# Copenhagen Consensus 2008 Perspective Paper

# Women and Development

**Discussion Paper on**
**Women and Development (King, Klasen and Porter)**
by Lawrence Haddad, Institute of Development Studies, UK
December 6, 2007

In many parts of the world, one of the most unfortunate things that can happen to a person is to be born female. Women and girls are subject to norms that treat them as objects, are denied rights as basic as the freedom to leave their village, and are excluded from opportunities that many take as a given.

Although much worse in some regions than others, women's relative powerlessness is a global phenomenon—witness many feminists in the US agonising over whether to vote for Hillary Clinton or to vote for the person who best represents their positions on the issues.

Women's relative lack of power means that they are unable to influence the framing of the norms, values, laws and institutions that, in turn, may reinforce their relative powerlessness. The reasons for this powerlessness are wrapped up in biological and cultural evolutions which often reinforce each other. They have been laid down and reinforced and enforced over hundreds and thousands of years. Is it difficult for public policy to break this cycle of powerlessness? Surprisingly, the evidence says "no". The authors highlight three options where

interventions that have successfully broken through the cultural barriers in a ruthlessly pragmatic fashion: microfinance targeted to women, cash transfers targeted to women conditional on girls' attendance at school, and the reservation of positions for women in legislative bodies. Credible evaluations have shown that within a short period of time, women have been empowered by these interventions—directly and in terms of indirect or second round effects. The fourth option selected by the authors for intervention—reproductive health—is also an area where good evaluations show large returns. It is a bit disappointing that this option is the only one that is not treated within an implicit power framework—it is framed as a shortage of services, a lack of knowledge, financial constraints and lack of spousal support. No mention is made of the make-up of the institutions prioritising health spending needs.

It is difficult to argue with the 4 options selected by the authors. They are all sensible in that they build on fundamental research and more operational evidence. They have all been evaluated well, at least on the impacts side. Given the options outlined, the key literatures, by and large, have been done justice. Costs are difficult to categorise and delineate and, in part because of this, are chronically badly measured in development interventions and I am very dubious—as are the authors--of the numbers presented here, despite the authors' best efforts. All the options outlined are politically thinkable in most contexts. As to the cost-benefit ratios, I am pretty sceptical of them, again, as are the authors, because of the cost data, and hence cannot take the rankings of the options too seriously, even if some of the ratios are 10-20 times larger than others. But if the outcome of this paper were greater priority of and support to some or all of these options then I would be very happy.

Nevertheless, the paper represents somewhat of a lost opportunity to think outside the box. What do I mean?

First it is a shame that the authoring team is composed entirely of economists. They are fine economists, but gender is essentially about power. And most economists are not terribly good at recognising power within their work and incorporating it into their models and empirics, even armed with bargaining models. Furthermore, the authors are steeped in the US microeconometric approach to economics (if in doubt check the preponderance of such papers cited in the references). I myself am embedded in this tradition, and have a lot of time for it, but it is not the only tradition, and certainly not always the most important. It is a tradition that is very apolitical and is loathe to draw upon literatures that do not speak in the same probabilistic languages (i.e. it is very comfortable with, say, epidemiology and demography). But there are vast literatures out there about how power relations are shifted through the creation of invited spaces for negotiation and contestation and how further such spaces can be carved out through social mobilisation (Eyben, Harris and Pettit 2006).

The main consequence of this self-imposed straightjacket is that the authors do not give sufficient consideration to issues of voice, representation and recognition in terms of the capacity of citizens to claim rights and the obligation of states to deliver on those claims. In short, the authors do not do justice to the political, anthropological and sociological literatures—feminist or not—that deal with the power relations between men and women, how they are shaped and how they can be re-shaped. How do institutions shape these power relations? How malleable are they? Where are the points of maximum leverage? There seems to be an implicit assumption that individual agency is the best way to effect change. Is this based on a consideration of how change happens? Is this how things changed have changed for women in the rich countries? Where is a consideration of different forms of collective action and social mobilisation? There are calls for a public information or advocacy campaign and for leadership and management training, but these are essentially apolitical interventions, and gender is about rebalancing power—it will involve contestation and negotiation—

it will not yield to management training. As cited in Coyle (2007), economists based in the US have very different political orientations to anthropologists and political scientists based in the US. These differences will tell in terms of how the Copenhagen Challenge is framed and answered—our authors should guard against this unipolar view by building in more safeguards of plurality.

The author's institutional centre of gravity might also be a hindrance to a more contested and political perspective. The World Bank finds it difficult to explicitly define its political role, despite having a very significant implicit role. It would have been very refreshing to witness such a critical self-reflection, perhaps in the context of why King's excellent work on gender at the World Bank appears–-to this outsider—to have found such lukewarm support from Bank senior management when push comes to shove. When will we see a World Development Report on the scandal of how women are discriminated against in nearly all countries?

Second, the very nature of the exercise is to focus on "what works". What works is a subset of what has been tried and evaluated. What about promising initiatives that have not been evaluated in a probabilistic sense? What about visionary ideas that have not even been tried? Ten years ago conditional cash transfers would not have made it into the list of options. The same could have been said about microfinance thirty years ago. It would have been useful to have a "venture capital" section in the paper—what might work, given half a chance? Drawing on a more diverse literature would have been one way to avoid the purely pragmatic consolidation of a particular sub-set of knowledge and interventions well-known to the authors. For example, work led by Andrea Cornwall at IDS is focusing on how women actually seek to empower themselves through their everyday activities (www.pathwaysofempowerment.org; Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead 2004). Often these do not correspond to the donor

superhighways constructed for women's empowerment—superhighways that often place more emphasis on speed than destination.

So, have the authors missed any opportunities? Who knows? If I had written the paper I would have focused on some related literatures that may have generated different or additional options. For example, I am struck by the power of Chattopadhyay and Duflo's (2004) work on how female representation on village councils in India significantly affects spending priorities for the same budget constraint. We need more work that looks at these links. There is very little in the paper drawing on social capital literatures—from economics or elsewhere that shows how the composition of social networks can advance women's rights. There is little from the communications technology literature about how mobile phones may have shifted power balances. There is very little about how nondemocratic political choices (the one-child policy in China) profoundly affect female to male survival ratios. Work on how important the relative size of assets brought to marriage by men and women is for determining future bargaining within households is barely touched upon (Quisumbing and Maluccio 2003). The work on registration and identity (one example of recognition I referred to earlier) cited in the paper is a promising example of how to potentially change fundamental norms, although the authors do not actually tell us the male-female disaggregated results of this work. All of these issues may appear tangential to the Challenges. They may be. They also may appear to be less amenable to policy change in any single instance. But if they can be shaped, they may have very profound impacts. In sort the confidence intervals will be very wide, but the expected value of their impacts could dwarf the benefit-cost ratios outlined in this paper.

In conclusion, the options identified are sensible and will prove to be good investments. They are difficult to rank and choices about which to act on will have to be made according to the policy space available to support them. In a

given context, when the problem, political and solution streams come together, then there will be space for pushing one or more of these 4 options.

But there are few surprises in the options outlined. That would be fine, if such surprises had been entertained. But more lateral (as opposed to unilateral) thinking is necessary to ensure we are not foregoing other more profound–and risky—options, at the individual, organisational and institutional levels. Much more economics research needs to be focused on institutional and representational issues and how these affect outcomes-- direct and indirect, quantifiable and qualitative. That can only occur sensibly if economists recognise that gender relations are about power and politics, and that means economists reading outside their discipline of comfort and working with those who will challenge their explicit and implicit assumptions about the power relations between women and men.

**References cited**

Chattopadhyay, R. and E. Duflo. 2004. Women as policymakers:Evidence from a randomised policy experiment in India. Econometrica. Vol. 72, No 5.

Cornwall, A. E. Harrison and A. Whitehead. 2004. Repositioning Feminisms in Gender and Development. IDS Bulletin. Vol 35 (4).

Coyle, D. 2007. The Soulful science: What Economists Really Do and Why it Matters. Princeton University Press.

Eyben, R. C. Harris and J. Pettit. 2006. Exploring Power for Change. IDS Bulletin. Vol 37(6).

Quisumbing, A. and J. Maluccio. 2003. Resources at marriage and Intrahousehold resource allocation. Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics. 65 (3).