Does the World Bank need an expanded notion of institutions to take gender into account?

Josephine Tsui, a gender consultant for theIDLgroup, reviews the 2012 World Bank World Development Report on Gender Equality and Development arguing that, while its recognition of the importance of gender equality independently of its positive economic effects represents a step forward, its narrow definition of institutions keeps it from taking into account the gendered nature of markets, households, or the state.

In September the World Bank released the World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development. Gender Equality: The Right and Smart Thing to do.

The report concluded there were real advances in gender equality but there are still many gender gaps that remain. It acknowledges that despite equality being a core development objective, gender equality is also smart economics. Finally, it stresses that domestic public policies remain the key to bringing about gender equality. The report prioritizes four areas of action:

1) Addressing human capital issues, such as higher mortality rates for girls and women, and closing gender gaps in education;

2) closing the earning and productivity gaps between women and men;

3) giving women a greater voice within households and society; and

4) limiting the perpetuation of gender inequality across generations.

Finally, the report recommends improving women's access to economic opportunities through 1) reducing women's time spent doing housework and caring for children; 2) enhancing women's access to productive resources; and 3) addressing the biases of markets and service delivery institutions against women.

The report illustrates why some gender gaps close while others persist. The gendered outcomes of policies can be seem in 3 areas: a) markets b) formal institutions and c) the structure and function of informal institutions.

This World Development Report marks a change in how the World Bank conceptualizes gender equality. From 2007-2010, the World Bank's Group Gender Action Plan was mainly focused on the economics of gender equality; it was during this time that the phrase the phrase "Gender Equality as Smart economics" was coined. The Bank's take on gender economics spurred development practitioners into using economics as justification for gender equality. However, while many practitioners are looking for economic justification to invest in women's rights, it may not turn out to be economically feasible to invest in women (as in there may be an economic loss). Women's economies often reside in the informal sector and, as such, may not be recognised formally. These economic gaps were demonstrated by Agarwal (1994). The current World Development Report acknowledges Agarwal's thesis by recognising that gender equality matters in its own right despite the positive economic effects. It carefully emphasizes this in each section while acknowledging that the Bank's strengths lie in the economics of gender equality and it will continue to focus in this area.

The report was comprehensive and thorough. While it was well-researched, I disagreed with its depiction of the framework they presented (as seen above). In the framework, the report illustrates that households were the key to changing gendered paradigms. Secondly, the report narrowly defines formal institutions as all organisations that pertain to the functioning of the state. These two issues cause two major problems with the framework. First, according to the framework gendered outcomes are a result of responses of households to markets and formal and informal institutions. However, gendered outcomes can be the result of more than households, as markets, the state and other institutions such as religion and culture can inform gendered paradigms without households. It does not recognise the gendered effects of the state, markets or religions.

The second problem with the framework was around the definition of "institution". The report narrowly defined formal institutions as all organisations that pertain to the functioning of the state. However the report fails to recognise that the state is not comprised of a single body entity but is made up of many different departments with different opinions. Further, a more encompassing definition of institutions is any structure or mechanism of social order and cooperation governing a set of behaviours from a group of individuals (Turner, 1997). The narrow definition of institutions does not allow for an understanding of households as an institution which can govern a set of behaviour, nor does it allow for an appreciation of the ways that markets or religious spaces can be defined by a set of social orders governing behaviour. Without a broader understanding of institutions, it does not take into account the gendered paradigms of markets, households, or the state on their own and interacting with each other.

An institutional analysis of gender would involve the analysis of each institution to determine their gendered paradigms and how it affects people. One method of such analysis is the determination of women and male's sphere of conduct within the institution. For example within markets, men's contributions to the economy tend to lean towards the formalised markets where women's contribution to the economy tends to lean towards informal markets. Consequently, women's contribution to the economy is less recognised as it is less formalised.

Thus, to better understand gendered paradigms, I would illustrate institutional interactions in the following way:

Thus, all forms of institutions can have a gendered bias and they can be mutually reinforcing.

Josephine Tsui is an expert on resource sovereignty. She has worked in the gender economic unit in the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe synthesizing the Beijing Platform for Action +15 Review. She is also the co-director of Good Girls Marry Doctors, an organisation dedicated to exploring intergenerational conflicts amongst the North American Asian diaspora.

October 20th, 2011 | Development, Environment, Politics | 0 Comments