WDR 2012: Radical Redistribution or Just Tinkering within the Template?

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Gender equality is the focus of the 2012 World Development Report (WDR), the World Bank's annual flagship publication.

The WDR 2012 argues that progress towards gender equality is constrained by interactions between formal institutions (laws and public services), informal institutions (social norms and networks), as well as market structures and opportunities (e.g. the economic benefits of educating girls).

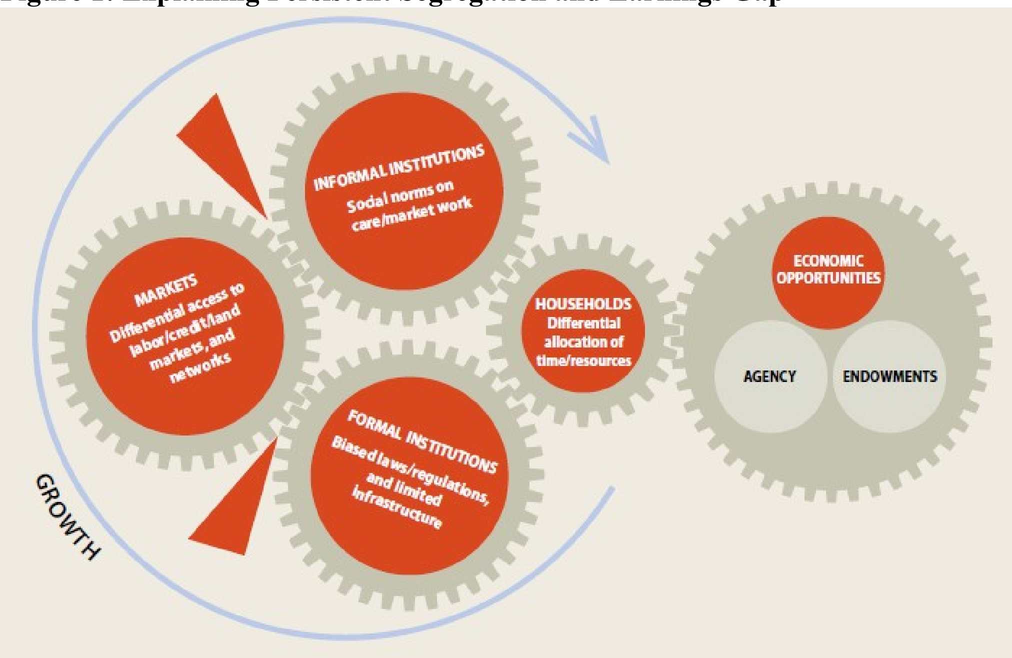
Some messages of the WDR 2012 are fairly mainstream: to reduce gender differences in human capital endowments by increasing access to education, targeting disadvantaged groups, improving access to clean water, reducing maternal mortality and combating HIV/AIDS. The global development community is directed to provide related financial support.

Also addressed are women's access to justice and gender-based violence. However, the global development community is not encouraged to provide financial support here, but only to promote innovation and learning. This might be interpreted as recommending support to scale-up successful pilot interventions. However, it is also possible that these issues will be perceived as less pivotal to economic development and hence disregarded.

But development policy is not just about money, it is also governed by policy norms. The WDR plays a decisive role in establishing and disseminating development orthodoxy. So even if not prioritised for financial support, some WDR recommendations may yet prove pivotal. One, somewhat surprising, example of this is support for employment quotas. Having (finally!) recognised that economic growth and paid work are no panacea for gender equality, the World Bank now champions active labour market policies to tackle the structures which segregate women into poorly paid work:

'Breaking out of this trap thus requires interventions that lift time constraints and increase access to productive inputs among women and that correct market and institutional failures' (World Bank, 2011: 236, see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Explaining Persistent Segregation and Earnings Gap



Source: World Bank, 2011: 18.

Together with subsidised childcare, mandatory joint land titling and microfinance, active labour market policies (i.e. vocational training in non-stereotypical work, wage subsidies and gender-based employment quotas) are heralded as key tools to enhance efficiency and transform social norms. Quotas, it is argued, would demonstrate women's competence, thereby alleviating employers' discriminatory doubts and inspiring other women to follow suit.

This may prove to be a hugely significant move by a mainstream organisation with major implications for development practice. While previous World Bank reports, such as 'Engendering Development', mentioned quotas, they have hitherto not been portrayed as appropriate for developing countries, given the prevalence of informal work. But while it is true that some developing countries' labour markets are largely informal, there is still scope for affirmative action, such as in the public sector and infrastructure contracts. Some initiatives are currently being piloted through the Adolescent Girls Initiative. Perhaps women will no longer be sidelined in World Bank projects (see Gender Action et al, 2011).

But despite this radical push for redistribution of employment, the Bank's incorporation of gender remains questionable. There is no engendering of macro-economics, trade or finance - perhaps they are assumed to be gender neutral, or perhaps women's disadvantage does not count. The WDR exclusively argues that globalisation increases growth and in turn employment opportunities. But even in the best of times, firms' ease of relocation constrains women's power to push for better wages and working conditions. Yet the WDR's priorities for the global development community omit ethical trading initiatives.

The limitations of the current form of globalisation are further revealed by recent economic crises (Pearson and Sweetman, 2010). Yet the WDR is blinkered to women's vulnerability in a globalised world and pays scant attention to stimulus packages. A single sentence in a 452 page report notes possible ways to protect people from shocks. There is no suggestion that the global development community should prioritise gender-sensitive job creation and social protection, or that macro-economic policies (such as minimal capital controls) should be rethought. Nor is there any recognition of the limits of microfinance, in contexts where informal trading has become increasingly saturated with retrenched workers. These silences are somewhat surprising.

The WDR seems to focus on ways to unlock women's potential to work for economic development, rather than make development more conducive to gender equality. For example, the WDR disregards unproductive women who cannot work due to old age or disability. Further, although the WDR champions women in non-stereotypical work, there is no suggestion of parallel sponsorship for media programmes that might normalise men's sharing of unpaid reproductive work. Also, while the WDR admirably pushes for mandatory joint land titling, there are other successful alternatives, such as Nepal's tax exemptions for land registered in women's names.

These omissions make me wonder about the WDR's consultation process. Reflecting on her own experience, Sylvia Chant (2011) comments, 'there was probably a predetermined line to toe that could not be shaken by dissonant voices'. So the World Bank's macro-economic template remains unshaken, albeit engendered by its support for radical affirmative action.

References

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