sq. mile and 800 residents, no motorized vehicles.

As a socio-cultural anthropologist, Prof. Walley's focus is on everyday life, spending time with people "just hanging out" to understand their world views, etc. Specifically, she focuses on development projects, and how people interact with an environmental project. Her first book is called "Rough Waters: Nature and Development in an East African Marine Park." Her most recent emphasis (including a new book) is on influence of gender in development; see her MIT course *Gender, Power, and International Development* (21A.338J) published in MIT OpenCourseWare: <http://ocw.mit.edu/OcwWeb/Anthropology/21A-338JFall2003/CourseHome/index.htm>.

On Mafia, those that worked for government, the residents of the island, and various international institutions had divergent views and conceptualizations about the meaning of development.

- An elderly man said (in literal translation from his Swahili statement): "my ancestors used to bury our development in the ground." What did he mean by development? For most people here, development is largely about "getting ahead", about improving one's individual standard of living. A woman being tutored in English said she was "getting a little development." Turns out the older gentleman was referring to burying cash underground, rather than putting it in a bank.
- On the other hand, government folks have usage more akin to our Western concept. But they see the government at the center of the process, not the residents.

An important thing to keep in mind is who gains access to development. Class, gender, race all have impacts. Who gains access to technologies

relative to other groups, and what does this mean in social terms? Often there are strong tensions between government development officials (Christians from mainland) vs. Mafia residents (Muslims from the coast).

Here's one example. In Chole, people have built beautiful wooden sailing boats, with a big traditional boatyard. In 70s, a Scandinavian development organization decided they were going to modernize the boatyard. But their solution was all about power tools, and there was no electricity. They brought generators, but fuel was hard to get. The tools broke and there were no spare parts. The project broke down...

A rep from this NGO had picked a couple of people in the boatyard and taught them how to use the power tools. Turns out these two were from a neighboring island; as the tools and training are to be passed along to your community, Chole residents didn't "receive" the development they were supposed to. Thirty years later, there's still social tension around that former project. Interestingly, the Chole folks don't blame the development project...

Other examples:

- In the Masai region of Tanzania, an NGO comes in to talk to men about how to care for sick cattle. They didn't realize it was the women that took care of sick animals.
- An NGO wants to introduce tractors. Often the development workers were men, and tended to work with local men. This has effect of "coding" the technology and its application for men, leaving out women.

Big picture – be very aware of how gender roles and divisions play out in a community.

Another example, from South America, is the "Kayapo video project." An anthropologist got a grant to create a community video project in this Brazilian Amazon indigenous community, taping their ritual ceremonies and things that are important to them. The Kayapo had many political issues they've been angry about, i.e. government and World Bank dam building projects that will flood their environment. The residents decided to hold a big urban-based rally, attracted great international attention (Sting attended), and used their local media tools to influence outside media. Furthermore, they used their own video equipment to counteract problems with literacy, videotaping meetings with government to make sure they didn't get cheated by the process.

How did use of video shift social relationships in the community? An anthropologist Terry Turner studied this. Men, not women, had access to the equipment, and got all the training. Indeed, only certain men were trained. It quickly became clear to all that the video gear was high-status. So leaders tried to keep the cameras in their own homes, setting up control structures. There were also generational dynamics; a young man that was very talented with filming and editing wound up socially ostracized due to resentment of older people.

So, as new technologies are introduced, it's important to see what new dynamics and tensions might be set up in the process.

Back to Chole... In early 90s, a small ecotourism hotel was being built. For every tourist, ~\$10 is directed into a community development pool. When they had first community meetings, it was older men that spoke; women and younger men were held back, as it's rude to speak up in presence of older men.

Then the developers held separate meetings for men and women. Both sides wanted a school and a health clinic. But the women put clinic higher, whereas the men wanted the school more. Consider how these groups' roles affect their views: women caring for young children, confronting high infant mortality rates; men are representing the island in talks with the mainland and government officials, facing barriers of their limited educations.

Clearly, as groups, men and women don't always have the same priorities for development. When you have representatives speaking for the community, ask who they are speaking "for" and who is probably being left out due to generational, gender or other reasons.

In 1997, the ecotourism developers suggested a women's group. And through this, the women got connected with a Norwegian NGO that could support their group. There were very few women with secondary education, and nobody spoke English. The women's group looked to the bi-lingual hotelier as translator, advisor to connecting with official organization, resulting in some dependency issues. There was a lot of in-fighting among subgroups this summer....

<class views a video clip, produced with the NGO to promote the women's group>

The women's group has had some significant accomplishments:

- Began handicrafts groups and sought to development economic opportunities on the island;
- Sponsored adult educational programs
- Helped members gain organizational skills, self-confidence. "In the past it wasn't easy for a wife to go to meetings...to study... to move about freely...;"
- Built a nursery school, market and later learning centre.

But there continues to be controversy around the group and over who will get access to resources from the NGO given the relatively large budget for the region.

Sources of tensions:

- 1: Access. Who gets to be leaders that work with international development organizations? Tends to be the most educated, bi-lingual. The NGOs need written reports, so people who can write are favored. This can lead to resentment. Older women may feel, "Bah, it's the younger women that have access...they won't care about us."

Norwegian NGO wanted Chole group reps to travel to conferences, including air travel to Botswana. The lucky reps loved it, but the ones left behind are resentful. Some divisions among women have been generated in this process. Bottom line: projects can encourage INCREASED stratification. How can this be counteracted?

- 2. Assumptions of corruption. Development projects also have reputation in many cases of being linked to corruption. Government officials are being paid wages below subsistence, so the temptation is great. There's often an assumption by some that the women's group leaders are also acting this way even though there is no evidence for it. Has led to relatives not speaking to each other!
- 3. Gender. Don't fall into the trap of assuming that gender relationships are always polarized. There can be tremendous variations individual and local community practices. In Chole, men and women both have sources of power and strength. Yet often an assumption that Muslim women are oppressed in generic ways. One of the group leaders asked Walley "Can you ask for development projects for our husbands as well? The fish are all fished out...We want to do some things together." Prof. Walley felt that ironically gender-based tensions have increased in the past three years...an unintended consequence?

Pay attention to these social relationships. Development is inherently political as well as technical. How do we understand these relationships? Listen to what people have to say, be humble.

Q&A

Q: How's the gender conflict relate to general conflict handling in Chole?

A: It's a very egalitarian society, so jealousy is a major factor. Any project involving distributing new resources will kick this off.

Q: How does it work when men are involved in a development project?

A: There is a male collaborator in this Chole project. There are certain subjects and situations where a man can get more info from men, and other situations (appropriate?) where a man can't get free info from a women in 1-on-1 situation.

In Walley's work on environmental projects, i.e. fishing, most of the participants are men. And the fighting is just as intense.

Q: Have the women received any training in conflict resolution?

A: For middle-aged women, it's hard to start over. Access to education via scholarships can be a source of conflict. They now have high school scholarships for some girls, but until recently there wasn't even a high school to attend. So those that don't get scholarships might be resentful.

When you're in a resource poor area, you'll see much more intense conflict about development resources. Walley has also been working with community meetings in south side Chicago, waste dump areas in place of shut down steel mills. The dynamics and conflicts in these meetings are charged up. Don't think of conflict over resources as a "3rd world thing."

Q: Do you have any examples where development does NOT cause social stratification?

A: We want to emphasize the good things in this project. Everybody loves the nursery school and the market. But at the same time, the new resources will always be a source of conflict. Some take the "market-driven view" – sure, the more talented and more education will rise up. But others ask shouldn't development projects also reach everybody? These are huge issues, important to debate.

Q: What would you recommend for somebody that's had successful projects in one country and wants to expand to other less-familiar countries?

A: As international groups work in different regions, there's a tendency to generalize. It feels efficient to take models from other regions and apply them someplace else, but often we lack knowledge of uniqueness of each place. It's a lot of work to know everything about the local groups. For instance, the Chole project has to struggle with assumptions about gender and religion.

Q: In Chole, have the costs outweighed the benefits?

A: In general yes, but "ask me in 2 years." It's in hindsight that more up-front attention to social situations and conflict management would have been very beneficial.