At issue: Gender WDR
Limits, gaps, and fudges

The 2012 World Development Report (WDR) is a watershed moment: it is the first time that the World Bank, the world's largest and most influential development institution, has devoted its flagship publication to gender. Kate Bedford of the University of Kent argues that the report leaves the Bank failing to face up to its role in perpetuating policies that harm women, and is seriously limited in its approach to women's movements, markets, and households.

The 2012 WDR aims to establish the relevance of gender to development, given a continuing suspicion – not least among the Bank's own macroeconomists – that it is a distraction from the serious business of growth. This is accomplished by asserting both the intrinsic and instrumental value of gender equality: it is a development good in its own right, and it is related to other development goods such as increased productivity, improved outcomes for children, and more effective political institutions. We learn that development has closed many gender gaps in education, life expectancy, and labour force participation, but that gaps persist in four areas: excess deaths of women and girls; continuing educational disadvantage; unequal access to economic opportunities; and differences in 'voice' in households and formal politics. These gaps lead to the identification of four priorities:

1. Reducing gender gaps in human capital, especially female mortality and education;
2. Closing gaps in access to economic opportunities, earnings, and productivity;
3. Reducing gender differences in voice and agency; and
4. Limiting the intergenerational reproduction of gender inequality.

Part three of the report aims to help countries choose the best policies to meet those priorities. The final chapter explains the role of transnational institutions in global gender equality struggles, and provides a succinct "what to do and how to do it" guide.

Useful tools

Those who have followed the Bank's gender work will find some reasons to be cheerful with this WDR. The Bank makes repeated assurances that gender equality matters; there is partial recognition of the importance of women's unpaid work to the economy; and there is a robust defence of the need for national and global policy action to tackle gender inequality, including through legal reforms to increase the rights of divorced and widowed women, and through increased investment in basic infrastructure and public services. Notwithstanding the need to see this agenda funded and enacted before we begin celebrating, it is noteworthy to see it articulated in an institution that has been so criticized by gender experts for its record on women's issues.

Some of the report's specific policy guidance is also likely to be useful to gender advocacy organisations seeking to pressure their own governments or transnational bodies. For example, the report concludes that affirmative action to ensure more equal representation in formal politics and employment has little or no adverse efficiency effects, and works best if mandatory. The report also advocates for childcare services, although the recommendations need careful scrutiny.

In my view the most important and sustained window of opportunity for transformative gender policy advocacy is provided by chapter three, on education and health. Using beautiful data analysis along with firm critique of privatised solutions to public health problems, this chapter argues that public investments to fund basic health improvements are the key to eradicating excess female mortality. If the advice in this chapter is followed, global development institutions will prioritise support for clean water, sanitation, and maternal health care in the world's poorest countries. Even the Bank's fiercest critics will concede that this beats microcredit as a gender policy priority.

Some gaps, limits, and fudges

a. Where are the feminists?

Although the report cites self-identified feminist work liberally, its own understanding of feminism as a transnational social movement is poor. A definitional textbox on feminism comes at the end of the WDR and is less-than-useful, using a eurocentric framing of feminist waves irrelevant to most of the world. The report also argues that gender gaps are worse when poverty is combined with other factors of exclusion such as race, caste, or disability. The complex interwoven injustices at play here are not explored in any conceptual or empirical depth. The key activist and academic literature, on the feminist concept of intersectionality, is not mentioned until page 336, and it does not substantively inform the report's analysis.

b. Where is the Bank?

Another interesting theme to emerge from the report is the curious absence of the Bank itself as an actor. Far from blowing its own trumpet as leading the vanguard of global gender equality efforts (something it did in the 2001 *Engendering Development* report), the Bank somewhat fades into the background.

Although this apparent modesty is refreshing given the Bank's reputation for self-aggrandisement, as Shahra Razavi of UNRISD points out, the absence of the institution in its own report also reflects a 'historical amnesia' about its inconsistent role in the struggle for gender equality. For anyone familiar with the Bank's recent policy record, it is galling to hear the institution now advising countries about the merits of public health infrastructure, the error of imposing user fees for primary education, and the value of legal pluralism for protecting people's rights. The Bank has taken opposing positions in the past, and has caused considerable harm in the process. Moreover, we learn nothing about the Bank's failure to abide by its policies on gender, or its own lack of institutional accountability in this regard. These have been extensively documented by organizations such as Gender Action.

c. Where are the economic crises?

A third key omission in the WDR is any sustained analysis of gender and financial crisis. The current crisis may have left many global south countries relatively unscathed, but previous versions in East Asia, Russia, and Latin America did not, and these testify to the importance of accounting for economic crisis in gender and development. The report notes that progress on gender equality can be harmed by external shocks, but since that category includes economic and political shock, alongside adverse circumstances in the first three years of life, it does not provide the analytical clarity required to discuss either economic crisis or associated feminist debates about financial services regulation. The only research mentioned on the current crisis foregrounds gendered patterns in job losses. Yet, as several analysts have pointed out, what is distinctive about this crisis is not so much job loss patterns, but rather the heightened significance of personal household debt and the growing interest of international financial institutions in the regulation of consumer credit. There is also considerable feminist scholarship on issues of debt (including mortgages), financial services regulation, and the gendered effects of public services cuts imposed as a result of banking bailouts. The WDR's neglect of such work is a significant gap.

d. Do free markets empower women?

Bank staff frame gender issues as good for growth, as "smart economics", and this leads to a predictable failure to engage with research or activism that challenges free markets. Other commentators, including Sylvia Chant, and Alice Evans, have already pointed this out. Specifically, the WDR asserts that "gender inequality has become more costly for most countries in a world of open trade". Globalisation leads to greater gender equality given the shift from "brawn" to "brains" (manufacturing to services), and the related increase in demands for women's labour. Corporations are heralded as key gender equality allies, and any ill-effects of free markets on women are explicitly designated as temporary.

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These arguments exemplify what Razavi calls a missed opportunity to "engage seriously with the gender biases of macroeconomic policy agendas that define contemporary globalization". Such biases include a gendered definition of skill that leads to women's labour being consistently devalued. Hence the Bank assumes that women's low pay reflects their low productivity and can be corrected by improving their access to higher valued jobs, rather than by re-evaluating what counts as productive. Tellingly, the top priority in the section on removing discriminatory treatment in labour laws is to revisit limits on part time work, rather than, for example, ensuring that part time workers are paid living wages.

In essence, then, the report sidesteps crucial debates about whether free market reforms harm people in deep, sustained ways. It ignores that many people experience their employment as disempowering; that discrimination can be immensely profitable; that *exploitation within markets* has significant advantages over *exclusion from markets* as a way to understand inequality; and that the private sector can fiercely resist gender equality measures since they incur costs.

e. Happy households as the key to development?

A final significant limit of the report is its approach to households. The WDR is based on neoclassical economic assumptions that individuals act to maximise their utility. The ability to meet preferences depends on bargaining power, which depends on resources. Households play the key role here: they aggregate individual preferences, and link progress in markets and institutions to gender equality. Indeed the report repeatedly uses a figure showing the household as the sole cog in the machine that connects growth and policies to greater gender equality.

There is an extensive feminist critique of neoclassical assumptions about the bargaining household. However, that literature aside, given the central role of households to the WDR's analysis, it is astonishing that they are not explicitly defined (unlike other key terms such as markets and institutions). One is left to deduce what the Bank means by households by examining how the term is deployed, and here we see households typically meaning married, nuclear units where the only dependents are children. For example the advice on building coalitions for reform relies on a harmonious notion of male-female partnership within households-read-as-nuclear families. Countries with high numbers of unmarried couples are urged to enact legal reforms to make those unions more marriage-like, to enforce nuclear-family responsibilities on members.

The gap separating this vision of the household from so many peoples' lived reality is enormous. Household formation within and across the global south is very obviously diverse: in some Latin American countries over 30 per cent of households are female-headed. Indeed we see women interviewed in the report contest a nuclear definition of the household; women in the West Bank and Gaza, and in Tanzania, told Bank researchers that they relied on women-only networks of friends and family for advice, loans, and support, not on male partners.

While the report advocates for women's social networks and for women's independent control of income, gender equality is still defined, and ideally achieved, within sharing partnerships imagined through nuclear families. This leads to a serious tension over the meaning of gender empowerment. Consider, for example, the WDR's advice on family planning. At points the report argues that men should be educated on the benefits and use of contraception, since uptake is higher when husbands are involved. But other evidence contradicts this, showing that women need autonomous control of their reproductive health to utilise contraception. The policy advice is ultimately hedged: family planning services "need to be provided in a manner that protects the individual's or the couple's privacy". This fudge, between gender empowerment as women's individual sexual autonomy, or as couple-focused, is an inevitable consequence of the choice to centre households – read as sharing nuclear units – as the key actors in the gender equality story. The family-focused policy narrative may work to disarm conservative opponents of women's rights, but it also imposes serious limits on the work of feminist organisations that have a different vision of gender empowerment. It is disappointing to see it so central to the WDR.

Key questions

- How will this report influence Bank policy, and where is the money?
- What space (if any) is available to make intersectional, anti-racist, post-colonial perspectives central to the Bank's understanding of gender and development?
- Given that many gender activists and experts know that free markets do not empower women in the simplistic way portrayed here, how do we best counter the pro-market message of the WDR?
- Can the Bank define households without sounding like the Vatican? If it cannot, should households be so central to the definition of gender empowerment used in the report?

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