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Fixing women or fixing the world? 'Smart economics', efficiency approaches, and gender equality in development

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Abstract

This article focuses on the current trend for investing in women and girls as 'smart economics', which is a direct descendant of the efficiency approach to women in development (WID) prevalent in the wake of the economic crisis in the 1980s. We highlight the dangers of conflating the empowerment of women as individuals with the feminist goal of removing the structural discrimination which women face as a gendered constituency, and consider the implications for feminists in development if they adopt smart economics-speak and work in coalition with individuals and organisations who have fundamentally different aims. This has attractions in strategic terms, but risks recreating the very problems gender and development seeks to transform.

Cet article se concentre sur la tendance actuelle de l'investissement dans les femmes et les filles dans le cadre de l'« économie intelligente » qui tire directement son origine de l'approche d'efficacité pour ce qui est des femmes dans le développement (WID - women in development), approche qui était très courante au lendemain de la crise économique des années 1980. Nous mettons en relief les risques que comporte le fait de relier l'autonomisation des femmes en tant qu'individus et l'objectif féministe d'élimination de la discrimination structurelle à laquelle se heurtent les femmes en tant que groupe constituant représentant un sexe, et nous examinons les implications pour les féministes dans le secteur du développement si elles adoptent un discours d'économie intelligente et travaillent dans le cadre de coalitions avec des personnes et des organisations dotées d'objectifs fondamentalement différents. Cela présente des côtés attrayants en termes stratégiques, mais risque de recréer les problèmes précis que le genre et le développement cherchent à transformer.

Este artículo se centra en la tendencia actual de la “economía inteligente”, la cual propone invertir en las mujeres y niñas. Dicha orientación se remonta al enfoque basado en la metodología de la eficiencia aplicada a las “mujeres en el desarrollo” (WID por sus siglas en inglés), que prevaleció tras la crisis económica de los años ochenta. Las autoras advierten sobre el peligro de confundir el empoderamiento de las mujeres como individuos, con el objetivo de las feministas de eliminar la discriminación estructural enfrentada por las mujeres como grupo de género. Asimismo, analizan las implicaciones que, en caso de trabajar en coalición con personas y organizaciones cuyos objetivos son distintos, podría tener el uso del lenguaje de la economía inteligente para las feministas en el desarrollo. Aunque ello representa ventajas en términos estratégicos, si reproduce los mismos problemas que la perspectiva de género y el desarrollo buscan transformar, puede encerrar riesgos.

Keywords:

smart economics efficiency feminist economics empowerment gender equality World Bank

Notes

1. Matthew Gutmann's main title for his 2009 monograph on sex, birth control, and AIDS in Mexico was ‘Fixing Men’ (Gutmann [2009](#)). We are very grateful to Matthew for

giving us permission to adapt his phrase.

2. In July 2011, Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala left the World Bank to become Minister of Finance in Nigeria in the new administration of President Goodluck Jonathan.
3. Robert Zoellick was appointed as the 11th President of the World Bank in 2007.
4. Interesting reactions to the Nike 'Girl Effect' campaign can be read on the 'Aid Watch blog' on 'So now we have to save ourselves and the world too? A critique of the "Girl Effect"' at <http://aidwatchers.com/2011/01/so-now-we-have-to-save-ourselves-and-the-world-too> (last checked by the authors October 2012) and on Contestations, Dialogues on Women's Empowerment, Issue 4, March 2011 at www.contestations.net/issues/issue-4/ (last checked by the authors October 2012).

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