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The Relation Between Economic Development and Equality Between Men and Women

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the complex relationship between economic development and gender equality, challenging the assumption that growth alone guarantees equity. Through comparative analysis and case studies, including Egypt's Takaful and Karama programs, it argues for a shift from top-down economic models to locally grounded, inclusive development approaches that address structural gender disparities and contextual realities.

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Introduction

This paper critically examines the complex relationship between economic development and gender equality, challenging the assumption that growth alone guarantees equity. Through comparative analysis and case studies, including Egypt's Takaful and Karama programs, it argues for a shift from top-down economic models to locally grounded, inclusive development approaches that address structural gender disparities and contextual realities.

By thinking deeply about the relationship between economic development and achieving equality between men and women, three main concepts were found to be profoundly interconnected: Women's empowerment, gender equality, and economic development. On one hand, economic development can play a significant role in reducing gender inequality, while on the other, empowering women can positively contribute to development (Duflo, 2012). So, does this mean that economic development means equality between men and women? Or does this indicate that asserting just one of these two parts would set an efficient equation in motion?

Although many studies and research papers have concluded that the correlation between economic development and gender equality is not absolute, they do suggest that economic development plays a significant role in improving factors that may positively influence gender equality. However, it cannot be definitively stated that economic development alone leads to greater gender equality (Amjad Naveed, 2023). On the contrary, research has found that the reverse may be largely true: gender equality tends to have a positive impact on economic growth. This holds at both the individual and community levels, as well as at the national level. Empowering women, in its most basic sense, creates more job opportunities and contributes to overall economic advancement (Zahid Pervaiz, 2023).

Despite extensive research on the relationship between economic development and gender equality, much of the focus has been on examining factors that contribute to "real women's empowerment." These studies typically explore the impact of women's political participation, access to education and healthcare, job opportunities, and wage equality in achieving gender equality (Audrey Babic, 2021). However, relatively few studies have addressed how contextual differences affect the validity and reliability of these findings, or the extent to which the results can be generalized between developed and developing countries.

One significant work that explores the broader variables affecting the relationship between development, particularly economic development, and gender equality is The Development Dictionary. This book, despite being published over 32 years ago, remains highly relevant for its critique of the dominant "Western" model of development, which prioritizes economic growth. It argues that this model has largely failed, especially in developing and impoverished countries. Rather than narrowing the gap between rich and poor nations, it has often exacerbated inequalities and created new forms of dependency. Consequently, the Western approach to development has also been ineffective in addressing social class disparities within poor countries, and it has, in many cases, widened the gender gap at the individual level.

For instance, Countries such as Egypt, Argentina, and Brazil have demonstrated a strong commitment to the programs and conditions set by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and other related international institutions (ARGENTINA Escaping crises, sustaining growth, sharing prosperity, 2018). However, despite these efforts, there is a noticeable gap in achieving true development that benefits both society and individuals. In Egypt, Statistics show that Poverty rates have worsened, and progress toward women's economic empowerment has either stagnated or declined (Egypt's 2021 Voluntary national review, 2021), falling short of the intended goals. This can be attributed to the predominant reliance on top-down developmental planning, which centers on the state rather than addressing issues at the community level. Such an approach overlooks the importance of individual agency and shifts the focus from mere GDP growth to broader, locally defined concepts of prosperity that prioritize social justice, environmental sustainability, and cultural autonomy (Sachs, The Development dictionary, 1992).

This perspective is reinforced by researchers in Gender Matters in Development, who observed that certain development initiatives, such as the Green Revolution and structural adjustment policies implemented by international institutions in various countries, including the Middle East, Nepal, Ghana, and India, were intended to improve overall productivity and economic conditions. However, these initiatives have often worsened gender inequality. Women, in particular, have borne the brunt of these policies, facing increased workloads, reduced access to essential resources, and diminished economic benefits (Pearson, 2021). In my view, this underscores the importance of valuing diversity and recognizing the distinct contexts, lifestyles, and notions of well-being that exist globally. Rather than imposing a singular Western

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development model with its assumptions about social roles and gender relations, it is crucial to appreciate the differences in property relations, labor divisions, legal systems, and family structures that vary across developed, developing, and poorer nations.

The call by this group of researchers -whose views I fully support- for policymakers to respect cultural, social, and economic diversity in the implementation of development policies is not a rejection of Western experiences or successful models. Instead, it advocates for a more flexible, locally grounded, participatory, and environmentally sustainable approach to social and economic change. This approach prioritizes the needs of individuals and communities first, and the state second, emphasizing a bottom-up strategy rather than the traditional top-down model.

In their study Economic Development and Gender Equality: Is There a Gender Kuznets Curve? the authors argue that the relationship between economic development and gender equality varies depending on the level of development achieved. The study, which examined the connection between economic development and gender equality across 146 developing countries from 1980 to 2005, utilized the previously mentioned four indicators/factors to assess women's political, social, and economic status. According to the findings, economic development tends to improve gender equality when per capita income is below $8,000–$10,000. These gains, however, stabilize or even slightly decline in the second phase, when per capita income is between $8,000–$30,000. Beyond this point, economic development is again associated with improvements in gender equality (Prakash, 2013).

In my view, the conclusions of this study, which have been used to challenge the theory of the "specificity of each country's economic and developmental context," lack strong credibility. This is because the income levels cited do not account for the significant disparities in poor and developing countries, where high poverty rates and fluctuating inflation severely impact purchasing power. As we see today in Egypt, these economic and social realities were not fully considered in the statistics presented. Therefore, the recommendation of the authors, which suggests that simply pursuing policies to promote economic development will ensure improvements in gender equality across different stages of development, seems insufficient.

I believe that merely incorporating women into existing development frameworks is inadequate, and making partial adjustments to these policies is not enough. A complete reevaluation of development goals and strategies is essential, with a focus on addressing the root causes of gender inequality and ensuring women's full participation and equal benefit from development processes. As Ruth Pearson has emphasized, development is not solely about economic growth, it is also about achieving social justice and empowering all members of society.

One notable example that comes to mind when assessing the effectiveness of "Western-style" development programs in a developing country with high poverty rates is Egypt's "Takaful and Karama" program. This initiative, launched by the Egyptian government in March 2015 as part of its social reforms, aims to strengthen the social safety net for poor and marginalized families. The program's primary objective is to provide "material" support for women as a means of economic empowerment to combat poverty directly, while indirectly addressing the gender gap (Takaful and Karama, A Social Safety Net project that Promotes Egyptian Women Empowerment and Human Capital, 2020).

Although it is a national program, Takaful and Karama have been significantly influenced by recommendations from international organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, particularly regarding conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs. It follows the global trend of CCT programs but has been adapted to Egypt's specific context, incorporating requirements that families send their children to school and obtain healthcare conditions tied to the country's social and developmental needs.

When evaluating this program's effectiveness in promoting gender equality, several key points emerge. Takaful and Karama is designed as part of Egypt's social protection network, providing monthly financial assistance to poor families, particularly those with children, the elderly, or people with disabilities. While the program shows some commitment to improving the conditions of women, who make up 88% of its beneficiaries, several factors may limit its ability to fully advance gender equality. These factors include challenges related to the program's design and implementation, which may not adequately address the deeper, structural issues of gender inequality in Egypt. The most important of these reasons are as follows: (Grievance Redress Mechanism of the Takaful and Karama Program in the Arab Republic of Egypt)

Traditional Gender Role Reinforcement:

Although women are the primary beneficiaries of programs like Takaful and Karama, the traditional distribution of gender roles in Egyptian society still

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perpetuates the notion that women should be responsible for child-rearing and household care. As a result, these programs were designed within this framework, reinforcing the idea that supporting women aligns with their conventional roles in the family.

Limited Economic Empowerment:

The program mainly provides cash assistance but does not place enough emphasis on economically empowering women through job opportunities or vocational training. Consequently, women who benefit from the program remain in a state of economic dependency, lacking the opportunities to fully participate in the labor market or develop skills that would enhance their economic independence.

Focus on Poverty, Not Equality:

The primary objective of Takaful and Karama is poverty alleviation, not achieving gender equality. While a large proportion of the beneficiaries are women, the program's focus is on reducing financial hardship for families rather than addressing issues like the gender wage gap, equal job opportunities, or women's access to education.

Lack of Gender Awareness:

Programs like Takaful and Karama typically do not incorporate components that promote gender awareness or aim to shift societal perceptions regarding gender equality. As a result, traditional gender roles and societal norms regarding the roles of men and women remain largely unchanged.

Rural-Urban Disparities:

In rural areas, where more conservative and traditional social norms prevail, women often face greater restrictions on their mobility, education, and employment. As a result, they are less able to benefit from such programs in meaningful ways. In contrast, urban areas may offer more opportunities for women's empowerment, but the positive impact of the program is not evenly distributed across regions.

Insufficient Focus on Women's Health and Education:

While the program requires families to send their children to school and ensure they receive healthcare, it largely overlooks the importance of education and healthcare for women themselves. This lack of attention to women's personal development may limit their potential to improve their economic and social standing.

Overall, we can say that while Takaful and Karama benefit a large number of women in Egypt, it does not necessarily promote gender equality. The program's design reinforces traditional gender roles and lacks sufficient focus on empowering women economically and socially. To truly advance gender equality, additional programs are needed that focus on empowering women and challenging societal perceptions of gender roles.

While The Development Dictionary raises an important hypothesis about the imposition of the "Western development model" potentially constituting a form of neocolonialism, I do not align with the idea that this stems from a conspiracy theory. Rather, I believe that the success of development programs in one context does not guarantee their effectiveness in another, given the distinct cognitive, economic, and social contexts of different countries. This concern became more pronounced for me when the Egyptian government recently announced its intention to fully transition from in-kind to cash support, particularly as this shift is driven by the conditions attached to the IMF's latest $8 billion loan (Eddin, 2024). I fear that this transition, which succeeded in countries like Brazil and Mexico (Rehorn), may fail in Egypt due to several contextual factors, the most important of these as follows:

The Existing and Inherited Subsidy System:

In Egypt, a large portion of the population has relied on the in-kind subsidy system for essentials like bread and fuel for decades. The shift to cash support is likely to face strong social resistance, as many view in-kind support as more secure and stable. Brazil and Mexico, in contrast, succeeded in reforming their support systems due to long-term strategies for implementing cash transfers as an effective alternative (Bolsa Família in Brazil, 2019). In Egypt, however, new programs are often hastily implemented without sufficient study, frequently failing to meet their objectives, as seen in the recent reversal of the construction and housing law after a two-year suspension due to its ineffectiveness.

Poverty and Unemployment Levels:

With 32% of the population living below the poverty line, Egypt's high poverty levels necessitate careful management of any cash support system to ensure that funds reach those in greatest need. Additionally, the state must be able to monitor and evaluate the impact of these cash transfers on families to ensure they are achieving their intended outcomes.

Institutional and Managerial Capacities:

Effective cash transfer systems require strong administrative infrastructures to ensure transparency and efficient distribution. For example, Brazil's Bolsa Família program benefited from advanced institutions and technology, ensuring funds reached targeted groups (Bolsa Família in Brazil, 2019). Egypt, however, may face

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difficulties in implementation if it lacks the necessary institutional capacity to manage and distribute cash support effectively.

Economic Challenges:

Egypt is facing significant economic pressures, including high inflation and a budget deficit. These conditions limit the government's ability to provide sustainable cash support. In contrast, Brazil and Mexico benefited from periods of economic growth during the early phases of their support programs, which enabled funding and continuity.

Technology and Financial Infrastructure:

Cash transfers require advanced financial infrastructure, such as widespread access to bank accounts or digital banking services. While Egypt has made strides in promoting financial inclusion, significant challenges remain, particularly in reaching the poorest segments of the population, especially in rural areas.

Political Stability and Will:

The successful implementation of cash support programs depends on political stability and strong political will. In Egypt, economic reforms may encounter strong internal opposition, especially if the reforms have short-term negative impacts on vulnerable groups.

Success in Brazil and Mexico was also tied to political consensus and the support of the ruling classes, which may be more difficult to achieve in Egypt.

Thus, several unique factors in Egypt may make the implementation of cash transfers more challenging or less successful than in Brazil or Mexico. It is crucial to thoroughly study the various dimensions of any development program that aims to directly promote economic growth and indirectly reduce gender disparities. This is especially true in a country like Egypt, which has diverse environments and significant differences between urban and rural areas, as well as distinct regions like Upper Egypt and border areas with unique social structures such as Bedouins and tribes.

In conclusion, While the freedom to "choose" whether or not to implement Western-style development programs is limited by the conditions attached to international funding, it remains important to adapt these programs to suit the unique characteristics of each country and its people. In this context, focusing on resilience and developing solutions that prioritize the individual and community is a forward-thinking approach, particularly in light of current global challenges. By considering these factors true economic development could be reached that achieves a substantial improvement in gender equality.

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