

Gender Myths

SUSIE JOLLY, *BRIDGE*

IN THIS ISSUE:

- Gender myths
- Creating myths from inside and outside institutions
- Myths of household and family
- Myths of solidarity and difference
- Ways forward

Much development work has been based on gender stereotypes – for example the idea that farmers are men. In reaction, feminism has sometimes created counter stereotypes – such as that of the African woman farmer and her lazy husband. Such images have been hugely important in changing ideas about gender and channelling more resources to women. However, some such images have been exaggerated and put beyond question, resulting in “gender myths”. Gender myths are a powerful tool for positive change but also bring with them risks and dangers. This was the subject of a conference, held at the Institute of Development Studies, UK, in 2003. This *In Brief* draws together highlights from the conference with the aim of thinking about how to move beyond simplistic stereotypes to better promote gender equality. You too are invited to join this discussion on www.siyanda.org or by sending your comments to BRIDGE.

Gender myths

WE LIVE IN a world of gender stereotypes. We are surrounded by messages about women being weak and men being strong, about women being better carers and men being better at earning money; a world in which everyone is supposed to be

heterosexual and married or wanting to be. These kinds of ideas are all too familiar, although the content of each stereotype varies from place to place.

Feminists have fought against these stereotypes. Sometimes arguments have been simplified in order to get the message across, and counter-stereotypes have been created in the process: men drink, women are sober and reliable, men perpetrate violence, women are capable, men are lazy and so on. Sometimes we do this deliberately for a particular purpose – yes we are capable and reliable, give us credit. Sometimes, we are less simplistic. However, even if we do not simplify our arguments, our ideas get picked up and used by others for a variety of



Participants in the Gender Myths Conference, July 2003