A Critical Approach to Women in Development:

Redefining Gender Inequality in Developing Countries and Assessing the Solutions Thereof

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In Victorian England, the pioneer feminist Mary Wollstonecraft wrote, “I do not wish [women] to have power over men; but over *themselves*” (Wollstonecraft). Female autonomy is the key to equality, she points out. Today, 200 years later, the feminist school of thought has expanded radically from her initial critiques. The two major approaches to gender and development are Women in Development (WID, for short) and Women and Development (WAD). Each brings a unique perspective to the cause of gender inequality in developing countries and what the solutions should be. The former argues that society excludes women from the process of development by denying them access to the practical needs of their gender, and it focuses on the needs of women in *isolation* from the other gender. On the other hand, WAD focuses on improving the relation of men and women in development as well as female needs. WAD also explains the *conditions* under which women are subordinated and exploited by a patriarchal society. **In this paper, I argue that Women in Development’s approach to counteract gender inequality in developing countries is ineffective and misjudges the role of women in a growing society. Additionally, it fails to consider the relationships between the two sexes as well as that effect on the socio-economic growth of the country. In this manner, the solutions that it proposes to close the gender gap falls severely short of achieving success.**

**Firstly, WID’s approach to defining gender inequality is highly outdated and neglects to consider the relationship between women and the rest of society.** Thus, it is difficult to judge how a woman is to be ‘equal’ to others. Additionally, this leads to WID focusing on investing in the woman’s ‘pre-defined’ needs and functions in society, and reaping from the economic profit that she produces for the country. The result of these steps does not consider the possibility that women’s ‘pre-defined’ roles in the developing world needs to change. Arguably, WID only strengthens a woman’s importance in the traditional settings of a home, but fails to expand her functions to match a man’s. Therefore, it is nearly impossible “to ensure women’s equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making” (United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) ). For example, when the United Nations Development Program created a division for Women in Development, it wished to encourage women to participate in the UNDP’s development projects in developing countries (Suran Agrawal). Thus, in Susan Joekes’ *Women in the World Economy: An INSTRAW Study*, she writes that “Full and effective participation by the entire population at [*all*] stages of the development process should be ensured. […] Women should play an active role in that process” (Joekes). However, WID limits the participation is *all* stages. In 1985, the Development Centre of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development found that most (too many) developmental projects targeting women were ‘welfare-oriented’ (Weekes-Vagliani). In this manner, the projects did not successfully create activities that helped the women participate in development. Weekes-Vagliani writes that “future projects should avoid the home economics approach and focus on income-generating activities which are relevant and useful to the women participating” (Weekes-Vagliani).

Following the point above, Eva Rathberger expresses that “the WID approach began from an acceptance of existing social structures. Rather than examine why women had fared less well from development strategies during the past decade, the WID approach focused only on how women could better be integrated into ongoing development initiatives” (Rathgeber). **This leads to a cycle of ignorance of the causes of female oppression that lies rooted in the communities in developing countries.** Thus, any further attempts to improve a woman’s welfare and autonomy will collapse under the same social structure that was not removed in the first place. These structures have sometimes been in place for hundreds of years; without changing the existing social structures, the same cultural values will permeate the fabric of society, half of which includes men. Patriarchal societies will continue oppressing women, though the women may improve their access to education or health-care, and eventually the society will turn back to its old ways due to WID’s failure to address cultural values or social structures that pre-existed. Rathberger elaborates her argument, “because the [WID] approach was rooted in modernization theory, it [does] not recognize the contribution of more radical or critical perspectives such as dependency theory or Marxist and neo-Marxist analyses” (Rathgeber). In other words, WID yet again confines itself to modernization theory and does not recognize dependency theory as a viable pathway to equality for women. Thus, it is blinded to the fact that women have as much of an effect upon society as men do, which dependency theory expounds in its two-sided equation. Marxist theory also recognizes the women as ‘equal citizens of the state’ and neo-Marxism particularly argues that women and men are equally productive to society, which WID does not.

**Furthermore, WID hardly encourages women into political involvement, which is the forefront of bringing equality to women: autonomy starts with policy-making and being involved with the welfare of the country.** Walter D. Mignolo writes in *La Idea de América Latina: La Herida Colonial y la Opción Decolonial* that “Political identities, it seems, have not aroused interest until recently. If you search for ‘woman writer in Latin America’ in Google, you get a lot of information, but it will not be so easy to find a significant amount of texts written by women in which the idea of ‘Latin America’ is discussed” (Mignolo) (refer to appendix A; this quotation was translated from the Spanish of the text used). Mignolo points out that women are far from equal to men in being involved in the decisions that affect Latin America’s developing economic and social policies, in both domestic and foreign policy-making. If women are not encouraged by WID organizations to participate in politics, and only in traditional, cultural duties, then it is impossible to expect them to close the gap between men and women. In secluding women from the work of men, especially in political situations, it refuses to acknowledge that a woman can make autonomous decisions about her country’s foreign and domestic policy for economics and social law. In a sense, WID is denying the woman her right to political autonomy.

Eva Rathgeber notes that “the WID approach tend[s] to focus exclusively on the productive aspects of women’s work […] WID projects typically have been income-generating activities where women are taught a particular skill or craft […] It is rare for feasibility studies to be undertaken in advance to ensure that a viable market exists” (Rathgeber). This is yet another way that WID projects fail to achieve success with closing the gender gap. In being unable to ensure job demand for women, and by teaching them the ‘skills of their gender’, there is little interaction with the skill base that men possess. The first stumble here is a lack of skill equality, the second is a lack of demand for the skills that these women now possess. **WID consistently misjudges its efforts to bring gender equality to those in developing countries, primarily through mis-defining what the problem is, and then choosing solutions that are not relevant to modernisation efforts.**

**If the women *do* possess a skill that is in demand, there is the problem of male appropriation.** More specifically, Rathgeber contends that “[t]he common assumption is that access to income will be a sufficiently powerful stimulant to encourage women somehow to juggle their time […] When women’s income-generating projects do prove to be successful and become significant sources of revenue, they often are appropriated by men” (Rathgeber). She obliquely argues that men too need to share a feminist point of view, which WID does not encourage (through its denial to focus on gender relations). Keeping men ignorant of female rights and autonomy issues leads to the appropriation of female-generated revenue, and follows a downwards spiral into more ignorance on the part of men and a decline in the overall rise of women in closing the gender gap.

In sum, the Women in Development theory’s approach to defining gender inequality in developing countries and providing solutions to close the gender gap falls extremely short of success. Its views on the steps that need to be taken to provide women with access to political activity and suitable productive skills is severely limited, and attempts to improve these aspects of women’s lives in developing countries have been heavily criticized by many institutions and individual studies alike. WID also restricts itself by refusing to discuss the relation between the two genders and the outcomes of such a partnership on the development of a global south country. Women in developing countries are doomed to be bound to a pre-defined set of roles in society that does not acknowledge their relationship with men, nor the limitations that they have in terms of access to autonomy in the political realm. The greatest weakness of isolating the two genders from each other cripples the theory’s effectiveness. Malala Yousafzai expressed this sentiment best when she said, “We cannot all succeed when half of us are held back."

Appendices

1. This quotation was translated by me from the original Spanish text, found on page 90.

“las identidades políticas, segun parece, no han despertado el interes sino hasta hace poco tiempo. si se busca ‘mujer, escritora en America Latina’ en Google, se obtiene muchisima informacion, pero no sera tan facil encontrar una cantidad significativa de rexto eson tos por mujeres en los que se cuestione la idea de «America Latina» ”.

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