



## The World Development Report 2012: A Review

// **Scott Wisor**

The *World Development Report* (WDR) is the flagship publication of the World Bank<sup>1</sup>. The 2012 report, *Gender Equality and Development* (GED), is an important contribution to the existing literature on this theme and a useful update for the World Bank's staff.<sup>2</sup> It also represents a new push to raise the profile of gender equality among a variety of official development actors. In this review I situate GED in the broader development context, discuss its key findings and some shortcomings and suggest how it should be used by advocates and allies concerned with eliminating gross gender injustice and global poverty.

### This Poverty Brief argues that:

- WDR 2012, on *Gender Equality and Development*, is an important contribution to the literature on development and gender justice.
- Gender equality is both intrinsically important and instrumentally useful in promoting some forms of development. While it is sometimes prudent to make the instrumental argument for gender equality, concern for gender justice should be prior to and more fundamental than instrumental considerations.
- GED notes where there has been progress in reducing gender inequality (e.g. education), and where progress has stalled (e.g. violence, time-use, property rights, and political voice).
- GED fails to adequately address the policies of wealthy countries that perpetuate gender inequality in developing countries, including through the importation of natural resources from states with high levels of gender inequality and low female labour force participation.

### Situating the World Development Report

The World Bank, one of the original two Bretton Woods institutions, has a direct mandate, in its own words, to “fight poverty with passion and professionalism for lasting results and to help people help themselves and their environment by providing resources, sharing knowledge, building capacity and forging partnerships in the public and private sectors” ([www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)). It is one of the most consequential global governance institutions. Although frequently dwarfed by other actors that provide significantly more financial assistance or have much more economic or political influence over national governments, the World Bank nonetheless plays an important role in setting the development agenda. With a global staff of over 10,000 highly trained and qualified employees, country offices that are typically involved in national policy making and have direct input into ministries of finance and planning, and strong ties to other multilateral and bilateral organizations, for better or worse, *it matters what the World Bank thinks*.<sup>3</sup>

GED is thus best read with two considerations in mind. First, this is not a pure research document: the authors must be more attentive than typical academics to the political constraints faced by the World Bank. Second, the authors should and do take account of the composition of their audience: while the UNDP *Human Development Reports* are likely to be read by NGOs and human rights activists, the WDR is more likely to be read in ministries of finance and planning.<sup>4</sup>

### Summary of Key Findings

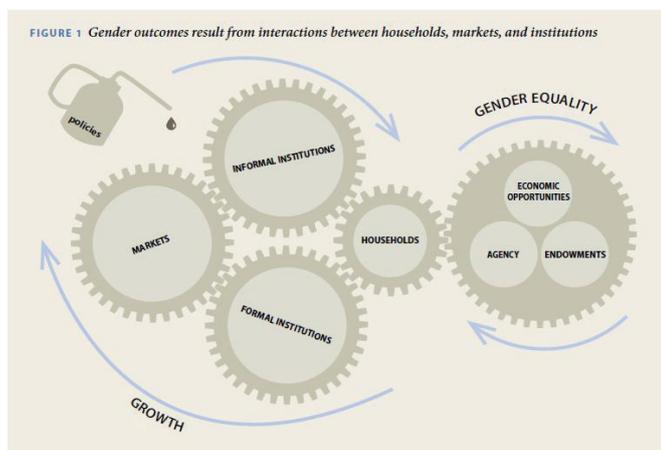
#### Normative Framework

Normatively, GED argues that gender equality is itself an important development objective, and that policies which promote gender equality will also deliver economic and social development. This dual-track justification—that gender equality is intrinsically valuable and instrumentally

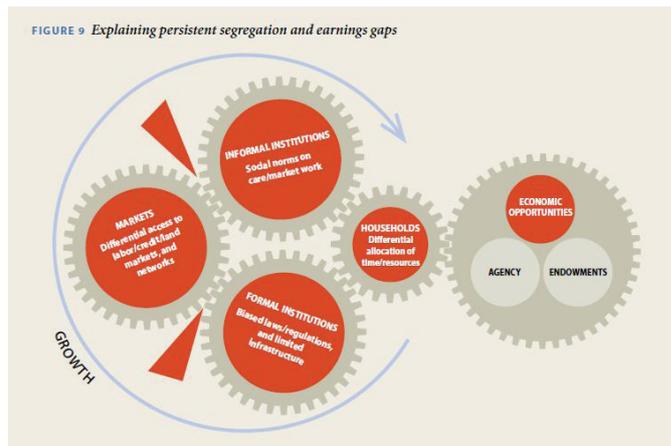
useful—is a promising strategy for the World Bank to take. Gender equality advocates might point out that it ought not matter whether gender equality will deliver better development outcomes. Promoting women’s representation in government or equal pay for equal work or a more equitable distribution of endowments and opportunities is what justice requires. But gender equality advocates can also recognize that these arguments only go so far with certain audiences. And when it is true that gender equality will deliver on other development outcomes—growth, higher incomes, better nutrition, education, and health—there is nothing wrong with making the instrumental argument some of the time.<sup>5</sup> While the Bank may be correct that they are best positioned, both in terms of their talents and in terms of their connections, to make the economic argument, the rights position on gender inequality must be prior and fundamental.<sup>6</sup> When the instrumental argument doesn’t go through, there are still morally stringent reasons to secure gender justice.

### Analytical Model

GED evaluates gender equality in agency (“an individual’s (or groups’) ability to make effective choices and to transform those choices into desired outcomes”), economic opportunities, and endowments. On this model, unequal gender outcomes in each of these three spheres are mediated by households, formal and informal institutions, and markets, each of which can play a role in creating and exacerbating gender disparities or, alternatively, substantially reducing or undermining those inequalities.



According to this model, changes in agency, endowments, or economic opportunities can change household relations and the way in which women engage with markets and formal and informal institutions. Similarly, changes in markets, formal and informal institutions can directly impact women’s agency, endowments, and economic opportunities. The analytical model also attempts to provide information on how gender inequality persists—when a ‘wedge’ presents itself in the above framework, such as formal institutions that do not guarantee equal pay for equal work or provide for property and inheritance rights for women.



### State of Affairs

GED usefully covers the state of affairs on gender equality in several key areas.

- **Violence:** While there is significant variation in the rates of sexual, physical, and emotional violence against women, in most countries the odds of a woman being abused in her lifetime are between 30 and 60 percent. In Ethiopia, 54 percent of women reported abuse in the last year. In Guinea, 60 percent of women believed it was permissible to beat a spouse for refusing to have sex with her husband.
- **Time Use:** Everywhere in the world women spend more total time working than men, and spend more time in the household and care work than men. In France, a woman does 50% of care work even when she earns 100% of household income. In Ghana that figure is 80%.
- **Earnings and Productivity:** While there have been some gains in the earnings and productivity of women workers, gaps in pay and productivity persist, are systematic, and present in almost every country that GED examines.
- **Political Voice:** Fewer than 1/5 of cabinet positions are held by women. Between 1990 and 2009, women parliamentarians grew from 10 to 19 percent. Many countries have 0 women parliamentarians.
- **Property:** Although data is scarce, women are somewhere between 10 and 20% of the landowners globally. In Kerala, India, if a woman owns a house and land, she is 1/20th as likely to suffer domestic violence.

In some areas, GED notes considerable progress in reducing gender inequality. Many countries have seen rapid gains in the education of women, with women outnumbering men in tertiary education. Some countries have seen gains in women’s political representation, especially through the use of gender quotas. In many countries, rates of female labor force participation have increased and fertility rates declined rapidly. In other areas, progress has stalled. For example, the share of care work done by men has been resistant to changes in the economic position of women. Finally, in some areas gender inequality has been exacerbated. For example, the number of ‘missing women’ as a result of sex-selective abortion has increased with rising incomes and increasing access to prenatal screenings, especially in China and India.

The GED team has worked through much of the available literature and data on gender equality. But it is important to reiterate GED's finding that comprehensive gender diagnostics are needed to advance gender justice. Absent such information, reported regularly in national systems of monitoring and information collection, it simply cannot be known what impact various policies, projects, and institutional designs have had on gender inequality. It is therefore necessary to continue to improve the collection, analysis, presentation, and use of gender sensitive data.<sup>8</sup>

### Prescriptions for Change

GED makes a variety of recommendations for domestic

political action. I will focus here on the recommendations for action from the global development community, which presumably includes IFIs, official donors, NGOs, foundations, and concerned activists, academics, and citizens. GED calls on this community to offer financial support to projects, programs, and governments (especially in those areas where resource constraints are the biggest obstacle), to enter leveraging partnerships (when such partnerships are available and fit to purpose), and to promote innovation and learning (when new research, monitoring, or technological or programmatic innovation is needed to achieve change). GED recommends focusing on four priorities, listed below.

## The Agenda for Global Action At A Glance

Priority area	New/additional initiatives that need support	Directions for the global development community		
		Providing financial support	Fostering innovation and learning	Leveraging partnerships
Closing gender gaps in human endowments	Increasing access to education among disadvantaged groups	√		√
	Increasing access to clean water	√	√	
	Increasing access to specialized maternal services	√	√	√
	Strengthening support for prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS	√		√
Promoting women's access to economic opportunities	Increasing access to child care and early childhood development	√	√	
	Investing in rural women		√	√
Closing gender gaps in voice and agency	Increasing women's access to the justice system		√	
	Shifting norms regarding violence against women		√	√
Preventing inter-generational reproduction of gender inequality	Investing in adolescent girls and boys		√	
Supporting evidence-based public action	Generating new information	√		√
	Facilitating knowledge sharing and learning		√	

GED argues for “upstreaming” and strategic mainstreaming of gender into development policy and practice. This important recommendation must be taken seriously in development organizations. Gender mainstreaming was promoted beginning in the 1980s to integrate gender throughout development practice. But critics of gender mainstreaming have found that this has resulted in gender being at once everywhere and nowhere (Tiessen 2007). By making all project managers integrate gender into their work, the diffusion of responsibility for securing gender justice results in an absence of effective, transformative reform. Thus, GED argues that, “because gender gaps often result from multiple and mutually reinforcing market and institutional constraints, effective policy action may require coordinated multisectoral interventions . . . it is thus necessary for gender issues to be upstreamed from specific sector products and projects to country and sector programs.” (p. 362).

### Critiques of GED

Terrific as it is, GED is not without its shortcomings. (For a much more critical view see Razavi 2011). Of course no single report on gender equality can cover all of the relevant issues, and no single model can explain all forms of gender injustice. I highlight here two areas in which GED underperforms, with an eye towards encouraging activists and academics to reflect on how the very useful thinking it contains can be extended in these areas.

The section on the political economy of gender equality is weak. GED rightly notes that some gender gaps are unlikely to change even with growth and growing incomes and that achieving gender equality requires political action. States are the most effective agents here, but certainly not the only ones. GED calls for collective action, both domestically and (to a lesser extent) in collaboration with transnational actors, to bring about change. But this fails to explore the hard political fight, both domestically and internationally, that must be waged to secure gender justice. What theory of change can explain how some political battles succeed and others fail? Of course improving the delivery of maternal health services would reduce maternal mortality. This is also true in the United States—but it took 40 years to enact some health care reform, and even this reform barely succeeded, used up almost all of the President's political capital, and was significantly weakened through extensive lobbying by special interests in an institutionally corrupted political system. Much more attention should be devoted to the political strategies needed to secure gender justice.

Second, there is insufficient attention to both macro-economic policy and the policies of rich countries (beyond finance and knowledge sharing) that directly aggravate gender disparity in developing countries. As has been noted in much recent global justice theorizing (Jaggar 2005), gender disparities are not solely the product of domestic gender relations. Consider one example. Developed economies remain dependent on the oil exports of developing nations. There is a high correlation between dependence on natural resource exports and high levels of gender inequality. Rich countries confer on these countries the resource privilege (Pogge 2008, Wenar 2008), which allows rulers who control resource rents to maintain

authoritarian governance by heavily arming themselves and by buying off potential political opposition. Furthermore, these economies fail to develop employment-intensive export sectors, which results in a lack of labor force participation by women, reinforcing their political and social exclusion (Ross 2008). So global action doesn't simply require support for domestic change, but change also in how developed countries engage with states that have high levels of gender inequality, including their conferral of the resource privilege on gender oppressive regimes.

### Building from GED

The World Bank is not impervious to regular (and sometimes stale) critique from NGOs that argue it is a behemoth insensitive to the views and preferences of poor people and poor countries, shrouded in secrecy, driven by nefarious political agendas, and insensitive to change. Under the leadership of Robert Zoellick, the Bank has taken a number of steps to change how it engages with external actors and is beginning to reform a number of internal policies as well. Importantly, the Bank has made huge strides in both transparency and engagement. It now makes publicly available on its website vast amounts of previously difficult to obtain development data and indicators (see the open data initiative <http://data.worldbank.org>). Zoellick (2010) has called for democratizing the research agenda within the Bank. And with the launch of GED, the bank has for the first time used innovative social media to carry the messages of a WDR.

The advocates and allies of poor women and men, girls and boys should pursue a three track strategy that builds from the strength of GED, changes at the Bank, and opportunities presented by current events (including the debut of UN WOMEN) to continue to advance the struggle for global gender justice.

First, use GED to push long desired policies with a range of reluctant development actors. Activists should use the arguments in GED to push for making gender a strategic priority in development institutions.

Second, activists and academics should continue to expand the spaces that have been newly opened by GED for further discussion and advancement. As the World Bank's agenda evolves, critical scrutiny and public support for positive shifts in the Bank's and the broader development community's thinking on gender equality is needed. Consider the range of evidence and policy recommendations in GED that would almost certainly not been in earlier WDRs: the importance of public sector employment; the need for social clauses in trade agreements; the need for affirmative action programs to promote women's representation; the need to integrate gender into land redistribution programs; the importance of social protection and cash transfers; arguing that “no size fits all”; and the use of a systematic evaluation of individual disadvantage that is at most partially focused on income and consumption growth, placing special emphasis on voice, agency, and assessing disadvantage in a range of dimensions, including time use, care responsibilities, freedom from violence, access to justice, mobility, and so on. This is not your mother's World Bank. Building on these

considerations and others, academics and activists can continue to solidify intellectual and political support for important shifts in development thinking, while at the same time refining our normative and empirical understanding of gender injustice, informing prescriptive reforms.

Third, take the GED's thinking in new directions: learning to think about gender justice and resource scarcity, increased volatility, climate change, the post 2015 development agenda, global financial regulation, and other pressing topics in new ways that will place greater emphasis on examining how these key issues are related to gender equality.<sup>9</sup>

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### Notes:

- 1) All references in this document to GED refer to Revenga and Shetty 2011. Both figures and the chart are from Revenga and Shetty 2011, and were produced by the WDR 2012 team.
- 2) The last research output of considerable importance by the Bank on gender and development issues, important in its time, was *Engendering Development: through gender equality in rights, resources, and voice*.
- 3) It is also worth noting that among the member countries owning the World Bank, some have much more influence than others. Historically, the United States has held the Presidency and is understood to dominate the direction of the Bank. The political influences over Bank policy, and specifically past WDRs, are a subject of some controversy. For example, Ravi Kanbur left, as lead author, the WDR 2000/2001 over political interference in the report's conclusions (Wade 2002). But we must be cautious to not get stuck on rather stale critiques of structural adjustment and neoliberal globalization from the 1980s and 1990s. The multilaterals have in some ways changed, though certainly not as quickly as progressives would like or victims of injustice deserve. For example, the IMF now endorses capital controls, a direct reversal of their position during the Asian Financial Crisis, and the World Bank now vigorously supports social protection programs. It is also noteworthy that Kanbur served on the advisory board of GED.
- 4) One final note: advocates for gender justice can take great comfort both in the fact that the GED team which has been assembled, the advisory board, and the subsequent activities which are underway surrounding GED have the highest credentials in terms of academic rigor and commitment to eradicating all forms of injustice, including gender injustice.
- 5) This returns us to a familiar point in philosophical debate between utilitarian and deontological thinking. On utilitarian grounds, gender equality should be pursued only insofar as that maximizes the (distribution insensitive) welfare for the whole population. On deontological grounds, the overall assessment of advantage and disadvantage cannot be insensitive to the distribution of benefits and burdens.
- 6) There are three kinds of cases which highlight this tension. First, some cases of gender injustice will have no overall development impact. Second, some instances of gender injustice may actually produce economic benefits. Third, in some cases addressing gender injustices may require allocating scarce resources away from other utility maximizing activities.
- 7) P. 150
- 8) I am fortunate to be involved in one project working on this issue. See [www.genderpovertymeasure.org](http://www.genderpovertymeasure.org).
- 9) I have benefitted greatly from presentations by and discussions with Gillian Brown, Andrew Mason, Sharon Bessell, and Katie Patrick, and useful comments from Thomas Pogge. All views and errors remain my own.