Development Discourse on Gender and Communication in Strategies for Social Change

by Karin Gwinn Wilkins

In this paper, I explore institutional discourse on the role of gender in constructions of development communication beneficiaries and on the process of social change facilitated through communication intervention. Analyses are based on descriptions of health, nutrition, and population projects implemented by several organizations since 1975. Since the Decade for Women, development communication projects have focused their attention on women and other marginal groups, whereas USAID has replaced informing strategies with persuasion approaches that target women as reproducers to consume products and services available through the private sector.

Development communication efforts, along with other development strategies, have failed to improve the conditions of women on a global scale. Compared with men, women are disproportionately subject to poverty, illiteracy, domestic violence, discrimination, and barriers to senior professional positions, even in development organizations (Harbour & Twist, 1996). As a group marginalized from global, national, and community power structures, women constitute a target more often than a participant in the production of development communication. The decline of women's conditions stands in stark contrast to the pronounced attention paid to issues of women and gender in development discourse. In this essay, I explore institutional discourse on the role of gender in constructions of development communication beneficiaries and on the process of social change facilitated through communication intervention.

Development communication activity embodies models of social change that are implemented across political and cultural boundaries. Issues of gender, com-

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munication, and development are grounded in global structures and processes of power, which condition access to and acquisition of economic and social resources. Critical scholars have described the global domination of media systems by Western and corporate agencies. Gender, however, also factors into this equation, as the extensive documentation of the tendency of media industries to trivialize women's roles and concerns has demonstrated (McLaughlin, 1991; Rakow & Kranich, 1991; van Zoonen, 1994). As in investigations of the unequal relations between states engaged in donating and receiving foreign aid, we also need to understand the dynamics contributing to the institutional construction of gender within development communication strategies designed to alleviate social problems.

Some challenges to global power relations build from a feminist approach, beginning with the premise that women constitute the group most neglected and harmed by global development processes. In her summary of feminist scholarship, Steeves (1993) concluded that, among other areas, research is needed "on women's roles and representations in Third World development communication activities, including funding agency projects" (p. 120). Issues of women, gender, and feminism may be examined by exploring discourse of development institutions, given that development strategies designed to benefit women do not emerge from women's experiences, but "in the midst of bureaucratic discourse," the language and activities associated with the planning and implementation of development projects (van Esterik, 1994, p. 265).

The purpose here is to explore the nature of this discourse on beneficiaries and social change in development communication projects addressing health, nutrition, and population problems. This work builds on recent scholarship about development as institutional discourse; historical shifts in development on issues of women, gender, and feminism; and communication intervention as strategic social change. This institutional discourse is situated within organizational and historical contexts. Analyses of health, nutrition, and population project descriptions demonstrate a shift from focusing on women and other marginal groups since the Decade for Women, toward emphasizing consumption and privatization.

Theoretical Approach

Development as Institutional Discourse

In this section, I frame this work within a recent tradition of understanding development within the context of institutional discourse. In subsequent sections, I focus on historical shifts in development discourse on women and gender, and on the role of communication interventions in the process of social change.

Escobar (1995a) defined discourse as "a rule-governed system held together by a set of statements that the discursive practice continues to reproduce" (p. 154), thereby shaping the reality of a field (Escobar, 1991, p. 675). As a discourse, development articulates knowledge and power through the construction of social problems and institutional interventions (Crush, 1995; Escobar, 1995b).

Institutional discourse represents the interpretations of development institutions working in their global context, rather than the interpretations of individual

practitioners. This discourse extends beyond descriptions of places and peoples as expertise that is created within the development agency to suit its own purposes (Mitchell, 1991). Development communication activity does not constitute neutral engagement, but rather, political action in the form of an intervention (Escobar, 1995a). Yet, when social problems are defined as natural rather than political, issues of power and hegemony are ignored (Mitchell, 1991, p. 23; Moore, 1995, p. 1). The articulation of social problems involves associating concern with designated conditions and groups in order to legitimize strategic solutions directed toward alleviating these problems among defined beneficiaries (Rakow, 1989; Schön, 1979). Escobar (1991) reminded us that these solutions may be accompanied by administrative measures that make practitioners "conform to the institution's discursive and practice universe" (p. 667). Through institutional practices, the nature of social problems, social change, and beneficiaries are categorized and enacted in development programs.

In this investigation, I assume that institutional documentation of communication projects represents an integral (though not complete) aspect of this sensemaking experience (Dervin, 1989; Weick, 1995). Development texts, such as reports, evaluations, and speeches, constitute assembled knowledge of the "development industry" (Crush, 1995, p. 5). In these texts, I seek organizational constructions of the processes of communication and social change, and of intended beneficiaries. Policies and programs of central development agencies constitute official program intentions, which may not correspond with actual practice, but reflect institutional discourse (Staudt, 1985, p. 3). This documentation represents an attempt by an organization to objectify knowledge through the process of establishing categories of beneficiaries and approaches to social change (Escobar, 1995a).

Gender, particularly as a way of differentiating beneficiaries, often becomes institutionalized (Staudt, 1990, p. 10) in a way that implies a "patriarchal gender system" (Valdivia, 1996, p. 8). For example, population projects focusing on women as "at-risk reproducers" privilege a biological construction, narrowing women's potential roles (Jaquette & Staudt, 1985). Development discourse creates knowledge about women, which is then processed into institutional justifications and intervention strategies. Moore (1995) estimated that "gender" made its "first discursive appearance" in development institutions during the 1960s (p. 43). However, it was not until 1975 that women's contributions to the development process were formally acknowledged by the United Nations (UN). Next, I review historical shifts in development discourse attention to women, gender, and feminism.

Historical Shifts in Development Discourse on Women and Gender

There has been a transition in the field of development communication from a lack of attention to women, to a focus on "women in development" (WID). This has been adapted by some into an approach considering "gender and development" (GAD), and more recently, toward an articulation of international feminisms.

Early scholars of development communication did not explicitly address the role of gender in their discussions of media and modernity. However, an examina-

tion of their work illustrates implicit assumptions made about men's and women's roles in the development process. For example, Lerner's (1958) classic text contrasting the life of a male Turkish village chief, representing traditional values, with that of a male grocer, representing modernity, chronicles the lives of men, while diminishing women's roles. Although women did not figure in his analyses, Lerner did hire a female interviewer, who was "ordered . . . by the numbers: thirtyish, semi-trained, alert, compliant with instructions, not sexy enough to impede our relations with the men of Balgat but chic enough to provoke the women" (p. 29). This example is not intended to isolate Lerner's work as a specialized case, but to suggest that early theorists trivialized women's roles in the development process. Valdivia's (1996) more extensive analysis of early development theorists' work confirms a pattern of discourse that minimizes women's employment and participation in development projects and constrains mediated images of gender roles. Early views of development obfuscate women's economic contributions, instead highlighting their role as vulnerable reproducers (Escobar, 1995a; Parpart, 1995).

The mid-1970s marked a shift in attention to women in development, along with other critical transitions in the field of development communication (Rogers, 1976; Schramm & Lerner, 1976). A WID strategy advocated including women as an explicit focus in order to achieve development goals (Dagenais & Piché, 1994). Based on her experience implementing a WID project, Spronk (1992) explained that project documents articulated not just the intentions of the practitioners, but of the institutional expectations regarding appropriate beneficiaries and practice. In 1975, WID was placed on a global agenda when the UN sponsored a conference in Mexico City to launch the Year of Women. This facilitated the designation of the Decade for the Advancement of Women (1976 until 1985; Staudt, 1990).

As a discourse, WID served to organize principles for the production of knowledge about women by states, institutions, and communities (Escobar, 1995a, p. 210). WID constructed women as actively contributing to society through their economic production and human reproduction (Staudt, 1985). Boserup's (1970) research on the importance of women's contributions to agricultural production, which tended to be underpaid if compensated at all, inspired a focus on women's role as economic agents. WID also pointed to a need to improve women's access to education, employment, and political participation (Parpart, 1995; Valdivia, 1996), conditions considered in earlier models of modernization that tended to privilege male constituents. Throughout the Decade for the Advancement of Women, several scholars recognized limits to using media to promote social change, such as problematic stereotypes of women in media texts, a lack of women's employment in positions of power in media industries, and poor access to mediated technologies as a source of information, particularly among rural women.

Following the Decade for Women, attention to WID gradually shifted toward a concern with gender and development (GAD). This shift from "women" to "gender" resonates with an understanding of gender as a socially constructed category, rather than essentializing sex as a biological condition (Dagenais & Piché, 1994; Parpart, 1995; Riaño, 1994). GAD attempted to position women as active agents of social change situated within social and structural systems of patriarchy and power

(Cardinal, Costigan, & Heffernan, 1994; Dagenais & Piché, 1994). Steeves (1993) drew our attention to critical scholarship about the political economy of communication and participatory approaches to development (Freire, 1983) to propose the creation of a global, imagined feminist community that challenges power relations. As a model of social change, a GAD approach to development locates power within normative and structural conditions (Parpart, 1995), in contrast to earlier development frameworks that privilege the importance of the individual in social change.

Recent literature has proposed a new shift toward "international feminisms" (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1996), recognizing differences across class, race, and other social categories (Fernea, 1998; Luthra, 1996; Mackenzie, 1995; Riaño, 1994). Respecting diversity across women, a move toward international feminisms has sought a collective identity across women as an imagined community of participants seeking to change a global history of patriarchy and domination (Cardinal, Costigan, & Heffernan, 1994; Steeves, 1987, 1993).

Existing development institutions have responded to WID and GAD by creating new structures (e.g., establishing WID divisions in the United States Agency for International Development [USAID], Canadian International Development Agency [CIDA], and the United Nations Development Programme [UNDP]) and strategies (articulating gender-sensitive guidelines). New organizations (e.g., the United Nations Development Fund for Women [UNIFEM], Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era [DAWN], Self Employed Women's Association [SEWA], Women's International Network [WIN], and Women's International News Gathering Service [WINGS]) have also been formed to facilitate collective mobilization toward global feminist issues (Wilkins, 1997). The 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women and the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Forum in Beijing attracted more than 30,000 participants, five times as many as had the conference 20 years earlier. Despite the introduction of new structures, conferences, policies, and organizations, the emphasis on women's programs may be diminishing (Dagenais & Piché, 1994, p. 59), limited by a lack of resources (Staudt, 1990), women in senior management positions (Parker & Friedman, 1993, p. 117), and appropriate gender stereotypes (Ferguson, 1990).

A feminist approach to development highlights many issues worth examining, including the gendered constructions of intended beneficiaries in communication interventions, the lack of female representation in existing development agencies, the efforts of women's groups to promote social change, women's access to communication technologies, and inappropriate stereotypes employed in strategic messages. I focus on the first of these issues, concerning the role of gender in institutional discourse on project beneficiaries, by exploring organizational documentation on communication interventions. Next, I consider the role of communication campaigns in strategic social change.

Communication Interventions in Strategic Social Change

In this study of development discourse, I focus on communication interventions designed to facilitate social change. The academic literature on development communication projects highlights the failure of these interventions, due to inappro-

priate theoretical approaches, poor program implementation, inadequate resources, lack of political support (Hornik, 1988), or lack of connection with audiences' needs, knowledge, and concerns (Mody, 1991). These development communication projects build on broader conceptualizations of the social change process facilitated through communication interventions. These projects are implemented by organizations working within political-economic contexts.

Communication campaigns represent a form of social intervention prompted by a determination that some situation represents a social problem that merits action. Although models of campaigns are united by their assumption that information may be an appropriate means to resolve social concerns, they are divided in their approaches to intervention. One of the most prominent approaches to public communication campaigns, at least in literature published on the topic in the U.S., advocates a social-marketing framework. Social marketing (McGuire, 1989) refers to a model of communication campaigns that works toward promoting a socially beneficial practice or product in a target group. It does so through market segmentation and formative research. The theoretical framework underlying this approach follows sequential cognitive processes, moving an individual from acquisition of knowledge, to an adjustment of attitudes, toward an ultimate goal of behavior change (known as a "KAP" hierarchy of effects).

By focusing on individual social change, social marketing may be critiqued for not adequately addressing social contexts (in terms of social structures and norms, or political-economic conditions) in its conceptual framework. Alternatively, other models of communication campaigns build on sociological frameworks, attempting to change norms rather than individuals, or on political-economic conditions, attempting to address structural constraints. Another critique of the social-marketing model corresponds with recent attention in development communication discourse to more participatory approaches to social change (Melkote, 1991; Servaes, Jacobson, & White, 1996). Some find fault with social marketing for assuming that individuals in an audience serve as the objects rather than participants of communication interventions. For example, according to Gnmucio-Dagron (1991),

> We in the Third World already have the experience of being objects of advertising techniques and we believe that social marketing represents exactly the opposite of what we have been fighting for over the last 25 years: a communication approach that places strength in the community and aims to change the passive receptor of messages into an active communicator. (p. 20)

These diverse approaches to communication campaigns may be categorized as attempting to persuade audiences to alter their behavior, to provide beneficiaries with information or skills, to educate groups toward normative change (Wilkins, 1996), or to adapt structural conditions. Projects designed to inform and to persuade focus on individuals as the central locus of social change. However, each model holds very different assumptions about the role of communication. In the first model, projects assume communication serves as an end in itself, resonating with a participatory approach to development communication (Melkote, 1991). This information approach needs to be conceptualized as distinct from a persua-

sion framework, which attempts to change behavior as an ultimate goal, perhaps facilitated through the process of changing knowledge and attitudes (McGuire, 1989). With persuasion projects, communication is assumed to serve as a means toward another end, and not as a social good in and of itself. This framework is closely aligned with social-marketing models of social change. In contrast, projects designed to educate locate the focus of social change at the level of collective groups rather than at the level of individuals. These projects are designed to encourage people to adopt new values and norms over the long term, assuming that interventions play a contributing role in the overall socialization of a community. Finally, structural approaches attempt to improve policies or services by focusing their interventions on key professionals (e.g., physicians) and decision makers (e.g., government officials), who are directly responsible for structural conditions.

I situate communication campaigns within the organizational contexts in which they are produced. Luthra's (1991) analysis of a social-marketing project in Bangladesh demonstrated the importance of the marketing organization in promoting particular conventions in intervention strategies. Drawing on Guttman's (1997) "value-centered" approach to the study of health communication interventions and Rakow's (1989) framework of communication campaigns, such projects represent political strategies rather than neutral responses to objective social problems. Approaches to social problems do not exist independently, but are constructed by human agents (Schön, 1979) working within institutional contexts. Organizations not only select the issues to be addressed through mediated campaigns, but they also define the problem they hope to resolve through their interpretation and characterization of the issue (Salmon, 1989). Groups and persons participating in the construction of communication campaigns have power with respect to their ability to define problems, appropriate solutions, and beneficiaries (Gergen & Gergen, 1983).

Organizational contexts encompass both structural (in terms of interorganizational relations) and normative (in terms of shared approaches to social problems and their solutions) conditions. To explore normative conditions within environments, I build from models of "sense making" (e.g., Dervin, 1989) and interpretive approaches to organizational communication (e.g., Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983). Weick (1995) summarized the central tenets of this approach, conceiving organizations as "sense-making systems" in which members actively engage in interpretation and action.

In addition to normative conditions, organizations are subject to their structural circumstances, such as the nature of the funding relationships between the organization and its donors and recipients (e.g., Aldrich, 1979; Luhmann, 1982; Murdock, 1988). This political-economic structure is believed to contribute to the direction of articulated policies and programs in development agencies (Luthra, 1991). USAID development projects, for example, are created within a context of foreign policies that have supported privatization and commercialization since the early 1980s (Mohammadi, 1997). Communication campaigns are implemented by several international development organizations with vastly different political-economic struc-

tures, operating as bilateral agencies, multilateral agencies, nongovernmental organizations, or domestic government institutions.

This approach to the study of communication campaigns assumes that social problems, and consequently the interventions designed to resolve them, are socially constructed by practitioners working within organizational contexts. These organizations are guided and constrained by normative climates and political-economic structures. Institutional discourse about communication projects is situated within organizational and historical contexts to address shifts in attention to gender and communication strategies over time.

Research Approach

The central issue in this research concerns the nature of institutional discourse on development communication. Specifically, how does this discourse articulate the role of gender in constructions of project beneficiaries and the role of communication in the process of social change? Moreover, does this discourse vary across organizational or historical contexts?

I explored these questions through an analysis of population, health, and nutrition projects implemented since 1975 (the first year dedicated by the UN to the recognition of women's roles in the development process). Although WID and GAD encouraged development interventions that would improve a variety of conditions for women (including access to formal education and economic opportunities), the areas of population, health, and nutrition command a much higher proportion of development resources and are more likely to target and reach a higher proportion of women than other sectors of development (Helzner & Shepard, 1990; Jaquette & Staudt, 1985; Population Council, 1997).

These analyses were based on institutional documentation of health, nutrition, and population projects[1] acquired through the Development Communication Archive in the Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin.[2] The selection of documents includes all development communication projects in these fields ($N = 262$) implemented since 1975. The unit of analysis was the project implemented in one geographical site. When possible, multisite programs were counted according to each individual project. Only those interventions implemented in communities outside North America and Western Europe were included in this analysis.[3]

[1] This project sample includes 37% in the area of population, 40% in health, 13% in nutrition, and 10% from the areas of population and health dealing exclusively with AIDS.

[2] Funded by USAID, the former Clearinghouse for Development Communication had been maintained most recently by the Academy for Educational Development (AED). This Archive is now administered by the Radio-Television-Film Department (RTF), through the College of Communication, and the Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin.

[3] Studied projects were implemented in the Caribbean or Latin America (46%), Africa (27%), the Middle East or Asia (25%), and in multiple regions (2%).

Development practitioners construct interventions designed to alleviate perceived problems, based on their beliefs about the nature of their audience, the social change process, and possible outcomes or processes facilitated through communication. Therefore, the central dimensions in this analysis included the implied model of social change, channels of communication employed, characterizations of intended beneficiaries, organizational context of funding agency, and year of initial implementation. The coding of these characteristics appeared to be reliable.[4]

To investigate assumptions made about communication and social change, I described the approaches to social change employed (according to the goal stated in the project), and assumptions about communication channels (implied in descriptions of and justifications for intervention strategies). Based on the stated objectives of the intervention and the description of the process engaged, I categorized each project as designed to inform individuals and promote dialogue, to persuade individuals to change their behavior, to educate collective groups toward new social norms and values, or to change structural conditions. Projects explicating an ultimate objective toward changing beneficiaries' behaviors were classified as "persuading." Projects that did not include behavior change in their objectives were categorized as "educating," if they focused on altering the attitudes or values of beneficiaries, or as "informing," if they concentrated on the provision of information or skills.[5] Projects that target other professionals and decision makers rather than beneficiaries are categorized as "structural." In this analysis, these categories were treated as mutually exclusive in order to differentiate projects with different assumptions about the role of communication intervention in the process of social change. Many of these projects described more than one objective, but were coded in terms of the ultimate goal the communication intervention intended to accomplish.

To investigate discourse on beneficiaries, I chronicled which groups have been targeted and how they have been described. Explicit reference to intended audience of each project was coded, along with justifications and descriptions of these groups. Many projects referenced more than one audience, so each category was coded separately.

In addition, I explored how discourse on social change and beneficiaries varied across organizational contexts and over time. The organizational context of the funding institution—whether through bilateral, multilateral, NGO, or developing country government support—may influence the nature of discourse about project activity. The historical conditions of the time period may also contribute to the nature of development communication. These analyses distinguished projects

[4] Agreement coefficients across two coders are estimated at or above .80 (year implemented: 1.0; funding institution: .87; social change strategy: .80; television: 1.0; radio: 1.0; film-video: 1.0; audiovisual: .93; newspapers-magazines: .87; other print: 1.0; telephone: 1.0; folk: 1.0; interpersonal: 1.0; women as reproducers: .87; women as other: .93; men-fathers: .93; youth: 1.0; low-SES: .93; mid-SES: 1.0; consumer: .93; rural: .87; urban: .87; professional: 1.0; general: 1.0).

[5] It is important to acknowledge that no claim can be made that these "informing" projects are more or less "participatory" than the others, given the research focus on discourse and not praxis.

implemented between 1975 and 1984 (54% of the studied projects), roughly approximating the Decade for Women, which lasted until 1985, from projects implemented after 1985.

Given that the collection was sponsored by USAID for many years, it is not surprising that most of the projects in the sample (55%) were funded through USAID. About one quarter (27%) were funded through NGOs, 10% through multilateral agencies, 5% through national governments in developing countries, and 3% through other bilateral donors or other sources. Projects on which USAID worked with other donors on a particular intervention were coded as USAID projects. Similarly, when a multilateral organization worked with NGOs, the project was coded as a multilateral strategy. NGO projects then represented those interventions attracting neither bilateral nor multilateral support.

I did not assume that this sample of documents reflected a population of projects or actual practice in the field. Therefore, significance statistics, used to assess a relationship between a randomly selected sample and a population, have limited value for this study. Although this sample represented all appropriate project descriptions identified in the Archive, it was limited in that it represented a purposive selection of materials deemed worthy by previous administrators of the collection. In addition, this research was limited by focusing on written documentation, which summarizes and selects aspects of project experience as bureaucratic discourse, distinguished from praxis or actual project implementation in the field.

Findings

Development Discourse on Communication and Social Change

In this section, I illustrate assumptions made about the potential for communication interventions in the process of social change. Project descriptions, articulating intended goals, selections of communication channels, and justifications for projects inform this analysis.

Overall, about half of the projects (52%) were categorized as attempting to persuade audiences to change their behavior. Another third (30%) were categorized as attempting to inform individuals with new knowledge or skills (see Table 1). Of the remaining 18%, half pursued a strategy to educate an audience and half to change structural conditions.

Projects attempting to persuade individuals tended to promote a Western version of modernity that is associated with faith in technology. Oral Rehydration Therapy (ORT), for example, was framed in USAID-sponsored Healthcom projects as the latest achievement of modern science to resolve the "problem" of mothers following traditional local practices when their children have diarrhea (Meyer, Block, & Ferguson, 1983). Similarly, a nutrition project description suggested that this intervention would coax mothers away from problematic rural customs (Huffman & Canbest, 1988).

The persuasion model can best be characterized by a social-marketing approach to social change. More than half (56%) of all projects categorized as persuasion explicitly discussed social marketing as a conceptual framework. For ex-