

S || Global Societies Journal



Peer Reviewed

Title:

Globalization, Women's Empowerment and Sustainable Growth: Development Theory with a Vagina

Journal Issue:

[Global Societies Journal, 1](#)

Author:

[Adcock, Kimberly](#), University of California, Santa Barbara

Publication Date:

2013

Permalink:

<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/4r64r5wj>

Keywords:

Gender, Development, Millennium Development Goals, Sri Lanka

Local Identifier:

gis_globalsocieties_19686

Abstract:

Through a gendered lens, this paper seeks to explore certain social realities and their effect on the global economic climate. Many across the globe are subjugated, actively oppressed and even murdered simply because they are female. While this can easily be seen as a human rights issue, it is also arguably an important economic factor that has yet to be adequately incorporated into development discourse. For example, gender equality is one of the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), however, the connection between women's rights and all of the other MDGs is inextricable. Further, key to the realization of gender equality is one of the most difficult pieces to the development puzzle—personal empowerment, which is not something that an outside force can easily influence. Applying these concepts to a case study of Sri Lanka illustrates the difficulty in measuring gender equity and the complexities in understanding the effect that gender relations has on development.

Copyright Information:

All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author or original publisher for any necessary permissions. eScholarship is not the copyright owner for deposited works. Learn more at http://www.escholarship.org/help_copyright.html#reuse



eScholarship
University of California

eScholarship provides open access, scholarly publishing services to the University of California and delivers a dynamic research platform to scholars worldwide.

Globalization, Women's Empowerment and Sustainable Growth: Development Theory with a Vagina

By: Kimberly Adcock

ABSTRACT

Through a gendered lens, this paper seeks to explore certain social realities and their effect on the global economic climate. Many across the globe are subjugated, actively oppressed and even murdered simply because they are female. While this can easily be seen as a human rights issue, it is also arguably an important economic factor that has yet to be adequately incorporated into development discourse. For example, gender equality is one of the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), however, the connection between women's rights and all of the other MDGs is inextricable. Further, key to the realization of gender equality is one of the most difficult pieces to the development puzzle—personal empowerment, which is not something that an outside force can easily influence. Applying these concepts to a case study of Sri Lanka illustrates the difficulty in measuring gender equity and the complexities in understanding the effect that gender relations has on development.

Keywords: Gender, Development, Millennium Development Goals, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

“Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs, but not every man's greed”

Mahatma Gandhi

Amidst a tremendous amount of data and information surrounding development programs and studies of economic growth lays a simple, yet somehow mysterious, factor that could be the key to the alleviation of poverty for most of the underdeveloped world, to an increase in the quality of life for the majority of the population, and even to the facilitation of better nutrition for children around the globe. Yet, it has been neglected, subjugated and mostly ignored by

mainstream economists. Recently, this agent can be argued to be the key to economic success for emerging East Asian economies and is, in fact, responsible for 66% of all work performed on the planet.¹ In recent development paradigms this factor has been repetitively problematized and paid lip service to without being sufficiently unraveled or represented in most literature. This enigmatic force is the woman.

Many economists and academics have turned to more comprehensive approaches to development in light of the 2008 financial crisis in the developed world rather than maintain the promotion of neo-liberal ideals of free and fair trade, which was rarely ever free or fair and solely focused on economic growth without any reference to equity of growth or human development. Due to the developing world's dependency on the consumerism and trading policies of the states in which the financial crisis occurred, specifically the US and Europe, underdeveloped countries felt the ripple effects of these failed neoliberal institutions as some aspects of growth were not sustainable. Examples of this can be seen in the slowdown of emerging economies. In terms of entering a more gender enlightened discourse, the banking powerhouse, Goldman Sachs, has been quoted saying "Gender inequality hurts economic growth," and Lawrence Summers, chief economist of the World Bank made a remark that "investment in girls' education may well be the highest return investment in the developing world."² However, even these tokens to women in mainstream economic discourse are not adequate if the gender lens is not sufficiently combined with pragmatic approaches to development that include the need for investment in human capital and social welfare along with the promotion of sustainable economic growth. In other words, ideas of holistic development are necessary in order to create sustainable economic growth, and no development model can be "whole" without being conceptualized through a gendered lens.

This paper seeks to explore the importance of women's rights and empowerment in the development of economic growth and stability. First, women tend to be overlooked in development analysis and when they are incorporated into the discourse there is still a general lack of qualitative understanding of the unique plight of women in our gendered world. Second, this misrepresentation of women in economic discourse is not simply a moral failing, but also contributes to the inability to realize the Millennium Development Goals—each of which is interdependent with gender equality and women's empowerment. Third, while it is hard to discredit the argument that women play a role in determining the condition of an economy, it is much more difficult to ascertain adequate mechanisms for positively influencing women in their own struggles for personal empowerment. Finally, a case study of Sri Lanka, which is considered to be somewhat of a success story in its region, shows how some measurements of economic growth and gender equality can be misleading in the analysis and understanding of socio-economic conditions.

¹ "Women's Economic Empowerment." (April 2011). DAC Network on Gender Equality (Gendernet). Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/dac/genderequalityanddevelopment/47561694.pdf>.

² Kristof, N. D. & WuDunn, S. (2009). *Half the Sky: Turning oppression into opportunity for women worldwide*. New York: Random House Inc. p. xx, xxi

GLOBALIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT: CONSIDERING 'ALTERNATIVE' AND 'HUMAN' DEVELOPMENT PARADIGMS

"For most of history, Anonymous was a woman."

Virginia Woolf

It is no secret that there is a severe gender gap in the developing world. However, the effects of this gap are quite hidden from the public eye in the developed world. While many people have heard of "bride burning," most are not aware that a woman is murdered this way in India once every two hours. Likewise, the fact that female babies are undesirable in Chinese families is well known; however, most probably do not realize that more female infants die every week, due to their undesirability, than the amount of protestors who died in the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989. In total, it can be estimated that more than 100 million girls are missing from the world population due to issues of gender discrimination—sex trafficking, AIDS, infanticide, bride burnings etc.³ This type of social discrimination spills over into the economic subjugation of women as well. Statistically, women perform 66% of work globally, produce 50% of the world's food and only receive 10% of the total income and own 1% of the land.⁴ The exploitation of women is a global phenomenon. This is partly attributed to the fact that women tend to be viewed as ideal laborers for low-cost, low-skilled jobs because investors can pay less in wages and have less of a backlash from the workers. In this way, multi-national corporations (MNCs) benefit from gender inequality in the developing world and hide behind neo-liberal facades, claiming that investment in the country and subsequent increases in GDP are good for the economies in which they operate. For many reasons, including the aforementioned exploitation of women along with social injustices perpetuated by irresponsible MNC and other developer practices, such as environmental degradation, lack of health care for employees and unfair trade practices attributed to lobbyist activities—all in the name of pursuing higher profits, developing economies do not actually benefit in an equitable and sustainable way.

Recently, approaches to development have taken on a new twist to include social costs in economic planning. This turn to true cost analysis is in part a reaction to the ills associated with unbridled neoliberal capitalism, such as the gaping distance between the rich and the poor. The current level of globalization exacerbates this gap, as social stratification becomes a global hierarchy and the "race to the bottom" leaves developing economies without much room to get out from underneath the exploitative mechanisms of inequality, which are utilized by capitalist enterprises. In short, economists are now trying to incorporate a balance sheet for development

³ Kristof, N.D. & WuDunn. S., 2009, p. xiv

⁴ Women's Economic Empowerment, 2011.

that includes economic costs as well as social and environmental costs in order to take into account the health of the people and the sustainability of growth.

One method used to incorporate these costs has been to create new 'alternative,' social and/or human development initiatives within economic development paradigms. Alternative development approaches have become mainstream with even the United Nations adopting Millennium Development Goals, such as poverty alleviation, child education, and gender equality, as priorities over aggregate GDP growth. The problem with moralistic objectives, however, is that moral incentives are only as strong as they are economically viable. In some cases, ignoring economic needs in favor of moralistic policies can lead to black markets and mobilization of ethnic and religious groups.⁵ For example, it is difficult to tell a mother that she cannot deplete environmental resources to feed her starving family in the name of environmental sustainability. Therefore, finding the meeting point between sustainability and economic growth is the ongoing challenge to the developing world.

Fortunately, investments in human capital and equity tend to foster long-term growth. It is welfare programs via the state or other organizations that provide incentives to invest in the reproductive stage of human capital. This would include primary and secondary education programs without fees to poor families, which foster economic growth in the community by educating the next generation of workers for the future. This could also include health care programs that would minimize child and maternal mortality, improve the health of the work force, and family planning assistance to promote adequate population control so that mothers can contribute to the formal economy while taking care of their families. This "health before wealth" ideology has been corroborated as essential for the sustainability of growth in the analysis of political economists such as J. Nederveen Pieterse and J. E. Stiglitz.⁶

In order to proliferate this ideology, some economists discuss certain conditions under which sustainable growth is more likely to be achieved. Economist D. Rodrik expresses democracy and democratic institutions as a precondition to equitable and sustainable growth. Giving people the power over their own lives by including them in the process of policy creation is considered beneficial for long-term growth. Furthermore, trust that one's rights cannot be taken away at any given time, for instance the right to own property and enforce contracts, makes business transactions more efficient as people have more trust in the market.⁷ This type of trust requires a stable government with adequate mechanisms of enforcement. Without trust that the government will not suddenly take rights away or transition into a new government that would remove these rights, it is difficult to make transactions that require time for fulfillment or to trust in long-term strategies for growth. Likewise, without a formal court system that recognizes equal rights for the people, certain laws will be ignored because there is no fear of prosecution. In this way, democracy and institutions facilitate economic stability and inclusive, diverse capitalism.

⁵ Nederveen Pieterse, J. (2010). *Development Theory*. London: Sage Publications. p. 127

⁶ Stiglitz, J. E. (2007). *Making Globalization Work*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. p. 25-59 and Nederveen Pieterse, J. (2010). p. 134, 136

⁷ Rodrik, D. (2000). "Institutions for High-Quality Growth: What They are and How to Acquire Them." *Studies in Comparative International Development*. p. 5

Other, more evolved, analyses of such efforts have even questioned the helpfulness of a paradigm per se as an effective tool for development in favor of more specific approaches in which the community affected is participating in the learning process of their own advancement.⁸ Analyses such as these run into issues of applicability as they attempt to critique current development paradigms without promoting a new one, for lack of advocacy for specific policies and overarching models for growth. In short, alternative development attempts to dismantle current development approaches, like neoliberal Washington Consensus paradigms, without putting an equally “grand solution” in its place. While this makes alternative development seem weak, it is still appropriate to acknowledge these people-centered “alternative” development goals in terms of a “bottom-up” approach, as any grand scheme might lack the ability to reach individual needs and local movements.

In terms of gender, the flaw of an overarching approach, whether it is neoliberal or “alternative,” is that in a generalized paradigm many statistics overlook the true situation for women. When discussing poverty alleviation, many alternative development programs focus on issues of social class, which are usually confined to a generalization of “the household” or the community without exposing the issue of gender power relations within these generalized categories.⁹ For example, in many households in the developing world, men have control over funds and tend to leave the women and children at a greater disadvantage, as they are less likely to invest in their families and communities than a woman counterpart.¹⁰ It is not uncommon in rural areas of developing nations for a man to spend money on alcohol while the woman spends her time working the land to feed the family.¹¹ Some estimates postulate that about 60% of the population of chronically hungry people is female and there is a correlation between high levels of gender inequality and high levels of hunger.¹² Many development programs, such as literacy campaigns and micro-lending schemes, tend to be less transformative than one would think, especially when literacy campaigns ignore the opportunity cost of a female’s time by assuming that any time of day is equally accessible to women for classes and micro-lending facilities think loans should be geared towards handicrafts and other such “feminine” business models, which are less stable and profitable in the long run compared to agricultural or trader vocational training usually geared towards males. Sometimes this type of discrimination goes so far as to innovate agricultural tools specific to the abilities of male farmers.¹³

⁸ Nederveen Pieterse, J. (2010). p. 84.

⁹ Anderson, M. B. (1996). *Development and Social Diversity*. Oxford: Oxfam. p. 17.

¹⁰ “Women’s Economic Empowerment.” (2011) p. 6.

¹¹ Mirembe, S. (1995). “In Defense of Women: Fighting for Equal Rights in Uganda.” *Let the Dawn Come: Social Development: Looking behind the Clichés*. London: Panos/Novib. p. 83.

¹² “Food Security and Land Rights: Empowering rural women.” (2012). DAC Network on Gender Equality (GENDERNET) and the United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality (IANWGE). Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/dac/genderequalityanddevelopment/foodsecurityandlandrightsempoweringruralwomen.htm>.

¹³ “Women’s Economic Empowerment.” (2011) p. 19.

Furthermore, the home-economic aspect of a woman's personal lifestyle, such as reproductive work, tends to lack value as it lies outside the scope of the formal economy in which everything has a monetary value. It is estimated that if a monetary value were placed on home care and raising children, it would range between 10% and 39% of GDP.¹⁴ This means that social programs advocated by alternative development promoters, which tend to only advance welfare programs that directly contribute to the formal economy, ignore important work done by women in the home that contributes to long-term growth. Additionally, the first social services to be cut when funds are low and economies are threatened are the ones that affect women the most—family planning, free education, childcare etc.¹⁵

As far as democracy is concerned, the ability to vote or serve in the government is only applicable to those who have the social capital to participate in a meaningful capacity. Some economists try to side-step this problem by either grouping capabilities into an issue of social class—by claiming that the poor in general lack agency, or by blaming “culture”—arguing that one should not play cultural imperialist in the developing world by forcing women to participate.¹⁶ The result of such intentional negligence is evident when one investigates the “glass ceiling” over women in politics and business in the developing world. While there is rarely a law or regulation that limits or forbids women in powerful positions, they are still strikingly underrepresented and tend to be paid less than male counterparts.¹⁷ In such cases, it is not necessarily a lack of institutional democracy in the state that holds women back from positions of power, but rather the social structure and lack of empowerment of the women in these communities that limits their ability to contribute to politics and economics equally. For example, in Islamic communities women do not participate in public life, in part because of “Muslim culture.”¹⁸ While simply blaming “culture” might be an easy way to sidestep the difficult issue of the subjugation of women in many societies, a culture of oppression should never be ignored nor left to continuously tyrannize the female population. Religion and culture are fluid, not static, and gender equality should be promoted in all circumstances.

Similarly, the lack of knowledge in the female population about their rights can lead to their under-participation in the public sphere. Women, especially in rural areas, are less likely to be literate than males and therefore are unable to read or understand their rights unless these rights are explained to them.¹⁹ Many laws still exist that leave men with a higher priority in property ownership than women, making women less able to take advantage of expected democratic property rights. In the democratic nation-state of Uganda, women are only entitled 15% of their husbands land should they be widowed, regardless of their role in the acquisition or maintenance of that property, while a widower is entitled to all property shared with a deceased

¹⁴ “Women’s Economic Empowerment.” (2011) p. 14.

¹⁵ Anderson M. B. (1996) p. 18, 19.

¹⁶ Anderson, M. B. (1996) p. 22.

¹⁷ Aulette, J. R., Wittner, J & Blankely, K. (2009). *Gendered Worlds*. New York: Oxford University Press. p. 139, 305.

¹⁸ Kristof, N. D. & WuDunn, S. (2009). p. xxi.

¹⁹ Mirembe, S. (1995). p. 75-79.

wife.²⁰ Clearly, women do not automatically receive equitable treatment due to democracy, nor do other “alternative development” paradigms tend to adequately incorporate the woman in their models, regardless of token comments about women’s importance in economic planning.

ADD WOMEN AND STIR: HOW WOMEN CONTRIBUTE TO THE REALIZATION OF THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

“You educate a man; you educate a man. You educate a woman; you educate a generation.”

Brigham Young

Social inequality for women makes a good case for moral insufficiency in developmental economics. However, the subjugation of half the world’s population has devastating consequences on economic stability for everyone. Investment in this portion of the population could be the key to sustainable growth worldwide. Recently, the United Nations has established eight Millennium Development goals, one of which is gender equality. Yet, if properly established and enforced, rights for women could not only assuage the oppression of women, but also lead to a more comprehensive realization of the other seven goals.²¹ While gender equity and maternal health are clearly connected, women’s equality has a significant impact on child’s health, education, the alleviation of poverty and hunger worldwide, the ability to combat HIV/AIDS, the response to issues of environmental depletion and the call for global partnership. In short, the goal of gender equality can be used as a stepping-stone towards achieving all of the Millennium Development Goals.

Aside from areas where extreme gender inequality causes women to vanish, there is usually a higher percentage of females in the population than males. This is due, in part, to the fact that women tend to have a higher life expectancy than men, meaning they are much more likely to become widows and have to take care of the family and household by themselves.²² This issue is exacerbated when wars take the men out of homes to fight and many never return. Biologically, females produce the next generation of workers—gestation and birthing—and, therefore, have a deeper connection to children than paternal fathers. Together, these truths can help explain why mothers, and females in general, tend to invest more in their families and communities than male counterparts. As far as infant mortality is concerned, a study conducted in Brazil found that a child’s likelihood to survive rose by 20% when a woman controlled the income of the household. As women’s wages and ability to engage in business transactions increase, so does investment in the next generation via education, nutrition, and health care.²³ Therefore, including women in economic growth models by extension contributes to the health

²⁰ Mirembe, S. (1995) p. 80.

²¹ “We Can End Poverty 2015.” (2012). United Nations Millennium Development Goals. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals>.

²² Aulette, J.R., Wittner, J. & Blankely, K. (2009) p. 178.

²³ “Women’s Economic Empowerment.” (2011). p. 6, 7.

and education of children, the future bearers of the economy, which relates to two Millennium Development goals—education and child health.

As 60% of chronically hungry and impoverished people are female, attempts to alleviate poverty and hunger require the incorporation of gender studies in order to realize the true needs of those affected.²⁴ This goes beyond simply acknowledging that gender inequality exists and includes the necessity to incorporate the role of women in the formal and informal economy. Currently, women's participation in the labor force is on the rise and some estimates claim that women's share of work in the formal economy was 46% in 2007, which is 4% higher than a decade previous.²⁵ This rise in participation from women translates into economic growth as a larger labor force contributes to the global formal economy. Also, women are responsible for up to 38% of small-businesses around the world, meaning they are contributing to the development of their local economies by creating jobs and keeping the circulation of money, goods and services, within the community—as opposed to MNCs which tend to create jobs but take profits out of the communities in which they operate.²⁶ Thus, gender equality, as it is visible through the female participation rate in the public sphere via business interactions, has shown to encourage economic growth and could be a significant step towards the Millennium Development Goal of poverty alleviation in developing economies.

Additionally, introducing more females into the formal economy will remove them from the black market sex trade, which is an area where HIV/AIDS is largely concentrated in South Asian countries.²⁷ Promoting women's rights by promulgating and enforcing anti-prostitution laws will further mitigate the occurrences of prostitution. In India there are 2 to 3 million women involved in prostitution and a substantial amount of them entered the trade unwillingly.²⁸ In this way, the objectification and subjugation of women has led to the dissemination of STDs and HIV/AIDS, which incidentally does not discriminate between genders—HIV/AIDS kills men along with the women. Mitigating prostitution by investing in the creation and enactment of adequate laws against sex slavery along with investment in women's health, through programs such as family planning, the encouragement of condom use, and awareness campaigns for HIV/AIDS, could go a long way to reduce the amount of HIV/AIDS victims, which is yet another Millennium Development Goal.

Finally, the lack of participation from women in politics has led to some realizations about the differences between men and women in terms of voting trends and political views.

²⁴ "Food Security and Land Rights: Empowering rural women." (2012).

²⁵ United Kingdom Department for International Development (2010), *Agenda 2010 - The turning point on poverty: background paper on gender*. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/dac/genderequalityanddevelopment/47561694.pdf>.

²⁶ United Kingdom Department for International Development (2010), *Agenda 2010 - The turning point on poverty: background paper on gender*. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/dac/genderequalityanddevelopment/47561694.pdf>.

²⁷ "Sri Lanka has great opportunity to beat AIDS: UNAIDS expert. (Dec 2012). *The Sundaytimes Sri Lanka*. Retrieved from <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/121202/business-times/sri-lanka-has-great-opportunity-to-beat-aids-unaidsexpert-22218.html>.

²⁸ Kristof, N. D. & WuDunn, S. (2009). p. 5.

Women tend to be more critical of business and military intervention, more in favor of the government taking an active role in development, and more supportive of health care and basic needs programs. Similarly, women are less likely to feel that the government is wasting funds.²⁹ As more females enter politics there is an associated increase in equality and justice and a more efficient use of available resources.³⁰ Therefore, encouraging women's participation in voting and politics could contribute to the final two Millennium Development Goals. First, by helping to address issues of environmental sustainability, as women seem more likely to approve of government spending and investment, and, second, by promoting equality and social stability between nations, as war becomes less popular and the possibility for global partnership is more plausible.

Here, the correlations between gender equality and the remaining seven Millennium Development Goals are *briefly* explained and more research should be included to strengthen the argument that there is a causal connection between them. However, this analysis demonstrates the utility of a gender lens, which is clearly applicable and highly beneficial in development discourse.

HOW TO EMPOWER: OBSTACLES TO FEMALE EMPOWERMENT FROM THE GRASSROOTS

"It is not what you call me, but what I answer to."

African Proverb

While it is evident that investments need to be made in women and in the empowerment of women via the generation of income and participation in politics, one crucial question needs to be emphasized: How can development approaches facilitate the empowerment of women? This is the question that causes many development thinkers to stop short or give up, as the biggest obstacle to unlocking the potential of women is the fact that there are many facets to "empowerment" and none of them are easily actualized. The very nature of what constitutes "empowerment" is vague and controversial, and actions geared towards women's empowerment are not always likely to succeed even with the best intentions in mind. Part of the reason that this particular obstacle can be so overwhelming is that women are not a homogenous group and movements to empower them need to be tailored to meet specific needs of individuals and collectives, which is a difficult and tenuous learning process that needs to begin at the community grassroots level and take into account a myriad of unique, kaleidoscopic identities.

One facet of empowerment on the level of the individual is the conception of yielding a 'power over' the self or others. This is the most obvious form of power and is most troublesome when the woman does not have power over herself. In order to gain power over one's self, a woman does not necessarily need to gain 'power over' others. In fact, a major step towards

²⁹ Aulette, J. R., Wittner, J. & Blankley, K. (2009). p. 303-304.

³⁰ Aulette, J. R., Wittner, J. & Blankley, K. (2009). p. 307.

empowerment is removing the tyrannical “glass ceiling” that a woman can place over her own development. The best way for a woman to empower herself is through finding a ‘power within’ herself and a ‘power with’ others that culminates in real world capabilities, or a ‘power to.’³¹

First, it is impossible for a developer to directly “empower” a woman, as empowerment must come from within the individual. While there are many projects geared towards inspiring women to take control of their life situation, the true obstacle to gender equality is stimulating the ‘power within.’ One issue involved in the development of ‘power within’ is that many women live in a culture in which such empowerment is taboo. In these cases, when a woman takes control and stands-up for her needs it is possible that she will be shunned or even attacked. In many indigenous cultures in Latin America, violence-free partnerships are undesirable, making it difficult for a woman to find a husband that would accept her stance against domestic violence. In such circumstances it would be difficult for a woman to find a ‘power within’ as the community still maintains a ‘power over’ her with the threat of alienation.³² This issue could possibly be mitigated by finding a ‘power with’ other women in the creation of group solidarity. To be clear, collectives are hard to organize because women are not a homogenous group with identical wants or needs, nor are women intrinsically “better” than men or any less capable of exploitation and greed. This is evident when women in developing areas are cheated by other women, through being neglected or even defrauded, while attempting to create solidarity through collective action.³³ However groups are still important, as the empowerment of an individual alone cannot do much to change an entire culture in comparison to collective movements.

If the aforementioned barriers to empowerment were surpassed, women could transform the ‘power within,’ in the form of courage, and the ‘power with,’ in the form of collectives relating to the same needs, into ‘power to’ take control of their own lives and utilize their strengths and capacities to contribute to social action and economic development.³⁴ One example of a successful empowerment program is the BRAC, operating in 11 different countries including Bangladesh where it was originally founded.³⁵ Part of the BRAC program is giving out micro-loans to groups of women in order to facilitate entrepreneurship. While micro-loans do not necessarily bring poor women out of poverty,³⁶ in the case of BRAC they have been successful in promoting the empowerment of women and bringing them at least one step closer to equality. This is exemplified in a project they facilitated with a micro-loan in 2003, which translated into funds used by a woman to buy baby chickens for eggs and meat to sell. As in many cases of micro-finance to those in poverty, this business almost failed. The women who bought the chickens did not know how to nurture them in their infancy and consequently many chicks

³¹ Townsend, J., Zapata, E., Rowlands, J. Aberti, P., & Mercado, M. (1999). *Women and Power: Fighting patriarchies and poverty*. New York: Zed Books.

³² Townsend, J. (1999). p. 66.

³³ Zapata, E. (1999). p. 85.

^{34,35} Nederveen Pieterse, J. (2003). “Empowerment: Snakes and Ladders.” *Feminist Futures: Re-imagining women, culture and development*. London: Zed Books. p. 116.

³⁵ BRAC. (2012). “About BRAC.” BRAC: Creating opportunity for the world’s poor. Retrieved from <http://www.brac.net>.

³⁶ Townsend, J. (1999). p. 25.

almost died. In response to this problem, BRAC created a second project: an animal feed company that produced adequate feed for the baby chicks to mature.³⁷ In this case, the success of the micro-loan was a combination of ‘power within,’ as the women took the chance to start a company, ‘power with,’ as it was a group of women involved in the project with BRAC, and ‘power to’ as the BRAC provided funds and holistic assistance to the women, who developed their skills and became capable of running a business.

Similarly, a legal project in Uganda called FIDA provides clinics and seminars for educating women on their rights. This program has also run into some aforementioned problems associated with trying to reach a population subjugated by cultural norms, including the inability to get women involved in the prioritizing of the legal assistance. However, it has had some success in fighting for women’s rights to property.³⁸ In short, there is no fail-safe program for development and empowerment is not easily realized, as barriers to entering the economy range from social alienation from the community to the risks associated with capitalism in general, such as the possibility of failing or being defrauded. However, starting with a gendered lens when structuring such programs and utilizing more specific, pragmatic, and holistic approaches to development could facilitate empowerment and economic stability for women in developing areas. Women’s empowerment may be difficult, but it is not impossible.

CASE STUDY: USING A GENDERED LENS – SRI LANKA

“When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak.”

Audre Lorde

Devastated by a 26-year civil war that ended in 2009, ravaged by a tsunami in 2004 and riddled with violence, Sri Lanka has developed surprisingly well with a remarkable 8.1% economic expansion in the 2010-2011 fiscal year.³⁹ In comparison to other South Asian countries, Sri Lanka has a high per capita GDP of \$5077 with a total economy worth \$49.55 billion,⁴⁰ and a respectable life expectancy of 75 years.⁴¹ Furthermore, Sri Lanka is regularly envisioned as a success story for gender equality in the region with the first female head-of-state⁴² and a maternal mortality rate (MMR) at 35 per 1000 live births⁴³—compared to India with a MMR of

³⁷ Stiglitz, J. E. (2007). p. 52.

³⁸ Mirembe, S. (1995). p. 79.

³⁹ “Country Report: Sri Lanka November 2012.” (2012) Economist Intelligence Unit. Retrieved from http://www.eiu.com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:2048/FileHandler.ashx?issue_id=59815390&mode=pdf.

⁴⁰ Karunathilake, I. M. (July 2012). Health Changes in Sri Lanka: Benefits of primary health care and public health. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Public Health*. 24 (4), 663-671. Retrieved from <http://aph.sagepub.com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:2048/content/24/4/663.full>.

⁴¹ World Bank Data Sri Lanka.” (2012). The World Bank: Working for a World Free of Poverty. Retrieved from <http://data.worldbank.org/country/sri-lanka>.

⁴² De Soysa, N. (2000). The Truth Behind Sri Lanka’s Gender Development Statistics.” Third World Network. Retrieved from <http://www.twinside.org.sg/title/2093.htm>.

⁴³ “World Bank Data Sri Lanka.” (2012).

212⁴⁴ and Bangladesh at 194.⁴⁵ However, hidden behind these statistics remain issues of female oppression, a glass ceiling over women blocking true participation in the public sphere, and barriers to empowerment in rural areas.

Sri Lanka seems well on its way to the realization of many Millennium Development Goals, such as universal education, child health care, reduction of poverty and the combat of HIV/AIDS. With 99% primary school enrollment, under-5 child mortality rates falling to between 20 and 25 per 1000 live births,⁴⁶ poverty rates falling from 51% in 1985 to below 25%--compared to India at 29%, Nepal at 42%, Bangladesh at 50%, Pakistan at 33%,⁴⁷ and postulations from UNAIDS that it could eliminate the HIV/AIDS epidemic within a few years,⁴⁸ Sri Lanka seems to be picking up the pieces of the past disastrous half-century quite admirably. Also, many view Sri Lanka as a gender success story for the region because instances of adolescent pregnancy are decreasing, maternal mortality is falling to 35 per 1000 live births and the population is nearing equal distribution at 49% females.⁴⁹ Aggregate numbers this strong make the fact that women's empowerment is below 20%,⁵⁰ which is low even for South Asia, a difficult statistic to grapple with.

Looking behind the numbers from World Bank statistics and other aggregate data, it is evident that gender inequality still exists and has devastating effects on the Sri Lanka population socially and economically. To begin with, the tsunami and the civil war disproportionately affected women. In terms of natural disasters, women tend to fare much less favorably than men due to several gender norms, such as the fact that physical activities like swimming and climbing are seen as something only boys should learn, the belief that women should stay in doors and, therefore, are not outside to hear warnings that a disaster is occurring, and that women are more likely to be responsible for others, such as children, and, therefore, cannot escape the area as fast as male counterparts.⁵¹ These factors could be the reason that the majority of bodies recovered were female and the male population of survivors in camps was about 50% higher than the number of women and girls.⁵² Furthermore, the Sri Lankan civil war was riddled with accusations of war crimes and systematic rapes of women that have yet to be fully addressed by

⁴⁴ Dhar, A. (2012). "U.N.: India likely to miss MDG on maternal health." *The Hindu*. Retrieved from <http://www.thehindu.com/health/policy-and-issues/article3595095.ece>.

⁴⁵ USAID's Global Health Bureau. (2011). "Bangladesh: Maternal Deaths Decline by 40 Percent in Less Than 10 Years." USAID: From the American People. Retrieved from <http://blog.usaid.gov/2011/03/bangladesh-maternal-deaths-decline-by-40-percent-in-less-than-10-years/>.

⁴⁶ Karunathilake, I. M. (2012).

⁴⁷ "World Bank Data Sri Lanka." (2012)., "World Bank Data Bangladesh." "World Bank Data India." "World Bank Data Bangladesh." "World Bank Data Nepal." "World Bank Data Pakistan." Links retrieved from <http://data.worldbank.org/country>.

⁴⁸ "Sri Lanka Has Great Opportunity to Beat AIDS: UNAIDS expert." (Dec 2012). *The Sunday Times: Business Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/121202/business-times/sri-lanka-has-great-opportunity-to-beat-aids-unaids-expert-22218.html>.

⁴⁹ "World Bank Data Sri Lanka." (2012).

⁵⁰ De Soysa, N. (2000).

⁵¹ Aulette, J. R. Wittner, J. & Blankely, K. (2009). p. 1.

⁵² "The Tsunami's Impact on Women." (2005). Oxfam Briefing Note. Oxfam International. Retrieved from http://www.preventionweb.net/files/1502_bn050326tsunamiwomen.pdf.

the government. Also, because many men were killed in the fighting, thousands of women were propelled into a life of single parenting. When a husband did return home, domestic violence became even more commonplace, as the atrocities of war caused psychological damage and led many to binge drinking and volatility.⁵³

While the government has adopted several new laws to mitigate these issues, such as the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act,⁵⁴ violence against women is increasing. This is, in part, because the court system is over burdened, meaning sentences get suspended and cases take longer to process, and bail is easily met by perpetrators, meaning many responsible for crimes against women are not prosecuted efficiently.⁵⁵ Similarly hidden by aggregate numbers and public declaration of improvement is the fact that while maternal mortality has gone down, the remaining deaths of mothers during birth could be further reduced without too much effort from the state. The lack of education about and access to contraception could be to blame for 39% of all maternal mortality in Sri Lanka and lack of knowledge about anemia and its negative effects is partially responsible for the high levels of anemia in pregnant women at 34% and young children at 30%.⁵⁶ A call for further improvements in child and maternal health are not unreasonable.

Finally, the rise of Sri Lanka GDP makes the country look like it is developing well, however a good amount of this growth can be attributed to the neo-liberal exploitation of women. In free trade zones promoted by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and created by Sri Lankan urban capitalists, MNCs are granted special access to electricity, allowed to circumvent labor rights and, in effect, exploit the labor of the poorest Sri Lankans from rural areas. More often than not, those exploited are women.⁵⁷ These types of issues are difficult to see through aggregate statistics that do not take into account the difference between men and women and between urban and rural areas. Other issues include the fact that rural areas tend to be where poverty is more concentrated and more drastically affected by droughts, which is predicted to take a huge toll on production this year.⁵⁸ Thus it is clear that Sri Lanka is not the shining example of gender equality and development that some claim it to be.

These types of social injustices are prevalent within the urban business and political spheres as well. The difficulties associated with women's empowerment are further intensified by the 'glass ceiling' over women blocking them from positions of power. Even though Sri

⁵³ "The Tsunami's Impact on Women." (2005).

⁵⁴ CEDAW (2012). "Concluding Comment." Netherlands Institute of Human Rights: Utrecht School of Law.

Retrieved from

<http://sim.law.uu.nl/SIM/CaseLaw/uncom.nsf/804bb175b68baaf7c125667f004cb333/6a91c43fd5d13de9c1257833003429c5?OpenDocument>.

⁵⁵ Columbo Telegraph. (2012). "Women's Rights Group on Sri Lanka's 700 Sexual Abuse of Girls." Colombo Telegraph: In journalism truth is a process. Retrieved from

<http://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/womens-rights-group-on-sri-lankas-700-sexual-abuse-of-girls>.

⁵⁶ Karunathilake, I. M. (2012).

⁵⁷ Zavirsek, D., Herath, S. M. K. (2010). "I Want to Have My Future, I Have a Dialogue: between Neo-capitalism and Human rights." *Social Work Education: The International Journal*. 29(8). p. 831 Retrieved from Social Sciences Database (Proquest).

⁵⁸ Country Report: Sri Lanka November 2012." (2012).

Lanka has elected the first modern female head-of-government, Chief Justice Shirani Bandaranayake,⁵⁹ it is still difficult for a woman to win a seat, as men tend to have more money and muscle to gain powerful positions and women are more susceptible to character defamation.⁶⁰ In a recent example of sexism in the Sri Lankan government, a minister refused to answer a question from a female claiming that he was too attracted to her to talk to her in public.⁶¹ Also, the Chief Justice herself is being accused of fraud and protesters have demanded that she step down.⁶² Furthermore, there are still laws in place that favor men. Tamil women are required to obtain their husband's signature for land contracts and prohibitions to migrating for work are placed on females who have children less than 5 years of age. Also affecting communities still under Muslim law, marital rape has not been illegalized.⁶³ These are examples of how social capital tipped in favor of men in Sri Lanka can limit a woman's prospects in policy making and business positions and, therefore, their ability to take 'power over' their situation.

Some other specific barriers to empowerment and gender equity in Sri Lanka include the fact that 9% of the population is Muslim,⁶⁴ the negative connotations associated with the term "widow," and the lack of adequate empowerment programs in rural areas.⁶⁵ The literacy rate of rural Muslim women is only around 13%, meaning even though statistics show that violence against women is prevalent in Muslim communities, these statistics cannot translate into action as women are uneducated and find it hard to find a 'power within.' They are afraid to stand up for themselves.⁶⁶ Furthermore, women who have been widowed, which constitutes tens of thousands of Sri Lankan women,⁶⁷ are isolated and alienated by society making it difficult for them to form groups, or a 'power with' other women. The lack of ability to form groups is further exacerbated by ethnic cleavages that segregate Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim women and the subsequent complications to finding solidarity, as communication between these groups is negligible.⁶⁸

Even if the barrier of education and the limitation of ethnic cleavages could be overcome, there is still an issue of women having the capability to take action. Many programs in

⁵⁹ De Soysa, N. (2000).

⁶⁰ Kaul, A. (Jan 2012). "Sri Lanka: Voices from the underground: Talking politics in post-war Sri Lanka." Women's Feature Service. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/922395084?accountid=14522>.

⁶¹ Nelson, D. (Dec 2012). "Sexism Row in Sri Lankan Parliament." The Telegraph: World News. Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/srilanka/9726863/Sexism-row-in-Sri-Lankan-parliament.html>.

⁶² Associated Press (Nov 2012). "Sri Lankan Taxi Drivers Stage Protest Calling for Chief Justice to Step Down." Fox News World. Retrieved from <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2012/11/30/sri-lankan-taxi-drivers-stage-protest-calling-for-chief-justice-to-step-down/>.

⁶³ "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women." (Feb 2011). Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women Forty-eighth session. United Nations. Retrieved from <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/CEDAW-C-SR.971.pdf>.

⁶⁴ Fernando, V. (Dec 2010). "Sri Lanka: More power to Muslim women—That's Jezima's promise." Women's Feature Service. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/807419440?accountid=14522>.

⁶⁵ De Soysa, N. (2000).

⁶⁶ Fernando, V. (Dec 2010).

⁶⁷ Somachandran, S. (Oct 2010). "Sri Lanka: War widows left in poverty." World Socialist Web Site. Retrieved from <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2010/oct2010/sriw-o27.shtml>.

⁶⁸ Fernando, V. (Dec 2010).

place in Sri Lanka engender their projects by promoting handi-crafts, home economic activities and other low-income, small size enterprises that, while empowering women by giving them a place in the formal economy, still limits their ability to break free from gender norms. These types of programs also ignore the fact that these projects do not usually provide much upward mobility for the women involved.⁶⁹ Therefore, a plethora of unique characteristics need to be taken into account when applying alternative development models in Sri Lanka and pragmatic, critical thinking with a gendered lens is necessary to facilitate true development.

Most importantly, gender equality and development in Sri Lanka are not out of reach. Several programs have been successful in bringing women out of their oppression and into the public sphere. BRAC is a non-governmental organization that operates within Sri Lanka and promotes economic advancement of women via micro-finance. BRAC has employed multiple interventions in their mission to help women by first implementing programs for disaster relief after the tsunami and in the aftermath of the civil war, and then by incorporating new comprehensive programs to help ensure that loans were successful.⁷⁰ An example of a grassroots project that has led to women's empowerment is the project facilitated by the Women's Bank. The main goal of this project is to provide loans to collectives of women at similar interest rates as commercial banks, while also working with the unique needs of the group, promoting personal savings, and providing other comprehensive financial advice. One major accomplishment of these projects is the weaning of women away from limited, gendered jobs, such as handi-crafts, by promoting more sustainable business models that incorporate investments in the community's development as a whole. For example, houses in some of these areas have been strengthened as mud walls are replaced with brick and electricity and running water are introduced into many homes.⁷¹

In short, development in Sri Lanka may be more advanced than other states in its region, however, it still has a long way to go in terms of gender equity and female empowerment. While aggregate numbers boast the improvement of the nation in terms of social and economic growth and present Sri Lanka as a country on its way to achieving the Millennium Development Goals, behind these numbers lies a hidden truth that women are still heavily subjugated and oppressed. Taking into account the discrepancy of data between rural and urban areas, the unique needs of mothers and widows throughout the country, and the rampant sexism still apparent in the public as well as private spheres, could make a difference in the approach that Sri Lanka takes to future development. Although it is clear that empowering women in Sri Lanka has its barriers, these barriers are not insurmountable.

⁶⁹ Hyndman, J. (2003). "Beyond Gender: Towards a feminist analysis of humanitarianism and development in Sri Lanka." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 31(3). Retrieved from 212-226. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/233638113?accountid=14522>.

⁷⁰ BRAC (2012). Retrieved from <http://www.brac.net/content/about-brac-sri-lanka>.

⁷¹ Fernando, V. (Dec 2008). "Sri Lanka: You can bank on her." *Women's Feature Service*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/195852534?accountid=14522>.

CONCLUSION

“Women who seek to be equal with men lack ambition.”

Timothy Leary

In the current age of globalization, a time when unbridled capitalism is no longer the dominant paradigm for growth, short-term economic gain has taken a back-seat to socially sustainable development programs. These programs are essential in solving some of the world's most devastating crises, including those targeted by the UN's Millennium Development Goals. The goal of gender equality should not be seen as its own autonomous goal, but, rather, used as a lens through which to view and achieve all other objectives. Gender equality is not an easy feat to reach and the most difficult step in achieving equity is the empowerment of women from a grassroots level. However, finding a power within women worldwide is the first step towards achieving a 'power to' utilize the capabilities of women, and also towards gender equity and its associated economic and social gains. While this is a difficult and tenuous path to follow, the necessity to weather the storm lies in the abundance of direct and indirect benefits only accessible through the same vestibule that permits human life to enter onto this earth: the woman.