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Gender and Development: The Challenge of Mainstream

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Abstract

Mainstream institutions have only begun to address issues in Gender and Development since the 1970s, and it is time to evaluate how sustainable the progress in this field has been. In this essay, I briefly discuss three specific challenges facing gender advocates. First, I discuss the risks gender advocates take and the opportunities they miss when treating women as a homogenous group. Second, I evaluate the difficulty of balancing transformative policy and integrationist policy. The former seeks to change entire systems but risks being seen as too radical to be adopted by international influential institutions. The latter allows gender awareness to become adapted by these same institutions (i.e. gender mainstreaming) but risks not truly bringing the transformation needed. In the final part of my essay, I argue the importance of halting the "Sanctity of Culture," a phrase coined by feminist economist, Naila Kabeer (1999). I further this analysis by looking at an Indian case in which an increased ratio of women is gaining education but see little increase in other factors of equality.

Author's Note

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1. Introduction

The fight for the equal treatment of women has been hindered by a veil of tradition and religion, which has stood in the way of criticism and rationalism. Whether it is an Australian woman's fight against sexism in parliament (Al Jazeera, 2012), a Pakistani girl's protests for her rights to an education (New York Times, 2012), or a Polish girl's battle to abort a pregnancy caused by rape (BBC, 2012), these women are all fighting against their society's values, values that do not stem from the women themselves but affect them in every respect. In this essay, I focus on gender issues in developing countries where women are often overrepresented amongst the very poorest because of gender disadvantages (Kabeer, 1999, p.35). In many

cultures,[1] women suffer from an imposed role of inferiority which, as Kabeer (1999, p.15) summarizes, leads to "gender differentials in nutrition, food allocation, health status and health expenditure, education, mortality rates and life expectancy." In most development movements, criticism is directed towards the mainstream status quo that hinders transformative policies (Kabeer, 1999), and gender advocates are seen as having a trademark of relatively radical and transformative ideas. When it comes to development, the most prominent and influential multi-lateral institutions are the United Nations and the World Bank. As with any other organization of such immense size, the UN and World Bank suffer from bureaucratic problems that make it hard for minority movements to make their demands for transformative change heard.

I will discuss the problems that gender advocates face when switching from transformative policy to integrationist policy as well as study how integrationist policy is needed to reach long-term transformative effects. I will also briefly cover the dangers of treating women as a homogenous group with equal interests, as in the popular myths of a global "sisterhood." In the final part of my essay I will argue the importance of halting the "Sanctity of Culture," an excellently descriptive phrase from Kabeer's work. (Kabeer, 1999, p.7)

2. The Dangers of Treating Women as a Homogenous Group

The term "sisterhood" appears frequently in feminist discourse as a signifier of the unification of women for a common cause. (Morgan, 1996; see Kabeer, 1999, for related critique). This idea of global sisterhood is a fallacy for two reasons: it implies that women around the world have no conflicting interests to those of "womanhood," and it ignores that women live in completely different contexts, political systems, moral structures and belong to different age cohorts, ethnicities, and income groups. In reality, women of some regions, societies, or classes often benefit from structures that discriminate against women living in different systems. For example, the poor working conditions of a middle aged Bangladeshi woman may not be of concern to a British student indulging in cheap fashion. Another example might be the first wife of an Ivory Coast household who might oppose the abolition of polygamy since additional wives often function as unpaid servants (Boserup, 1970, Ch. 2). In the words of Kabeer, "Women carry identities other than those of gender"(Kabeer, 1999, p.30), 2). The idea of a global sisterhood would imply that there is an equivalent brotherhood - two groups with clashing interests. For equality to ever occur, both sexes need to be supportive of it. The terms of sisterhood and brotherhood convey the idea of a power struggle between the sexes where men are seen as a homogenous group of "holders of privileges or perpetrators of violence" (Stocking, 2004, p.vii). Some feminists still want to argue that men really are and should be addressed as the barrier to equality, but such a debate creates damage

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[1] The word "culture" is an indefinable and imprecise word that I usually refrain from using. In this essay, however, it will appear when I reference different traditions and ways to structure society in unspecified regions.

rather than progress for the gender awareness movement. The book *Gender Equality and Men: Learning from Practice,* released by Oxfam, offers examples of how important it is to include men in the work for female rights. Therefore, the women's movement is not exclusively addressing a "sisterhood," but needs to reach all members of society, both women and men.

3. The Risks Attached to Mainstreaming

Gender and development philosophy is essentially a critique of the mainstream approach to development. For development critics, the main problem is the unwillingness of major influential policy makers to change current structures of economy and power. Even if the gender awareness advocates' goals are transformative, their message must be comprehensible and implementable for policy makers in the current development structure, otherwise the message will not be heard (Kabeer, 1999; Standing, 2004; Razavi, 1997; Razavi and Miller, 1995). An important example of this is the views of Ester Boserup in her 1970 text *Woman's Role in Economic Development*, a work that led to a shift in the view on gender issues within the UN, World Bank, and other multilateral institutions (Razavi, 1997, p.1113). Boserup describes women as important in the both the economic and productive sphere; therefore, they are a significant factor in the process of economic growth that no country can afford to overlook (Boserup, 1970). The way to influence policy-making is through speaking the instrumental language of policy makers.

There are, however, risks with gender mainstreaming or alteration of gender theory to fit into mainstream policy. One risk is that institutional gender mainstreaming is not political, but merely terminological. An example talked about widely by feminists such as Kabeer (1998), Kandiyoti (1998), and Standing (1991) regards the neo-classical view of the household. Mainstream economists view the household as a "unit," and the head of the household maximizes utility for every member of that household. However, several feminist economists have shown that relationships within households are more often depicted by power relations than by self-sacrifice (Kabeer, 1999).

Kabeer's argument means that even though an institution calls itself gender-aware**,** it might still implement policies in ways that disable women from having participatory roles, hence preventing female economic and social empowerment. Standing (2004) argues that "[theoretical feminist analysis] cannot just be advocacy-based but require[s] a grounding in how institutions work, how to develop contextually-based strategies and create workable alliances in constrained environments." Standing raises a valid point on how it should be the feminist economists themselves who must be responsible for adapting their theories to the context of institutions (that is "mainstreaming" them) in order to minimize the risk of gender untrained bureaucrats deviating from the core values of gender theories. An excellent example of this is the *World Development Journal, volume 23(11),* that deals explicitly with gender economics. Its introduction, written by feminist economists Cagatay, Elson, and Grown, reads that "This issue grew out of the efforts of feminist economists to go beyond analyses of the gendered effects of adjustment and to demonstrate the relevance of gender as an analytical category in macroeconomics" (Cagatay, Elson, and Grown, 1995).

Clearly, it is better for gender theory to have a role within policy making than to be disengaged and without influence due to rigidity, but gender advocates face problems with no straightforward answers as they enter the mainstream. As summarized by Razavi, "… selective up-take of gender [theories] presents useful insights into the way development institutions work. It also hints at the political dilemmas facing feminist advocates: entering the mainstream entails making alliances and compromises, and modifying one's agenda and language. Some feminist critics have argued that […] what has been lost in the process of assimilation has been so central to the feminist agenda that there seems to be little reason to pursue the same strategies any further." (Razavi, 1997, p.1112)

4. The Urgent Need to Put Female Rights above Sanctity of Culture

So far, I have discussed challenges that feminist theorists face within their own field (the fallacy and dangers of the idea of women as a homogeneous group) and the challenges of influencing institutional implementation (the need for scientific and rigorous arguments for female empowerment and the risks associated with gender mainstreaming). The last part of this piece will focus on obstacles at the grassroots level, which include structural and traditional discrimination of women and sanctity of culture.[2]

Gender discrimination often stems from biological differences between men and women (for example, women being physically weaker and women's ability to childbirth) being distorted into constructed social differences (for example, women being mentally weaker and women's innate desire and suitability to raise children) (Kabeer, 1999). Kabeer separates what she calls discrimination through "biological differences," using what are perceived to be "facts" about how the *world is*, from discrimination through sanctity of culture, using a set of values of how the *world should be* (Kabeer, 1999, p. 4-12). I would not use that distinction since these "facts" arise to fit a certain set of values (for example, a woman's place is in the home taking care of children and household, thus she will not need an education), and discrimination always derives from ideals of how the *world should be*. Furthermore, so-called "factual" explanations (women do not *want* to vote, or, wearing a chador *liberates* women from staring men) are invented to suit these specific beliefs. The mistake of addressing women as a group with homogenous interests is again apparent since both women and men adopt values that are disadvantageous and discriminatory toward women. If a woman undeniably expresses a desire to be treated unequally to a man, then who is to tell her that she is wrong?[3] Indeed, not accepting her opinion would be quite the opposite of what female rights advocates try to enforce. But to leave the matter at that is a dangerous oversimplification of the

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[2] Arguments based on values and not facts are harder to argue against. Much discrimination against women (not allowing women the right to education or the right to sexual freedom) is protected by the concept of it in fact being "culture" and therefore legitimate.

[3] See Figure 2

context in which we live. It must become apparent how offensive to humanity it is to try to argue that a woman, who thinks that she is less worthy of an opinion than a man, thinks so because of biological reasons rather than of cultural ones. A question that is relevant when discussing which obstacles gender advocates face on a grassroots level is whether current development policies are improving the situation for women in developing countries. A seemingly evident way to encourage independence and critical thinking would be through education and participation in the public sphere. Women have a higher rate of return to education than men (Psacharapoulos and Patrinos, 2004), and studies show that gender-based violence decreases with the education of women (See figure 1: DHS, 2005, as cited in Simister, 2011). However, as Figures 2, 3, and 4 show us, discriminatory gender roles appear not to be affected by higher education for women. Indeed, it seems likely that a school operating in a gender discriminating society will not be an arena for the development of critical thinking, but instead be responsible for reinforcing gender roles. Increased levels of education for women do not directly mean greater autonomy for women. In many cases, particularly where higher education is of poor quality, students do not expand on their abilities to critique and create opinions, but instead become more deeply indoctrinated within current societal structures.
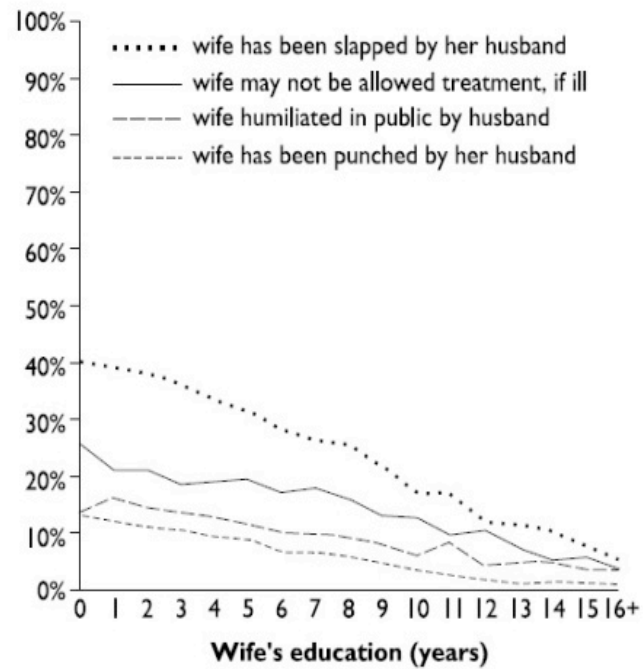
Figure 1: Gender-based violence by wife's education (Source: DHS 2005 (all Indian States) as cited in Simister, 2011

Figure 2: Attitude to Obedience by Wife's Education
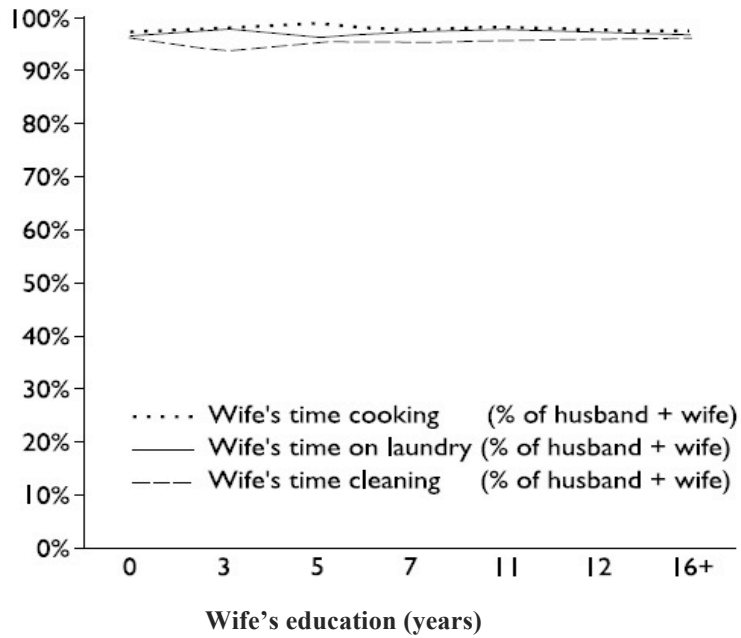Source: WAS 2002 & 2007 (all Indian states) as cited in Simister, 2011

Figure 3: Unpaid Housework by Wife's Education
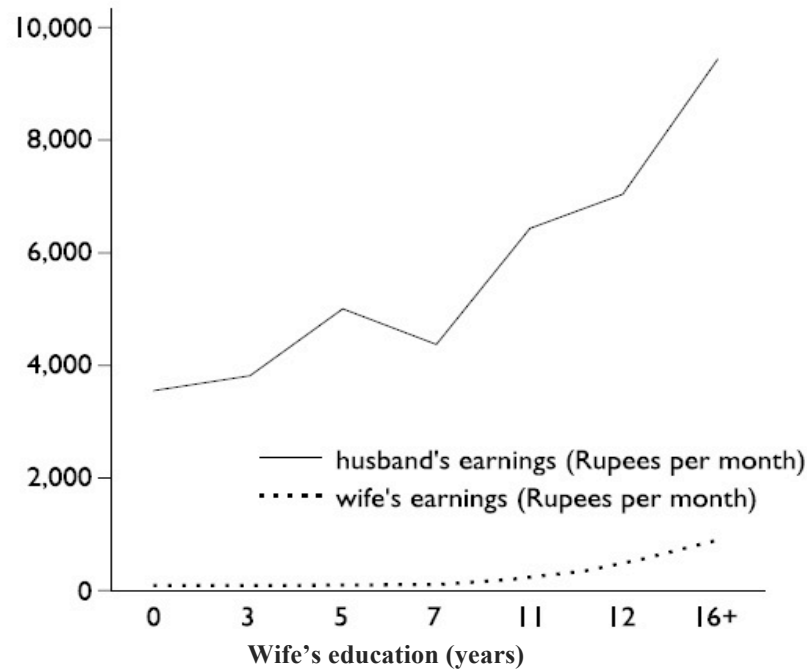Source: WAS 2002 & 2007 (all Indian states) as cited in Simister, 2011

Figure 4: Husband & Wife's Earning by Wife's Education
Source: WAS 2002 & 2007 (all Indian states) as cited in Simister, 2011

It is widely believed that low education is the most prevalent among both perpetrators and victims of domestic violence (World Health Organization, 2010, p.21). Therefore, the data on decreasing domestic violence in Figure 1 has more to do with the above-mentioned phenomena than with the empowerment of women. The data in Figures 2, 3, and 4 clearly show that "education is necessary, but not sufficient, for development" (Simister, 2011, p22). To overcome the sanctity of culture, gender advocates must defend the idea of social justice for all, with equal right to education, equal right under the law, and equal right to sexual freedom. Additionally, to "not presume an undifferentiated public with identical needs and interests" (Molyneux, 1998, p. 242), advocates should support feminist groups in developing regions and help them to engender local policy and encourage women to take a place in the public sphere.

Values, tradition, and therefore, culture are not and cannot be sacred. The malice of refusing women the right to be independent individuals cannot be protected behind the veil of values called culture.

5. Conclusion

There is a sense of frustration surrounding the concept of gender and development. The first multilateral institution to appoint a Women in Development-adviser was the World Bank in 1977 (two years after the First Conference on Women), and the concept of gender mainstreaming was first formally endorsed during the 1995 Conference on Women in Beijing (World Bank, 2010, p. 12). In other words, the inter-structural and bureaucratic gender awareness movement is

fairly young, and patience is required in anticipation of transformative results. However, nearly 20 years have gone by since the last Conference on Women. Feminists are afraid that a new conference would detract from the progress made during the Fourth Conference on Women. This unfortunate state is largely due to the global rise of religious fundamentalism and conservatism (Kabeer, 2012). Clearly, this is a time when gender advocates may struggle to keep their influence over states and multi-lateral agencies. Thus, it is more important than ever that they stay united as a movement rather than torn apart by inter-organizational disagreements (Kabeer, 2012). In this essay, I have discussed how the gender equality movement will not garner enough support if it does not invite men into the movement. Furthermore, the feminist movement should never assume that all women have equal interests, or that they necessarily conflict with the equal interests of men. When it comes to influencing policy, gender advocates need to keep using well-reasoned arguments when they propose policy to legitimize the fight for equality, even in the purely economic sphere. However, gender has been widely adapted by mainstream institutions, and this is the time for feminists to demand more transformative actions. Gender advocates should never accept sanctity of culture and always demand equal social rights.

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