

# Women and International Development

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An interview with Nora Cebotarev, Professor Emerita of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Guelph, Canada, conducted by graduate students Asako Shiraishi and Hiro Ishida, near the end of the revered professor's life. After a short illness, Nora died at Guelph General Hospital on August 12, 2007, at the age of seventy-nine.

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Asako            Thank you for giving us a chance to talk to you about international development. Let me ask the first questions. When did you start working in international development? Why were you interested in this field? What made you think of being involved in this field?

Nora            Maybe we should start one by one. First, when did I start. Actually, when I began, this is a long time ago, I did work in development. At that time I didn't call it international development because it was in the country where I was growing up, Paraguay. I began working in an educational program, non-formal education for rural people in rural areas. That was in the mid-1950s, so that's a long time ago. I think the reason I was interested in development issues is that my parents were from Europe. They came to Latin America to live in a very rural area, and they had other aspirations: for more education for people. I shared these aspirations and wanted to share them with others, so the logical thing was to start doing things that could help others to improve their lives. That's why I started working in international development. But at that time it was within my own country, which at that time was Paraguay, in Latin America.

Asako            Then you left your country?

Nora            I worked as a volunteer, but I felt then that I needed to get more education because I didn't have an university education. I was lucky I could come and study in the United States, where I did my Bachelor's, Master's, and PhD. When I got my education, the program in my country that I was working in ended. But in Canada they were beginning to increase the number of universities to develop a university system. This was in the 1960s, and they created many new universities – Guelph Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier. These were created more or less in the 1960s, so Canada invited me to come over and I came to work here. But I never forgot about people in other countries. I continued working with IDRC and CIDA, and with IICA, International Institute for Cooperation and Agriculture, which is in Costa Rica, and some other institutions.

- Asako           What did you do in these organizations? What is your specialty?
- Nora            I am a rural sociologist, so basically what we did is study rural areas and help people get organized, help people get better education and improve their agriculture and health, their nutrition. At that time, there was a great deal of transfer of agricultural technologies, so that was part of it, but also literacy, helping people to read and write, so they could inform themselves, also health programs, hygiene, public health, general health, how they can improve their health, and some knowledge about all these different viruses and germs and how to deal with contagious diseases, and nutrition was very important, so they would do the right things to be healthy and strong. Childcare, how to take care of small children and babies and what their needs were and how to educate them, was also part of this work. So a number of different things. I didn't do any long-term planning. I didn't have the training for that. I couldn't do that. But there were other people who did the planning.
- Asako           Now I would like to focus on women's issues in development. Have you done a lot of projects focusing on women?
- Nora            I focused on women a long time ago in different ways. When I worked formally in agricultural extension, I worked with women because in that country, Paraguay, I was the first woman to work in agricultural extension, and afterwards I trained some other women. But we mainly were concentrating on women as mothers and housewives. You see, not on the economic part, because that was considered the role of men. But I felt that so many women were left alone to take care of their families, that they needed all these other kinds of knowledge, not only household knowledge. Household knowledge is quite good and important. You need to know how to manage and run a good household. There's nothing wrong with that. But women also needed something else. That's how I began. In fact, the first research I did for IDRC, was in 1974 or '75. I was sent to sixteen countries in Latin America to review programs they were conducting for men and for women, particularly for peasants, not people in the cities, in rural areas and far away. On the basis of that, we had a publication. In many countries, they accepted our recommendations for their rural development programs. That was when I worked for IDRC.
- But I also was at the University of Guelph. That was part of my work. This is how I started. I felt work with women was very important, and there were no courses on women and development here. I was the first one to offer a course on "women and development" because it was important for people and students to realize that women were doing a lot of things that North Americans did not know about. In Latin America, we knew. I am sure that in Japan women do many things that other people don't know about. It's just never been paid attention to. So I started in 1980, the first graduate course at the University of Guelph on women and development, and from there on there were more. Of course, 1975 had been the international women's year, which focused attention on women, and we started

having more studies and more information on this subject, so I continued that work.

But I never was fully part of women's movements in North America, because I thought North America culture is still too individualistic, and because my experience was in Latin America. Latin American women don't think of themselves as separate from others. They think of themselves as part of their families, as part of society. Therefore, in my view, to work on gender relations you have to work with women and men, because otherwise you only create frustration. If you work only with women, you create frustration, because women alone are expected to do things and they ignore men or contradict men. I think we have to work together to change things.

Asako In international development many projects, especially for women, are implemented by international organizations such as the World Bank. I think that these projects are based on a western perspective. To what extent can these development agencies intervene in gender relations in third-world countries?

Nora I can tell you the following things. Whether they explicitly talk about it or not, they intervene in gender relations, because if you look at effects of development, as it was introduced and carried out without considering gender, it has actually in many parts of the world damaged the position of women. So even if they say they are not going to influence gender relations, they bring about changes that have effects on gender. I think that you cannot get away from this. If you bring in economic and political changes, you bring in changes in gender. I think that it is better to be explicit about it and recognize it and think about it and plan it.

The thing I believe is wrong quite often is that people go in and assume there are certain gender relations and they assume there are certain things that have to be corrected. I think we always have to go and find out first what gender relations are in that society and how they are connected to overall well-being and to people's values and then work with people to make things better. I am very uncomfortable with going somewhere and saying I know what you have to do in order to improve gender relations. I have to study, and I have to do it with men and women in that country. Because unless they accept it, unless they see that with some changes it will be better for all of them, they are not going to do it. They will be against it. We have seen in many countries that people say, "This is an imposition; we don't like this." I think gender relations are cultural. They differ. One has to learn and understand them before saying, "Yes, I know what you need to be doing and how to correct...."

Hiro Do you think that when approaching another culture, we should apply participatory observations before applying some kind of theory?

Nora I think so. I think at least with gender issues, we have to use a participatory approach: make sure we are hearing both sides, because quite often one of the

problems was that male social scientists would talk to men in a community, and then very seldom would hear women, the women's side. It's also in many countries difficult also for men, for example in Latin America. I was just talking to somebody this morning. It's not appropriate for an agronomist to go and teach a woman better farming practices if this woman is married and if her husband is not there. So you have to know the local gender relations to understand what is appropriate and what is not. So I think international agencies are doing an important favour to us when they call attention to gender relations as something we need to pay attention to. My one reservation is that we cannot have answers or solutions for everywhere that are the same. Appropriate solutions have to be found within the country, with the culture, with the people, in a participatory way.

Hiro Do you think a certain concrete theory is important, or that a more go-with-the-flow approach is better?

Nora I see two things. One is to understand what gender relations mean and how gender is formed. Gender is formed within the culture and changes through time. If you go through history, if you look at Japanese history, you will see how gender relations have changed. You can see the change since World War II, over the last forty, fifty years. So it's something dynamic, changing. That's one thing. But there is something totally different that we have added to this gender issue. It is that we now have a strong belief in human equality and human rights. Now we are trying to say, "Okay, we are using this measure of equality and human rights, and hey, things are not equal. This is not good." These are different things.

I do some work in Ecuador, in the Andean region of Latin America, which I didn't do before, which is relatively new for me in the last three years. I am reading a lot about the history and culture of indigenous people. It seems that in the culture of indigenous people, there is something called a "parallel system." See in our system, in order to be equal, you have to be the same. So far we have accepted men as a model: to be equal, women have to be like men. Much less, very little that we ask men to be like women. Have we asked men to be like women? Not very much. But if we really think about equality, then we will have to ask that men do some things and be like women, as well as to a certain extent that women be like men. We don't do that. We just want to shape up women, so women have to do as men do, as well as what they always did. This creates a lot of problems in order to be equal.

In the Andes they have a different system, what is called a "parallel system," where you have men doing their things and women doing their things. But they are valued equally, more or less. They are different but equally valued, and both are considered essential. One without the other is incomplete, not sufficient. So you see there are different ways of thinking about equality. Right now I am working in Ecuador. Research is one of the things we are doing, and I am going there again next month. We are trying to see what are men's and women's, indigenous men's and indigenous women's, what are their titles in their culture,

what is considered to be appropriate and what is not. We are finding that they are more egalitarian than the Spanish, the people who came and colonized the Americas. It's interesting to see that there is more than one way of looking at equality. But it's the equality that creates problems: the ideal of having equality that brings attention to unequal gender relations. Do you see? If we were not concerned about human equality and human rights, equal rights for men and women, we wouldn't be worried about gender.

Hiro I think that there are many approaches to defining equality, to make a difference in the culture. But I guess there are some activist western NGOs that try to go into another culture and not enforce but push their way of looking at things, and that sometimes causes a cultural destruction. What do you think of that?

Nora Not really they don't. I don't think that they are that powerful, but they create a lot of conflicts.

Hiro I think in some cultures they might look at it differently than we do. Maybe women have their roles and men have their roles.

Nora You are right. This is why I think you have to go there. Instead of coming with a pre-conceived notion about gender and gender relations, you have to actually do a bit of study and find out. Then you can see and discuss with the people themselves how and where they can change things.

Hiro Everybody cooperates, so everybody is satisfied with what's coming out.

Nora It has to be done, because if men are not satisfied with the kind of change you put forward, in most countries right now they are in power, they have more power than women, they can either stop it or they take it over. We don't want either of these things. We want them to work with us to bring about changes. The important thing is to be able to reach men and show them there are advantages for everybody if they are less controlling sometimes.

I have some examples from Mexico. In Mexico, there are organizations for men where men get together and discuss how they can make life within their families, within their community, better. One of the main themes is that sharing responsibility, sharing power, is beneficial for everybody, that less violence is beneficial for everybody. They are quite successful. Psychologists and psychiatrists who work there have a whole network of men's groups that are trying to say, "Women have been meeting and getting together and thinking of gender issues, but we never have. Let us get together and think about that. Then we can improve." These groups are working very well.

There is another case in Veracruz, in the southern part of Mexico, where a medical doctor has a group of men, is working with men for gender equality. He uses the approach to health. He shows men how the idea of the Mexican male –

very aggressive, drinks a lot, womanizing, and so on – how that is really killing them, how it is bad for their health, how if they change, they will live longer and live better. So there you have an approach through health to bringing about more egalitarian and more cooperative relationships.

- Asako Just not say that women have to be equal to men, so men should have to give up something.
- Nora That's part of it. The important thing is for men to recognize that they give up something but they also gain. It's not a loss. It's not a zero-sum game. It's a win-win situation. They give up something but they get something, which is even better for them. If you get a longer and healthier life, that's more worthwhile than a miserable life. But still, I think it's good that international agencies require attention to gender because it is an important topic, an important way of differentiating people. Just like social class, ethnicity and race, you know gender distinguishes and excludes, so it has a kind of function that was ignored because it was considered natural. So I think it's good that they call attention to it. Now I am not so sure that all the methods are the most appropriate. I think that we have to have different, more participatory, more exploratory ways of working with people for change.
- Hiro I guess then that project teams should have equal numbers of women and men.
- Nora I think that more important than whether they have the same number of men and women, is the attitude of the men and the attitude of the women. I have seen some women who are tougher than some men. They are more sexist. I have seen that. So it is not just the same number. That's the easy thing to say: we are egalitarian because we have 48 percent women and 52 percent men, or fifty-fifty, or thirty-seventy. I mean that's the easy thing. You still don't know what women think. So it's really developing a different perspective on life that is important. That's the important part of it.
- Asako I think that the next question might be related to how these projects should be done. Some people say that all development projects for women implemented in the third world should be stopped now, because as long as these projects are implemented in the current capitalistic and global economic system, these projects only involve women in this current economic system. So it just assists global power to exploit women in the third world. What do you think of this argument?
- Nora Sometime this is true. I think that to do something about that, the first question should be, "Do we have an alternative?" The second question is, "Do women have an alternative?" I have seen many studies about (and I myself have been very much against) industries going from one country to another to buy cheaper labour. For example, when I came to Canada thirty years ago, the textile industry in Canada was stronger, there were more textiles and clothing produced here.

Many of the factories went to India, then to China, where labour is cheap. There they made more money for themselves, but they also damaged industry here. So it's a complicated kind of thing.

What happens to women in China or Brazil is that they are exploited. This is true. But if they don't go to those factories, what options do they have? Sometimes they have no options. Just staying home and farming, working very hard, being under the control of a very tough patriarchal father who doesn't let them out and sometimes even beats them and so on. So it's not that they have many options. When we look at these things, we always have to see what alternatives there are. If we don't have alternatives, then how can we make sure the damage is diminished, make it less? We have to weigh what is more damaging or worse for women: being exploited in those factories that support capitalism, or not being there. What other things can they do? What situations will work? So it's not that easy.

At one time I was very much against the foreign-owned factories. Then I went to look at some of these places. I looked at where they were living. When they worked, at least they could buy some things and improve some of their life, and they wanted these improvements. They didn't have many alternatives. So I think that we need to look at alternatives. If there are alternatives, of course that's better. But when there are no alternatives, I think that we have to make the best of it and see how we can diminish, decrease the exploitation, and help them. That's where the equal rights come in: their right to education, health and social services. You know, help us because there is legislation to push for that. So we can get some protection. I don't think you are going to like my answer so much because it is not that very simple.

- Asako This is very hard to answer. I think it is better to find alternatives. But of course sometimes we cannot find any, and then what we have to do are two things, as you said: decrease the degree of exploitation, or just stop these projects. But it is hard to just stop.
- Nora No, it's hard to just stop. One has to weigh, see what will happen if I go ahead with this project. You never can anticipate everything but you can anticipate some things. What will happen if this project is stopped, what will the consequences be? Which is worse? Maybe you have to choose between two not-so-good things. You choose the one that is less damaging.
- Asako Do you think that people in the first world countries can do something? I mean many people don't think we are exploiting those people in the third world.
- Nora I think people who are working in international development at least want to go and work on the local, grass-roots level. I don't think they exploit people. Most of them are going with a desire to help improve life. I think they have a desire to make a difference to improve life. There are people who exploit others in the third

world; they are in Canada, the United States, probably in Japan. But there are also people who exploit their own people right there in each of these countries. It is not just that we exploit others. Their own people exploit them, too.

I think of my own work, where I have been very careful about this. What I thought was important was to give people the knowledge and tools to make proper choices, to empower them in terms of making proper choices rather than telling them, “This is good for you, do this, you will improve.” But give them some tools, analytic tools so they can make proper choices. Give them information. Sometimes I tell them about the underdeveloped regions of Canada, because they think, “Canada! The best country in the world according to the United Nations, two or three years in a row! Everything is wonderful!” So I tell them we also have problems. You have to show them it’s not that black and white.

Then there is also the fact that people want material things. This is true. But some people don’t want to have material things when they have to sacrifice other things. For example, when I go to Latin America, people have time to sit and visit with me and talk with me. Then I return to Canada, where we seem hardly to have any time. My colleagues in the department, professors, my friends, they have very little time for me. They say, “I have to go, I have a meeting, I have this and that.” There is no time. In Latin America people don’t want to lose their abilities to have time for each other in the family, with their friends, within the community. That’s a cultural thing. It’s for them more valuable than having more money. So we have to see what is really more valuable and more important to them. I don’t know about Japan. I have never been there. I would like to go. I think that in Japan you are pretty busy too, aren’t you?

- Asako      I think it’s the same as in Canada. Maybe Canadian people have more time than in Japan.
- Hiro        Depends on region, I think. If you live in a big city like Tokyo, it’s the same as in Toronto: you have less time maybe for socializing with people, more of a scheduled outline for every day.
- Nora        I think that Japan is pretty structured. I have met and interacted with Japanese who are usually very well-organized and well-structured. I think this is true. It isn’t so true for Latin Americans. Depends who you work with, so you have to understand culture and the structure of life.
- Hiro        The last question. In just one phrase, what does development mean to you?
- Nora        That’s a difficult question. To me, development is basically human satisfaction, their satisfaction not mine, human satisfaction, which means being healthy, being well fed, and feeling that you are a human being or a person – whatever the notion is, because for example in Latin America, there is much more notion of a person.

You are a person when you have friends and you are a person when you have your family and you are a person when you are connected to others. In North America you are a person when you go by yourself and do this and that and achieve and beat somebody else to the best job and best mark and best things. So there are different notions of being a person. But living and thinking that you have achieved satisfaction in your culture. I think that should be development. I don't think that we should try to tell people something else.

Hiro            Thank you very much.

Asako         Thank you very much.