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## Welcome to the club: the World Bank, too, accepts equal oppor- tunities as a human right

By Dr. Elke Herrfahrdt-Pähle,  
*German Development Institute /  
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)* &  
Dr. Birte Rodenberg,  
Social Scientist

# The Current Column

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## Welcome to the club: the World Bank, too, accepts equal opportunities as a human right

Bonn, 5 March 2012. On 8 March International Women's Day will be celebrated. The 100th International Women's Day last year attracted some media attention, but otherwise little interest has been shown in the subject of gender equality in recent years. It is therefore all the more gratifying to find that the World Bank has for the first time chosen equality between women and men as the theme of its renowned *World Development Report* (WDR), thus helping to bring this political issue to international attention. Based on in-depth qualitative studies, the latest WDR begins by analysing progress and obstacles on the road to greater gender equality. In numerous developing countries, for example, the gap between women and men is narrowing in many areas of social development, such as schooling. On the other hand, women continue to suffer tremendous inequality in areas of socio-political participation, as in their access to formal employment and to such economic resources as credit and land. Unlike earlier World Bank publications, the WDR 2012 recognises gender equality as a value in itself. Remarkable in this context are not so much the conclusions drawn by the report, since the trends and tendencies in the heterogeneous development of global gender relations have been disseminated for some years now, during the global reviews of progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): more striking is the fact that the World Bank is presenting this complex, multi-faceted analysis – and, in so doing, recognising equal opportunities as a human right.

### **The World Bank's gender policy hitherto: "Gender equality as smart economics"**

For three development decades the World Bank shaped the objectives of international policy on women and gender with an approach to efficiency that functionalised gender equality and regarded it as no more than a precondition for poverty alleviation through economic growth and a market-oriented increase in productivity. For a long time, then, the World Bank contributed neither concep-

tually nor in practice to the assertion of women's rights and failed to meet demands that gender equality be made a development goal in itself.

The World Bank's Gender Action Plan (GAP; 2007-2010), for instance, explicitly perceived the improvement of women's capacity for action, i.e. their socio-economic empowerment, as an economic issue, a business case. Underlying the goal of promoting gender equality in partner countries, the emphasis was on increases in growth, which were to be achieved through the better integration of women into the formal economy. The measures taken were entirely consistent with the economic motives of the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s: efficiency, productivity and growth. What the World Bank overlooked in this context was that social and cultural factors make it difficult for women to play an equal part in social and political life. Moreover, the contribution that women and girls throughout the world make primarily in the informal sector and the unpaid care economy remains unseen.

### **The World Development Report 2012: conceptual turning point with weaknesses**

With the World Development Report 2012, however, the freedom to choose to live an independent life free from deprivation is now recognised as a fundamental human right for both genders. Even though, in presenting the second ground for espousing gender equality, the report continues to instrumentalise it for smart economics, the abandonment of the World Bank's credo that "general equality is good for economic growth" is as welcome as it is overdue: after all, the international community had already declared the elimination of gender inequality to be an overriding and separate objective of its programmes in the late 1990s. Yet there is also room for criticism. Thus the WDR analysis focuses, in neo-classical fashion, on households. Here, at the micro level of societal organisation, the World Bank would like to see women enjoying greater decision-making

power and freedom of action. In this it subscribes – like all bi- and multilateral development organisations – to the myth of the gender-neutral market and ignores the internationally known feminist analyses of what are in fact the gender-specific effects of macroeconomic market mechanisms. For, owing to the division of labour in society, the raising of interest and tax rates with a view to mobilising domestic financial resources and the privatisation of public services and goods differ widely in the impact they have on the living and working conditions of women and men. The same is true of the reduction of public expenditure and investment and, indeed, of measures taken to liberalise trade.

It remains to be seen whether, despite its shortcomings, the latest *World Development Report* triggers a process of rethinking at the World Bank, from “equal rights for women as economically efficient beings” to an approach consisting in “strengthening gender equality as a process of social and political change.” Currently, with the WDR itself at serious odds with the Bank’s operational practice, there must be some doubt that the report alone will lead to so fundamental a change in on-the-spot operational activities as an increase in future investment in independent women’s networks and projects rather than the classical micro enterprises run by women.

### **Here and now: public debate and public financing!**

Besides the conceptual quantum leap into the modern age ventured by the World Bank, it is not least the weaknesses of the report that provide an opportunity to revive the debate on gender equality at both international and national level. Since its publication, however, the response to that opportunity has been no more than muted and

limited to the gender-conscious community of some international institutions. In Germany not only are the independent voices silent, leaving the field free to right-wing female politicians for a debate on quotas conducted on a very modest scale: since the change of government in 2009 the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) has similarly refrained from indicating that or how it intends to uphold and apply the principle of its rights-based gender approach. The BMZ’s Gender Action Plan (2009-2012) expires at the end of this year, and it is not clear in what form German development cooperation will take up the gender issue in the future. A further sign of Germany’s waning engagement in the gender equality issue is that that its contribution to the funding of the new UN agency UN Women continues to fall short of international expectations. Yet effective **and** gender-sensitive multilateral mechanisms that support not only projects in isolation but also programmes of an international scale are vital if the rights of poor women in particular are to be reinforced. For only strong advocacy for the disadvantaged in these independent structures can ensure that such old and new financing instruments as the multilateral health and education funds and the climate change funds are used for gender issues. In the past these financial flows have been used predominantly in what is assumed to be a gender-neutral way.

If the opportunity presented by the *World Development Report* for reviving the political debate on the assertion of women’s human rights is to be seized, the debate on a sustained policy and sustained financing for gender equality must be conducted **now**. International Women’s Day on 8 March will be the first occasion for this.