

Is Gender Equality 'Smart Economics': An Analysis of the World Bank Gender Equality Policy

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Abstract

In the 'World Development Report 2012', the World Bank described gender equality as simply 'smart economics'; this paper provides a critical analysis of the 'smart economics' policy agendas by identifying the fundamental flaws in the implementation of the gender equality policy provided by international financial institutions. It will utilise a post-colonial and post-structuralist approach to analyse the barriers to the 'smart economics' policy agenda; identifying the implications of addressing inequality through capitalist, neoliberal institutions that are embedded in colonial relations of power. This paper will propose that although the 'smart economics' policy agenda has enabled the provision of useful financial aid, its excessive focus on economic development has failed to provide long-term change to the global structures of inequality that reproduce the subjugated position of the Global South. Similarly, the 'smart economics' policy agenda has relied heavily on 'gender mainstreaming' and consequently reproduces stereotypes of women in poverty as passive actors in need of a 'saviour'.

It would be beneficial to reform the 'smart economics' policy agenda to allow women to dictate the support that they need, in order to address the feminisation of poverty, instead of having decisions imposed upon them. This paper identifies that the 'smart economics' policy agenda continues to place the responsibility for tackling gender inequality at the feet of women and the reliance on heterosexual 'gender-myths' restricts any long-term change in gender equality. This paper offers alternative approaches to the 'smart economics' policy agenda, concluding that capitalist institutions that fundamentally benefit from the economic and social exclusion of women cannot play a foundational role in their 'liberation'. The 'smart economics' approach has failed to provide concrete change in structural inequality and women continue to be at the bottom of the gendered 'poverty gap'.

Introduction

Originating with the 'Women in Development' movement, 'gender equality as smart economics', was popularised in the World Bank's 'World Development Report' in 2012, referred to throughout this analysis as the 'smart economics' policy agendas. Although the intentions of these agendas are to promote the rights of women globally, this analysis will

argue that it has failed to do so. Firstly, I will begin by setting out a theoretical framework that will identify the origins of this movement, utilising both postcolonial and post-structural feminist critiques of the conceptualisation of gender equality within policy documentation from international financial institutions. I will then go on to look at the presence of ‘maternal altruism’ within these policies and why this stereotypical mobilisation of female identities is problematic, applying the critiques of ‘gender mainstreaming’ to assess how this has become a barrier to achieving gender equality. Finally, this analysis will critically assess the relationship between ‘smart economics’ policy agendas and both colonial power relations and the imposition of neoliberalism. Although the inclusion of gender equality as a development issue is an essential sign of progression, the quality of this inclusion must be evaluated.

Theoretical Framework

This analysis will follow a gendered binary of ‘men and women’ because the policies that will be discussed have not identified or accounted for the barriers faced by transgender and non-binary communities. This critique will focus upon the implication of gendered policy on women and their experiences of oppression. The theoretical framework provided by the ‘Gender and Development’ [GAD] movement will be utilised throughout this analysis, encompassing both the ‘Women in Development’ [WID] and the ‘Women and Development’ [WAD] schools of thought (Benerăia, Berik and Floro, 2016). WID refers to the movement established in the 1970s whose aim was to identify the differential gender impact on financially orientated development policy; challenging the dominant discourse at the time that the consequences were the same for both men and women. The WAD movement that followed in the late 1970s however, was attempting to include women into the creation of development policy instead of positioning them as apathetic beneficiaries of external intervention, advocating particularly for women-only projects (Miller and Razavi, 1995). The GAD movement encompasses both of these previous theories and utilises a post-structuralist approach to identify the practical implication of gender within international development policy. GAD theorists’ postulate that it is essential for gender to be understood not as a singular, autonomous factor but as a sight of marginalisation that interacts with other characteristics such as race and class (Pearson, 2016).

In 2012, the World Bank released a ‘World Development Report’ on the centenary of International Women’s Day. It focused on the role of gender equality within development and repeatedly employed the phrase: ‘gender equality is smart economics’. This statement became a popular ‘soundbite’ to promote the World Bank’s role in fighting gender inequality. This report, drawing upon primary research conducted across nineteen ‘developing countries’, postulated that the promotion of gender equality would not only help to achieve many major

development goals but that it was also a key development directive in itself (The World Bank, 2012). Additionally, The United Nations' Millennium Development Goals, agreed upon by 189 countries, introduced eight key goals to tackle inequality and poverty. 'Goal three' focuses on gender equality and the empowerment of women – particularly by encouraging girls into primary and secondary education (UN, 2000). What has since followed has been an appropriation of this value into other development agendas with varying degrees of success. For example, Goldman Sachs released a report entitled 'Womonomics' that aimed to highlight the gender employment gap in Japan, demonstrating that the interest of international financial institutions in gender equality has grown since the economic instability of the 2008 financial crisis (Shain, 2012; Goldman Sachs, 2019). It is necessary to analyse whether their increased concern, and subsequent policy changes, are a consequence of renewed interest in the role of women within development, or whether women act as a new vehicle through which neoliberal values and capitalist expansion can be pursued. Postcolonial feminists have postulated that state and non-state policy has failed to effectively enact change to reduce gender inequality through their renewed 'smart economics' frameworks (Mohanty, 2013; Wilson, 2015).

Policy agendas that focus exclusively on tackling gender inequality fail to understand the complex relationship gender has with other aspects of an identity. Social Reproduction Theory can help to explain the importance of policy agendas in reducing gender inequality; states can enact effective legislative change by acknowledging the stratification systems that reproduce structural violence. Understanding the reproduction of systems of domination can inform long-term policy to prevent institutionalised marginalisation. However, the 'smart economics' agendas have utilised a neoliberal feminist lens that fails to identify the way in which different forms of oppression can interact with another, ignoring how the stratification of privilege interacts with gender. For example, the failure to identify that black women, in both the Global North and the Global South, experience marginalisation differently to white women because of the interaction between their race and gender, entitled 'misogynoir' (Bailey and Trudy, 2018). Bourdieu's conceptualisation of 'capital' identifies how "accumulated labour" provides different forms of social advantages and privileges, which can be beneficial to explaining this intersection of inequality (Bourdieu, 1986: 15). 'Smart economics' policy agendas have failed to identify the complex relationships between social, cultural and economic capital, placing an excessive focus on financial development. This may benefit the finances of marginalised women, but it does not uplift their position within the public sphere and their rights and opportunities will still be suppressed in civil society. Equality cannot be conceptualised solely through the lens of financial aid (Rankin, 2002). Neoliberalism's focus on promoting women in work, without protecting their rights or enhancing regulations will

continue a cycle of exploitation and maintain the chains of 'cheap', predominantly female, labour for transnational corporations.

Gender Mainstreaming and Maternal Altruism

The inclusion of gender inequality in neoliberal economic and social policy has been labelled 'gender mainstreaming'. This refers to the way in which concerns for gender inequality can be embedded internally within the policy of bilateral and multilateral agencies and externally through their work (Stratigaki, 2005). The United Nations has stated that they believe gender mainstreaming is the most productive way of promoting gender equality both within their organisation and in their work (United Nations, 2001). The movement to include gender equality into more policy agendas is a positive step and demonstrates a willingness to identify the way in which the current global structure disadvantages women. However, 'smart economics' policies rely on 'gender myths' and essentialist assumptions of women as victims of inequality; consequently, women in the Global South are written through a 'Western' gaze (Cornwall, Harrison, and Whitehead, 2007). This formation of 'smart economics' is largely associated with the 'Women in Development' approach, which is more closely linked with neoliberal formations of development. It relies on women to enact change and "fix the world" to enable development (Chant and Sweetman, 2012: 523). Gender mainstreaming in economic policy largely focuses on widening participation of women within the labour market. For example, the World Bank identified four areas of 'gender development' in the 2012 World Development Report: human capital, economic productivity, access to finance and empowerment. Although these are important areas for development organisations to explore, it fails to account for the redistribution of work within the private sphere to allow women to have a balanced level of responsibility and only considers the ability to accumulate economic capital (Bacchi and Eveline, 2010). Additionally, references to the redistribution of private sphere responsibilities in 'smart economics' policies are through the heteronormative assumption that women exist exclusively within nuclear families that involve male partners. (Bedford, 2007).

'Smart economics' development policies rely on an expectation that women in the Global South will automatically participate in and enable the implementation of grassroots changes to gender inequality. These women are burdened with an obligation to participate in development movements in addition to their pre-existing pressures and responsibilities. 'Smart economics' policies have identified women as useful tools for development, particularly because of their responsibilities in the private sphere. The intrinsic link between female identities and motherhood makes women an appealing point of investment because it is believed to have a 'trickle down' prosperity effect. Campaigns produced by charities and non-

governmental organisations that provide international aid often focus on projects that benefit mothers and children rather than 'women' (Apodaca, 2000; Revenga and Shetty, 2012). Without this aspect of their identity, they are not appealing sources of development and are not positioned as a 'worthy' investment. This pattern within economic policy has been labelled as the 'myth of maternal altruism'; it is a tool that is employed to legitimise spending for gender equality (Potvin, 2015). To promote investment in gender equality and to make it 'worthwhile' it must have a broader reach and enable wider community prosperity. It appears that for investors, equality is not enough to justify spending (Chant and Sweetman, 2012). The 'World Development Report' relied on the values of maternal altruism to explain how gender equality helped to reduce global poverty, focusing on the role of prosperous women within the family (Roberts and Soederberg, 2012). This is a failure of 'smart economics' policies; women should not have to justify their position as beneficiaries of support through their role as caretakers. Their existence alone, both in and out of the labour market, is a valid site of investment. Reducing women to their stereotypical 'gender role' prevents economic policy from effectively understanding the root cause of gender inequality and instead social reproduction enables systems of poverty that suppress the autonomy of women in the Global South.

Decolonising 'Smart Economics' Agendas

'Smart economics' policy agendas rely on the 'mainstreaming' of gendered stereotypes that portray women in the Global South without agency and therefore in need of intervention from the Global North (Wilson, 2015). The narrative of 'developing' countries and their citizens are produced by 'Western' writers, through a 'Western' gaze. Consequently, a colonial power dynamic is reproduced when actors in the Global North 'dictate' the experience of marginalised women back to them (Benerăia, Berik and Floro, 2016). The lived experiences of women at the centre of the policies are erased by these writers, who often exist within male-dominated organisations, committing 'epistemic violence'. 'Epistemic violence' is perpetrated through the Westernised production of knowledge, where marginalised voices are silenced and suppressed by privileged individuals. Consequently, the opinions and lived experiences of the 'subaltern' are missing from the formation of 'smart economics' policies, significantly reducing its effectiveness (Spivak, 1988). Colonial relations of power are reproduced when the Global North imposes definitions of 'development' and 'progress' onto the Global South; imposing upon them what their 'issues' are. 'Smart economics' policies fail to acknowledge the structural violence committed against women that limits their access to social and cultural capital, neglecting to value the lived experiences of those being oppressed.

The feminist theory used to inform the World Bank's gender policy also needs to be evaluated through a postcolonial lens. The mobilisation of neoliberal feminism in economic

and social policy should be problematised; a key failure of neoliberal feminism and consequently these policy agendas, is the focus on individual responsibility that can often be translated into blame. Blame itself upholds colonial power structures, utilising the value system promoted by the idea of a 'deserving' or 'undeserving' poor (Abramkvitz, 2017; Mackenzie and Louth, 2019). Categorising people in this way, even when providing short term financial aid, does not promote development or equality. For example, policies that promote gender equality often cite microfinance as a key factor in improving living standards and stimulating wealth production. Microfinancing is often short-term financial assistance that does not tackle the structural violence that maintains gender inequality, focusing heavily on the gendered myths of maternal altruism (Wilson, 2015: 809). Neoliberalism places a significant importance on economic capital, but structural oppression requires more than individualised financial intervention. Without the provision of long term, stable investments into welfare and state infrastructure, microfinance only creates short term or highly concentrated pockets of prosperity. The focus of 'smart economics' policy agendas should be to critically evaluate, and offer alternatives to, the role of the state in the process of dismantling structures of inequality that oppresses opportunities for women and performs epistemic violence that reproduces colonial relations of power.

'Smart Economics' and Neoliberalism

The 'smart economics' movement is employed by Westernised, capitalist organisations; this is innately problematic. Transnational corporations play an increasingly large role in the production of development policies; it is important however, to analyse whether neoliberal institutions can claim to be joined in a desire for gender equality whilst they simultaneously exist within a market relying upon 'unfree labour' that further entrenches gender inequality and neo-colonialism (Gore and LeBaron, 2019). The structure of global supply chains and the increased freedom of transnational corporations contribute to the increasing income disparity and inability to hold individual organisations accountable. Corporations will continue to exploit 'cheap' labour whilst it is available; an estimated 80% of garment workers are women, unless their insecurity in the labour market is solidified the gender disparity will continue (Sequino, 2010; Kaur, 2016). For example, a fast-fashion brand, 'Boohoo', was accused of 'super-exploitation' when it was discovered production workers manufacturing their garments in Leicester were being paid below minimum wage (Selwyn, 2020). Despite this violation in human rights, it was difficult to hold the company accountable because of the extensive supply chain that enabled 'Boohoo' to defer responsibility. Transnational corporations, particularly those within the garment industry, have mobilised the 'smart economics' values; simultaneously producing items with slogans such as 'the future is

female' whilst benefiting from the exploitation of 'unfree labour'. The mobilisation of the 'Western gaze' that is reproduced by neoliberal feminist discourse has failed to identify the inevitability of inequality within the colonial relations of power and failed to identify the role of the Global North in maintaining gender inequality. Consequently, private corporations can avoid blame or retribution for their practices that set the conditions women in the Global South are forced to work in (Roberts and Soederberg, 2012). The imposition of neoliberal values is done under the guise of 'development'; however, capitalism and capitalist institutions are not invested in the selfless growth of the Global South and the expansion of gender equality, but rather the expansion of their own gain.

The committal of 'epistemic violence' through the imposition of Western values in international development is embedded in the 'smart economics' agendas. This approach is problematic because it continues to reproduce the power relations that place substantial blame and responsibility on the shoulders of women. Organisations that promote 'smart economics' agendas are often motivated by economic growth and not the injustices of inequality (Chant and Sweetman, 2012). Development policies often fail to effectively account for gender because they take an 'efficiency approach' that focuses on the increased participation of women in the public sphere, assuming this will inevitably lead to equality (Moser, 1989). Active participation in the economy alone cannot solve issues of gender inequality because gender roles and unequal participation in education will continue to suppress opportunities for women (Eastin and Prakash, 2013). This is an essential issue in the 'smart economics' policy agenda; the goals of gender equality are embedded in the spread of neoliberalism and it is unable to address inequality because it is not an autonomous motivator for change.

What are the alternatives?

The 'smart economics' policy agenda is flawed in its current formation; the motivations behind it, however, demonstrate that the issues of gender equality are becoming legitimised within international financial institutions. These policies, although problematic, can be improved through a critical re-evaluation of the current power relations that 'smart economics' agendas reproduce. The post-structuralist approach argues that political, social, and economic issues cannot exist autonomously outside of internalised biases and judgments, this must be applied to the role of both governments and non-governmental organisation in international development; the neoliberal motivations and political affiliation of these organisations cannot be ignored (Roberts and Soederberg, 2012). Consequently, to achieve effective gender policy, it would be beneficial to utilise the work and research conducted by grassroots organisations that understand the cultural and socio-economic contexts of the countries that 'smart economics' agendas will be applied to. Effective 'smart economics'

policies must acknowledge their role in the exploitation of women in the Global South; the avoidance of blame and accountability is enabled through long and complex supply chains. Consequently, the role of transnational corporations in the promotion of 'smart economics' policy agendas is hypocritical. In its current formation, capitalism relies on the domination of the labour market in 'developing' countries; maintaining a 'public ignorance' for the way in which this power structure reproduces inequality.

Conclusion

This analysis has identified a multitude of flaws within the 'smart economics' agenda. Although there may be good intentions with the inclusion of gender equality as a development goal, it is also presented as a contributor to overall economic prosperity; the need to justify investment into gender equality undermines the 'smart economics' movement. Women continue to be defined by their role as 'caretakers' even if they are participating in the public sphere; 'smart economics' policies have failed to account for the increasing responsibility of women both in and out of their homes. This analysis has identified that there are multiple flaws within the conceptualisation of 'gender equality as smart economics'; it must be expanded to look beyond the traditional and narrow conceptualisation of gender and identify that gender equality cannot exist purely through a heteronormative lens. As previously stated, an important weakness in this agenda is the lack of accountability for key transnational corporations who profit on the marginalisation and oppression of women, particularly in the Global South. The 'smart economics' agenda has provided an excellent base for identifying the way in which gender inequality affects many areas of life and although it does not need to be entirely replaced, there must be a widening of inclusion and a focus towards the voices of those it claims to benefit.

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