

Acceptance of the Margaret Mead Award by Mary Lindsay Elmendorf  
March 12, 1982

[This document represents a small part of the life long work of Mary Elmendorf, a pioneering anthropologist working in policy circles. Dr. Elmendorf's papers have been archived at the University of Florida; the index can be found on the web at <http://web.uflib.ufl.edu/spec/manuscript/guides/Elmendorf.htm> -- Joe Heyman, SfAA Public Policy Committee]

I am happy, truly happy, to receive this award and to know that you all feel that my work has helped make anthropological data and principles meaningful to a broader concerned public.

I am also honored, but I feel strongly that this honor should be shared with my supportive family, especially my late husband, John Elmendorf, who during our 43 years of marriage, tolerated my rebelliousness and shared my hopes and dreams and the nurturing of our two children, Lindsay and Susie, who have encouraged me to continue my active life.

I am also amused to be receiving the Margaret Mead award for a younger scholar, a month before my 65<sup>th</sup> birthday! There are two primary reasons for this. First, because of Margaret Mead who gave me a needed extra incentive to go back in my fifties and finish my Ph.D. by her insistence on the special contributions that can be made by post-menopausal women. As anthropologists we are all aware of the non-polluting characteristics of older women in traditional societies but are less aware of their potential in our society.

The second reason was to complete unfinished business. Like many young women, wives especially, my graduate studies were interrupted. Growing up, as I did, in the rural south during the depression even completing my undergraduate studies at Chapel Hill was difficult. When my father sadly told me he couldn't afford to send me back for my senior year, he said he could only educate one of us children, and it would have to be my younger brother, because he felt that I'd get married and didn't need the education as much, I was shocked. I can still remember saying, "I must go back. I won't promise not to get married, but I will promise to use my education". My consciousness was raised. And back at Chapel Hill, where as one of 200 women admitted only if we had a B or better average in a subject area not offered in a women's college, among 2,000 men, I suddenly realized we were living in a segregated, but not equal world. We complained and I suddenly found myself on the student executive board. And so I finished the University at 20 with a B.A. in Psychology and graduate credits in Public Administration, and Social Work. After nearly a decade of hard work in various agencies, public and private, in the rural south, the slums of New England and two years as director of the AFSC refugee program in Europe as a Quaker volunteer during and after World War II, I returned to Chapel Hill to re-enter graduate school in the new department of Anthropology. After 2 years and 2 babies we went to Mexico for 18 months and stayed 11 years. But the years were full of learning, and as Chief of the Mexican CARE Mission, the first woman director, I worked closely with Aguirre Beltran and Villa Rojas, and others at the National Indian Institute and the Ministries of Health, Education and Agriculture in their innovative programs. It was in Mexico in the 50's that I became

acutely aware of the power of women as agents of change as I worked with Mexican professional women, and saw the various pilot programs where young women trained as promotores, mejoradores, etc. were able to successfully reach villagers both the women and the men. And it was after this that I decided that more needed to be known about this phenomenon.

After coming back to the states in the early 60's I prepared a research proposal on the "Role of Women as Agents of Change" – Women in Development as we say now – but the time was not right. Thanks to encouragement from my Mexican colleagues Aguirre Beltran, Villa Rojas, Steven Hagan and others, I continued my interest in Mexican women. George Foster, who will receive the Malinowski award tonight, urged me to go ahead with my research and introduced me to Beverly Chiñas who was studying Tehuantepec women. And finally, I reentered graduate school and completed my degree in 1972 under Dorothy Lee, and Alfonso Villa Rojas, writing on Maya women and change. This work, which was published in Spanish and English within two years, led to various research and consultant assignments for the Mexican government, the World Bank, USAID and other agencies analyzing the socio-cultural aspects of development projects, with emphasis on the roles of women and community participation in meeting basic needs. For me these basic needs have fallen into three categories – Water, Energy and Population. In all of these issues I have worked closely with engineers, planners, demographers, and others always urging better communication with village people in order to understand their perceived needs and solve mutual problems.

In population my concern has been in conception and contraception with fertility control as a women's right, in contraceptive technologies as considered appropriate and presented in appropriate – meaningful ways to local groups. Not just access, but understanding. For example sin palabras – without words, pamphlets with PIACT (Piate de Mexico), using drawings and photographs.

In energy my interest in the fuelwood crisis – a far greater problem than the oil crisis – was aroused in 1975 when my first task at the World Bank was to review Eckholm's classic book Losing Ground. I suggested places throughout where women, as primary users – and often gatherers of wood – needed to be inserted in major roles. And they were. Then in 1979 I was asked to prepare a discussion paper on household energy for the National Academy of Sciences International Workshop on Energy Survey Methodologies for Developing countries, which appeared as "Human Dimensions of Energy Needs and Resources". And from that into social forestry and a draft of a think piece on "Forestry, Fuel Funds, Food and Females" just before a field assignment to Thailand to assist in designing a national energy survey with engineers and local social scientists. Household energy is a continuing interest, and working with my new husband, John Landgraf, we are examining possibilities of community woodlots in Thailand as a part of their rural renewable energy program.

In water, which I always combine with sanitation, I have spent about half my time since 1977 when I attended the UN conference on Water at Mar del Plata where I spoke out on the need for community participation – and particularly by women – in improving domestic water. First there was an assignment at the World Bank helping design a research program on acceptance and diffusion of appropriate technologies for excreta disposal. I was able to get approval for case studies – by social scientists – of successes and failures of intervention in sanitation in Latin America. The analysis of these studies

– “the Sociocultural Aspects of Excreta Disposal” is being reprinted. I’m accused by some of voyeurism, and I’m called the “four letter word lady” by others, but awareness of the importance of taboos and habits in acceptance of changes in water use and excreta disposal is growing. And this understanding has led to the importance of women as primary users and socializers. Another think piece was “Women, Water and Waste” – alliteration helps call attention to interrelatedness of things. People laugh but they remember. “Women, Water, and Waste” was presented first to a small AID group, then presented at a Forum seminar at the Mid Decade Conference of women in Copenhagen, then revised for presentation to various engineering groups including the 100<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the American Waterworks association, 3000 engineers strong, as “Women and the Decade”. By 1990 there is hope that the more than a billion people in rural areas and urban slums presently without safe drinking water and even rudimentary sanitation will have at least minimum facilities. The World Bank estimates that 100 to 300 billion U.S. dollars is needed. Now John Kalbermatten the World Bank advisor on Water and Sanitation is urging that women be involved in planning and designing so that the sociocultural aspects will be understood and improvements will be used and maintained. And AID is circulating a working paper of “The Roles of Women as Participants in and Beneficiaries of Improvements in Water Supply and Sanitation”, for use in overseas programs. In fact it is being translated into French and Spanish for field use.

Just last week a call came from WHO in Geneva to say that these papers – and discussion of them – have helped get women’s roles, for the first time as an agenda item for the upcoming annual meeting of the interagency consortium composed of UNDP, WHO, UNICE, FAO and the World Bank, where planning for allocations of the billions of dollars for water supply and sanitation will be discussed. My priority next week is to prepare an issues paper for this meeting. And so it goes.

But for me even more important is the fact that more and more agencies are asking for anthropological inputs – and for women’s perspectives. More doors are opening for anthropologists as planners, politicians; even economists are becoming more aware of the cultural dimensions of development. Reports such as the Global 2000 Report tell us – and the newspapers daily confirm – we must seek new ways of solving the increasing poverty and violence. As anthropologists we have many things to offer but we must be able to communicate our micro-level studies – our views from the villages – to a macro level or global perspective. We must learn the languages of the other disciplines, translate our findings, and at the same time listen carefully to the villagers if we are to be effective as cultural brokers.