

A Response to the World Development Report 2012

Written by Hannah Butt

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HANNAH BUTT, OCT 18 2011

This year's World Development Report (hereon WDR2012) from the World Bank was recently published and interestingly its subject is Gender Equality and Development. The very fact that the World Bank has published a paper on this topic is worth comment, and I would like to share with you some of my immediate responses and reflections.

There are many angles from which you could critique this report. Its Eurocentric vision of progress and modernity is, for example, highly problematic, as is its clumsy definition of "gender". However, there are two related threads within the report which I would like to draw out and open up for discussion. Namely, its use of gender equality merely as an *instrument* for achieving economic growth, and the contribution that the report makes to a trend of what I term the "*financialization*" of everyday language.

The WDR2012 introduces its topic by postulating that gender equality matters in relation to development for two reasons. Firstly it matters intrinsically according to classic liberalist principles; agency and basic human rights should be for all regardless of the gender of the body one is born into (p.3). Secondly, gender equality matters "instrumentally". It is "smart economics", reducing economic inefficiencies and contributing towards the achievement of other development outcomes (p.3). In short, the advancement of gender equality is both an end in itself and a means to an end.

However, as you will discover if you even glance at this 450 page document, the authors of the WDR2012, gender equality goals are consistently described in terms of instrumentality for economic growth and development, and rarely as worthy objectives in their own right.

Equalising access to resources such as fertiliser between male and female farmers is, for example, discussed as a way of reducing the "productivity gap" and increasing agricultural exports of various developing countries (p.5). It is argued that improvements in women's education may lead to a whole range of benefits for children's health, nutrition, education, and future career prospects (p.5). Mindful of the tactlessness of describing domestic violence as "another type of economic inefficiency" (as the 2006 report does), the 2012 document falls short of repeating this slip-up, but it does insist on discussing domestic violence in economic terms – highlighting the relationship between assets, earnings, share of household income and the incidence of domestic violence towards women (p.21).

The above examples are characteristic of the logic which runs through the WDR2012; expressing the quest for gender equality in terms of the benefits to a nation's economic growth, to wider goals for children and the family, and to female productivity but not for its own sake – thus neglecting the first of the two original rationales for writing the report at all.

I believe the reason for this lies in the framework in which the report is operating within, namely economic theory. Whether this is a case of feminist economists attempting to "speak truth to power" in language which the powerful can relate to, or whether the economic lens (and dictionary) have involuntarily penetrated the report, the WDR2012 has missed the mark in efforts to "not limit itself to economic outcomes" (p.6).

Which leads me onto my second point: that the language used in the WDR2012 represents a contribution to a

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growing trend of “financialization” of social space. I’m unsure of the terms origin, but it has been used by feminist and critical theorists to discuss the way financial language continues to creep into use in non-financial settings, defining social and political practices in economic terms. The WDR2012 is peppered with language such as “social capital”, “human capital”, “productivity gains”, and “social investment”, language which is becoming increasingly familiar to us.

The media, politicians and pundits regularly talk about education in terms of “investing in your future”, for example, and it is not unusual to hear the expression “capitalize on your...” in reference to a whole host of subjects – experience, friendships, creativity, etc for the purpose of self-advancement.

For me, this discursive slippage is highly problematic. It introduces neoliberal concepts and principles, with all the values attached to them, into mainstream use and sensitizes us to them. There is a risk that the way we talk about, and potentially think about, our lives – our opportunities, choices and aspirations etc – will become imbued with norms such as individualism and competition, which we haven’t necessarily engaged with critically.

The WDR2012 acknowledges that the lens it uses to approach gender equality and development is a strictly economic one; however the authors claim to be able to form arguments and reach conclusions which extend beyond the economic realm into human welfare and rights. I would argue that both the report’s failure to see gender equality as an “end” as well as a “means”, and the financial language used throughout demonstrate that the authors have been limited by their discipline more than they would like to admit.

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Hannah Butt is a Commissioning Editor for e-IR. She is a graduate of IR at the University of Exeter, and is now undertaking a master’s in Gender, Development and Globalisation at the LSE. Her areas of interest include postcolonialism, biopolitics, and migration, with a focus on critical international relations theory.