

WORLD DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2012

GENDER EQUALITY AND DEVELOPMENT

A Comment for the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

By Christa Wichterich

Prelude

The fact that the World Bank devoted its *World Development Report 2012* to Gender Equality is highly welcomed, firstly because it is a signal against the widespread gender fatigue in development and other policies, secondly because it marks a big step forward in the Bank's understanding of gender inequalities and gender policies. The report confirms the norms set by many UN documents: gender equality is considered a development goal in its own right and "to live the life of one's own choosing...is a basic human right." It pays tribute to the history of struggles for women's rights and to women's collective agency pushing for reforms. Catching up with academic research, the report centres around gender gaps and analyses gender disparities as highly complex, intersectional system of structures and practices which are reproduced (or changed) by social interaction of households, markets, and other institutions. Similarly, women's empowerment is seen as the result of a combination of various factors.

With this complex view the report overcomes the Bank's earlier monocausal thinking regarding growth as the driver for gender equality. It stresses the fact that there isn't any automatic link between GDP/income growth and the closing of gender gaps, and that the manifold determinants of gender discrimination rather than the outcomes have to be targeted. This complex perception also goes beyond the World Bank's earlier one-dimensional perspective on women as instrumental to growth and productivity.

At the same time, the report looks at gender issues through the typical World Bank lens: it refers gender gaps to markets, to efficiency, productivity and competitiveness, and calls gender equality "smart economics". Surprisingly, its analysis of progress made and persistence of gender inequalities does hardly take into account 1) the recent multiple crisis and current conflicts related to finance, food, energy, climate, land grabbing, resource extraction, social inequalities etc., 2) the power asymmetries which inform macro-economics and governance, and 3) the Bank's own development and investment policies which frame very much the political opportunities at national and global level that could trigger off gender equality. Different from the often made linkages between women's issues and poverty there is a strange silence about poverty and growing social inequalities in the report. Thus, despite the plethora of information and empirical data, the analysis reads largely disembedded from the topical political and macro-economic context.

Taking the report as signal for the Bank's new openness for a more complex and broader perspective on gender and development, implementing agencies and the Bank's development and investment policies should focus in future on the following three critical areas which are interwoven with each other.

1. Development cooperation has to be more responsive to the needs and the human rights of women.

The reference to “basic human rights” and gender equality as intrinsic development goal at the beginning of the report raises expectations that gender issues would be addressed from a human rights perspective. However throughout the report, market categories determine the assessment of gender gaps and development, not the enforcement of human rights. The human rights paradigm is not coherently carried through, it is neither translated into sectoral objectives nor is it operationalised with regard to various gender gaps. With the exception of property and land rights, the report talks about endowments not about entitlements and rights. Therefore the concept of endowment has to be complemented by a consistent concept of citizenship and entitlements resp. women as citizens who are entitled to access education, health, equal economic opportunities and equal wages, social protection, public services etc. It needs special attention and state intervention if human rights and market rules contradict each other – like freedom of investment and local people’s livelihood rights – because it’s the State’s triple obligation and an indicator of good governance to respect, protect and enforce human rights.

For example the right to food and water, livelihood rights and the nexus of land/food/water/energy security should be taken as starting points which inform planning and validation of agricultural production whether it is small-scale food crops or industrialised export cash crops. Strategies of women’s economic empowerment have to be responsive to their human rights and their special needs which emerge from their livelihood and the nature of economic activities they are involved in. The report concedes that there is no “one size fits all”-policy for gender equality. Being responsive to women’s human rights and women’s special needs makes it sometimes necessary to think outside of the “market/productivity/efficiency-box” and to search for other development paths which could trigger off more social and gender justice. Protection of commons such as forest, rivers and water tanks, collective ownership with usage rights by a community – as suggested by Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom - instead of individual property, and co-operative entrepreneurship have to be explored to ensure livelihood rights. Building on the report’s acknowledgement of women’s collective agency this should be done in a democratic process and in consultation with women’s organisations and women at the grassroots.

2. In order to brake up gender hierarchies, a consistent concept of labour is needed which is informed by an critical analysis of the market system and micro-macro-economic linkages.

It is laudable that the report takes into account women’s care work and recognises it as a key structure in gender inequalities. However, the market lens on gender equality leads to a focus on quantitative gender gaps and a neglect of qualitative indicators and validation. In view of women’s indispensable, valuable work for social reproduction, it is ironic to call their labour and talents “underused” or “misallocated”. Language like “differences in time use” cover up power relations in the gender division of labour. Women’s care burden is well acknowledged in the report but it is a flawed perception to primarily see care load as limitation to paid work rather than as a productive, yet unpaid cushion of social reproduction which subsidises markets and allows them to function effectively.

The praised integration of women into labour markets and global value chains does not pay attention to the quality of jobs and the fact that it was “cheap” female labour with high health hazards and without any social protection which fuelled export manufacturing. Unequal pay

and the low valuation of women's work is not a "market failure" but a market rationale and constituents of growth. Here the market rationale clashes with the objective of equal pay. Part-time and flexible jobs which the report recommends for women may be profitable for the enterprises but they perpetuate the hierarchical valuation of women's and men's skills and "human capital endowments".

The quest for equal access to fertilizers and "improved seeds" in agriculture does not take into account the difference between industrialised cash crop production and small-scale peasant agriculture which is highly feminised, based on control over local biodiversity, own seed production and indigenous knowledge systems. Removal of public subsidies hampers small peasants' agriculture and women's food sovereignty. The nature of their agricultural labour which supplies households and local markets is not valued and taken as starting point for women's economic empowerment but only quantitative indicators of yield, productivity and at the end of the day profitability are accounted for.

Only if the different nature of work and economic systems like the care and the market economy, small-scale and industrialised agriculture etc. is qualified and valued, gender hierarchies can be identified and market segregation can be addressed. This is a necessary precondition for political intervention and change of gender inequalities in paid and unpaid labour, in the care economy and labour markets.

3. The World Bank and implementing agencies have to link the micro-economics of gender reform to macro-economics and have to support an enabling macroeconomic environment for social policies and public investment: focus on livelihood and social security.

The recent and current multiple crisis as well as conflicts around resources, land grabbing, new development projects like massive dam constructions in many countries, struggle about markets where due to import liberalisation local producers and petty traders are outcrowded – all this puts the livelihoods of indigenous, poor, small peasant and other vulnerable groups at risk. This is actually the reality of development cooperation on the ground. Policies which set up social security nets and protect women's livelihoods are needed more than ever. The report only mentions conditional cash transfers and property/land rights for women as response to the urgent need of women for social security. However, those can't replace the development of full-fledged social policies including health and pension schemes, and the strengthening and extension of public services, infrastructure and mechanisms to ensure that all citizens but in particular marginalized and vulnerable groups and women must have entitlements and access to public provision of social security and protection.

The report makes a strong case for public policies and public investment. This however won't be possible without an enabling macroeconomic fix which mobilises revenues by changing fiscal constraints which are generated by structural adjustment policies, current austerity policies, tax policies which ease the burden of investors and capital owners, the push for privatisation and investment liberalisation etc. The policy principle of austerity and the market principle of cost reduction has often enough undermined the enforcement of human rights and the sustainability of women's empowerment. Macroeconomics matter for gender roles and relations. They have to be fixed in way that social and gender justice are objectives from the very beginning. Development agencies and the World Bank have to encourage states and strengthen mechanisms of global social policies to take on public responsibility for redistribution and social security for everybody. And at the same time they must work for an enabling macroeconomic environment for social policies and public investment.