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Addressing World Poverty through Women and Girls: A feminized solution?

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The intersections between food systems and poverty

Food and nutrition have historically been deeply implicated in poverty analysis and measurement. Indeed, poverty is often defined and measured in terms of both absolute and relative incomes in macro-level international comparisons. Absolute measures, such as the “extreme poverty line,” are grounded in a “basic needs” approach whereby an extreme poverty line is typically established as the income necessary to access sufficient calories to avoid death. Likewise the “poverty line” is also an absolute measure of the income/expenditure of resources needed to access not only food, but also housing and transport.

Both these measures have particular relevance to gender, given the disproportionate onus on women to provide for basic household needs – both because they are often unpaid workers and carers in the context of household livelihoods, and because in many parts of the world (especially in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia) they are the backbone of subsistence farming and horticulture, whether in rural or urban areas.

Yet despite these inputs, women’s and girls’ claims to food and decent nutrition are often compromised by male bias in household consumption, which, in a number of instances – perhaps most notably in Asia – have been associated with undue mortality on the part of girl children. In addition to this, self-sacrifice on the part of women in the form of neglecting their own nutritional needs, especially when pregnant or lactating, can lead to high levels of maternal mortality, and can compound several other health problems which accrue from privations in housing, services and infrastructure. Recognizing the intersections between food systems and poverty from a gendered perspective requires acknowledging not only the hiatuses between women’s production of food and its consumption, but also the manifold burdens associated with access, provision and preparation which devolve upon women and girls, and can add to

their monetary privations in numerous ways, including physiologically, psychologically and socially.

Positioning women as a pathway out of poverty

Since the “feminization of poverty” came to enjoy the status of global orthodoxy at the Fourth Women’s World Conference at Beijing in 1995, women and girls have assumed an unprecedented visibility in development discourse, not only as the principal victims of economic privation, but also as frontline actors in poverty reduction.

The quest for women’s empowerment and gender equality has become a vital component of contemporary anti-poverty initiatives, in which great store is set on female agency as a solution to privation in the Global South. The inclusion of, and investment in, women and girls as a pathway out of poverty is in many ways well justified. Although the “feminization of poverty” has been criticized on numerous grounds, there is widespread consensus that being female exacerbates vulnerability in many ways, and can deprive women and girls of fundamental human rights.

While not denying that men are also vulnerable, the preponderant focus on women owes not only to their comparatively greater victimization; it also rests on repeated observations that income earned by women, or under their control, is often allocated more fairly within households than by men, and is spent on the kinds of consumption which better assure familial nutrition, health and well-being. However, whether female-targeted poverty reduction programs provide the most appropriate route to promoting women’s empowerment and/or gender equality is more contentious.

The new female focus in development policy is perhaps not accidental. An important step came in 1995 when the World Bank’s flagship publication for Beijing emphasized how “[i]nvesting in women is critical for poverty reduction. It speeds economic development by raising productivity and promoting the more efficient use of resources; it produces significant social returns, improving child survival and reducing fertility, and it has considerable inter-generational pay-offs.”¹ In 2007, the World Bank’s business case for “investing in women” was further



Nicaraguan migrant woman in her self-built home in Cañas, north-west Costa Rica.

intensified with the launch of its three-year Gender Action Plan (GAP), which was sub-titled: “Gender Equality as Smart Economics.” An unfortunate consequence was to sideline “... the moral imperative of empowering women to achieve women’s human rights and their full and equal rights with men.”²

Given this history, it was arguably auspicious to see somewhat modified messaging in the Bank’s *World Development Report 2012 (WDR 2012) on Gender Equality and Development*.³ In this document, much greater space is devoted to gender equality as an intrinsic goal. By the same token, WDR 2012 is far from free of what I have called “clever confluences,” whereby the repeated linking of Smart Economics and reference to women’s rights implies a profound symbiosis with efficiency agendas.⁴ Indeed it seems that economic utilitarianism is increasingly the major justification for promoting gender equality, yet with a version of gender equality based on some rather dubious assumptions.

These assumptions not only encompass the inclusion of women and girls as an “untapped resource”; they also trade on the idea that women and girls represent “value for money,” not least because they are nominally more altruistic than men and boys, as well as more likely to be risk-averse entrepreneurs.^{5,6,7,8} A further element in this assemblage is that women are “better able to incorporate compassion and humanitarianism within business practice.”⁹ It is little surprise, therefore, that one of the concerns raised in feminist circles relates to the instrumentalization of women to alleviate poverty, despite ostensible gestures towards “empowering” them in the process.^{10,11,12,13,14,4} Such tendencies intensify a longer-observed trend for women to end up working for “development” – rather than development working for women.^{15,16,17,18,19}

“One of the concerns raised in feminist circles relates to the instrumentalization of women to alleviate poverty”

While not disputing that economic growth might be highly desirable, questions remain as to whether we should be relying on women to bear the responsibility for accomplishing such an objective.^{20,21} Women end up as the duty-bearers for household poverty alleviation, with responsibility for childcare, farm work and other essential activities, while men’s exclusion can effectively excuse and/or alienate them from collaboration in this struggle. On top of the immiseration and emasculation associated with male losses in the labor market, this can also play a role in exacerbating tendencies to stereotypically “disaffected male behavior” such as violence in the home and community, or drug or alcohol abuse.^{22,23,24,25} None of this is good for men themselves, or for women and their children. As summarized by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM): “One might even argue that the economic and social reproductive realms which women are expected to tread overextend the range of roles and responsibilities of women compared to men, which does not necessarily enlarge their life choices, but may even limit them.”²⁶ UN/UNIFEM’s concerns are pertinent when weighing up some of the pros and cons of three significant female-focused strategies to deal with poverty in the Global South:



Recycling tin cans into cooking pots, Fajara, The Gambia.

conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs, microfinance schemes and “investing in girls.”

Intensifying women’s unpaid work

CCT schemes nominally aim to “empower” women and to alleviate poverty simultaneously by channeling pecuniary handouts through women. Putting money in the hands of women signals social recognition of their conjectured financial prudence as well as altruism towards other household members, and provides official legitimation for greater female control of household income. Moreover, the fact that there have been some notable successes reveals that such programs may well provide possibilities for women to exit poverty in the medium to long term.

Nonetheless, CCTs have come in for criticism on account of their use of women as bearers of benefits to others. In placing pressure on women to intensify their unpaid maternal and community roles, while making little attempt to enjoin men in the process, this approach has entrenched a highly non-egalitarian model of the family.²⁷ Adult women’s current needs are bypassed not only through male exclusion, but also in that they are expected to make sacrifices for future generations. Indeed, the stipulations for being a beneficiary household can thwart women’s own initiatives to earn income. Paradoxically, this goes against the grain of trying to encourage greater female participation in remunerated activity, which constitutes a second string of feminized anti-poverty policy.

“Adult women are expected to make sacrifices for future generations”

Intensifying women’s remunerative activity

While CCTs capitalize on women’s unpaid reproductive labor, in microfinance schemes the emphasis is more on women’s “productive” work – which might, on the surface, seem more “empowering.” Indeed, given women’s historically limited access to formal credit,²⁸ micro-loans arguably create opportunities for women to embark upon and/or scale up their entrepreneurial ventures, to improve personal well-being and economic status, and, in the process, to challenge gender inequality. However, with group microcredit schemes frequently being “women-only” affairs, socio-cultural barriers to women’s entrepreneurship and empowerment tend to remain unchallenged, thereby minimizing the chances of significant gender transformation.²⁹ For this reason, many readings of microfinance are less than sanguine. As observed by Federici: “It is significant that loans, usually involving very small sums of money, are given mostly to women and in particular to women’s groups, although in many cases it is the husbands or other men in their families who use them.”³⁰



Female entrepreneur with baby in tow, selling maize on the street, Kanifing, The Gambia.

Over and above these concerns, the limitations of microfinance in offering a meaningful pathway out of gendered poverty are compounded by a lack of specialist guidance in enterprise growth, weak local or wider economies, and grassroots needs to divert loans to solving repeated crises of domestic consumption.^{31,32,33,34,35} As highlighted by Federici: “Far from lifting themselves out of poverty by some ‘virtuous’ investment, [women] plunge more deeply into it, going from a small debt to a bigger one in a sequence that often ends in suicide. Even where they do not die physically, many borrowers die socially.”³⁶

Enabling young women to “stop poverty before it starts”?

Since the early 21st century, feminized solutions to world poverty have taken a new turn in the form of extending the remit to girls, not only as a vanguard for “turning poverty around,” but also “stopping poverty before it starts.”³⁷ For instance, the Nike Foundation makes almost uncannily precise estimations of how much the neglect of girls represents for lost economic growth, and how much might be gained by their inclusion.

The Nike Foundation was one of the earliest corporate actors to make the case for “investing in girls.” It has done this via a movement called The Girl Effect, which was launched in 2008 and which involves partnerships with NGOs in developing countries, as well as with major multilateral and national agencies such as the World Bank and the UK’s Department for International Development (DfID). The objective of the Girl Effect is to promote girls’ “empowerment” through a variety of means, including education, vocational training, health and reproductive awareness, alternative forms of girlhood and womanhood, and sensitization to human rights. Yet while “empowering” girls

is clearly a worthy objective, it should also be borne in mind that one of the major justifications for Nike's campaign is that adolescent girls are the "world's greatest untapped solution" to eradicate poverty.³⁸ As articulated by the Nike Foundation's President and Chief Executive Officer, Maria Eitel: "In the world today, there are an estimated 250 million adolescent girls living in poverty. The untapped potential of these 250 million girls is the most powerful source for positive change."³⁹

The "positive change" envisaged is one in which, again in line with "Smart Economics" orthodoxy, "empowered girls" will not only glean rewards themselves, but also benefit their families, communities and countries. In light of this, it is perhaps no surprise that the Girl Effect has been criticized by numerous feminist scholars on two fronts: first, on account of its suppositions about young women in developing countries as innately altruistic, and second, for the use of these "values" in maximizing the economic and societal returns from female-focused investments at the expense of promoting girls' rights.⁴⁰

"The Girl Effect has been criticized by numerous feminist scholars"

Not only is there an issue with perpetuating bi-polar stereotypes of Global North and Global South girls, but also girls versus boys, who are largely off the radar – presumably on account of

the fact that the "returns" from investing in boys are likely to be of lesser magnitude. As identified by Chant and Sweetman:¹¹ "[T]he issue of 'gender' as characterized in 'smart economics' messaging, and the programming emanating from it, focuses narrowly and exclusively on the agency of women and girls, and leaves men and boys out of the picture. Is this because the focus is on economic investment rather than economic, social and political change, and economic investment in men and boys is regarded as already sufficient? Or is it because the prospective "returns to development" from male investments might be less than those from their female counterparts? And if the latter is so, to what degree does this imply the perpetuation of stereotypes of male 'egoism' and 'irresponsibility' versus female 'altruism' and 'self-sacrifice'?"

Concluding comments

In the cases discussed here, the translation of assumptions anchored in traditional "feminization of poverty" thinking into the "feminization" of anti-poverty initiatives is not an unqualified success. Indeed, there is instead little convincing evidence to suggest that goals of "female empowerment" and gender equality are guaranteed by dragooning women and girls into efforts to solve world poverty.

Part of the human rights agenda is the ability to make choices, but despite the ambitious rhetoric embedded in contemporary flagship policy documents like that of UN Women (2015), could it be that women and girls are not being empowered to



**GIRLS ARE THE MOST
POWERFUL FORCE FOR
CHANGE ON THE
PLANET.**

**WELCOME TO THE
GIRL EFFECT.**

**EXPLORE. DISCOVER.
TAKE WHAT YOU NEED...**

make any choices other than those which tie them ever more inextricably to serving others? As summarized by Cornwall and Edwards,⁴¹ women's and girls' empowerment as framed by development agencies means that this is often pursued under conditions "that are not of their own choosing."⁴²

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