Rationalizing ‘gender-wash’: empowerment, efficiency and knowledge construction

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As support for the agenda of women’s empowerment has grown, its remit has narrowed. From transforming structural inequalities, donors have increasingly focused on women’s economic empowerment, and within this sphere, specific thematic areas dominate aid programming: access to finance, markets, skills training, business development services and social protection. This trajectory indicates the persistence of the ‘efficiency approach’ to gender programming, despite its inadequacies, raising questions regarding how knowledge on women’s empowerment is constructed. This article examines how the World Bank constructs knowledge on women’s empowerment by evaluating the design and reporting of the project, Results-Based Initiatives. It does so in light of the latest manifestation of the ‘Knowledge Bank’ agenda, focused on producing and disseminating evidence-based ‘knowledge products’, of which Results-Based Initiatives is one example. The article demonstrates that the claim that empowerment can be achieved through increased competition relies on the exclusion of key works when describing the relevant literature; the misrepresentation of the project’s methodology as objective and value-free; and apparent critical reflection on its design. It explains the persistence of the ‘efficiency approach’ to gender programming as reflecting the Bank’s conceptualization of development as a purely technocratic endeavor, and highlights how feminist advocates can advance alternatives.

Key words: empowerment, gender policy, feminist political economy, World Bank, efficiency, competition, economic development

Introduction

Women’s empowerment has gained substantial visibility as a global development objective, and as visibility has grown, the remit of this agenda has narrowed. From transforming structural inequalities, donors have increasingly focused on women’s economic empowerment. Within this sphere, specific thematic areas dominate aid programming, namely access to finance, markets, skills training, business
development services and social protection. The narrowing of this agenda to projects that increase women’s market competitiveness has occurred despite long-standing critiques by academics and practitioners on the flaws of the ‘efficiency approach’ to gender equality. This raises questions regarding how knowledge on women’s empowerment is constructed, and how more successful approaches can be generated.

Multiple studies (Cornwall and Anyidoho 2010; Gregoratti 2016; Prügl 2015) highlight the pressing need for further research analyzing this latest manifestation of feminism to consider how specific feminist ideas are being incorporated into aid programming, as well as how these projects may create openings for contesting gendered power relations. This article responds to this call. It explores the rationale for focusing women’s empowerment projects on market-oriented approaches by analyzing the design and reporting of a key World Bank project, *Results-Based Initiatives*.

This case is investigated in light of the Bank’s reinvention into the ‘Knowledge Bank’, and in particular its recent expansion of strategies to produce and disseminate evidence-based ‘knowledge products’, of which *Results-Based Initiatives* is one. This agenda has garnered it substantial influence in shaping how development is ‘done’ (King 2002; Stone 2013; Wilks 2002), requiring researchers to pay greater attention to how the Bank produces and disseminates knowledge. This is particularly important given, first, the claim that *Results-Based Initiatives* would fill the ‘knowledge gap’ on how to economically empower women (Johansson de Silva, Paci, and Posadas 2014). Second, the distinction between public-led and private-led development interventions has declined as a consequence of the transferal of New Public Management rationales to the development sector (Mowles 2007), which has been central in the corporatization of gender equality agendas. As noted by Bedford (2009), ‘Bank research occupies a crucial place in national, regional, and global circuits of knowledge production about gender; more sustained attention to its mechanics is long overdue’.

The article evaluates the design and reporting of *Results-Based Initiatives*. Attending to the
researchers’ citation practices and the writing codes of Bank documents, it traces the project’s exclusions and silences. By documenting the flaws in the Bank’s claim that women’s empowerment can be achieved through competition-driving measures, the article furthers existing analyzes of Bank knowledge construction practices that document the strategies through which its preferred development approach is advanced (Broad 2006, 2007; Enns 2015; Mehta 2001; Wade 1996), and in particular, studies highlighting how the Bank has harnessed gender programming to neoliberal rationales (Bedford 2009; Griffin 2009). It also contributes to analyzes of the ‘business case’ for gender equality (Chant 2012; Chant and Sweetman 2012; Prügl and True 2014; Roberts 2015; Roberts and Soederberg 2012) by providing insights into how flawed ideas on women’s empowerment have been disseminated in the corporatization of gender equality agendas. By highlighting the shortcomings of Results-Based Initiatives, the article moreover provides potential leverage points for those advocating for alternatives to the ‘efficiency approach’ or seeking to push the boundaries of initiatives, from both inside and outside development organizations.

Finally, the article’s analysis offers insights into ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Cahill 2011; Peck and Tickell 2002), a term that acknowledges the distinction between neoliberalism’s normative ideal of “rolling back” governments and “freeing markets”, and its concrete policy manifestations. The latter entails not freeing markets but establishing and regulating them, and developing and maintaining incentive structures that create the “right” conditions for markets (on indicators see Cahill 2011; Hay 2017). Peck captures this more accurate conceptualization in the term ‘neoliberalization’, which he describes as ‘an open-ended and contradictory process of politically assisted market rule’ (2010, xii, emphasis in original). The concept of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’, therefore, highlights its variegated nature, which this article builds on by charting the precise mechanisms through which reforms are advanced. It does this in the specific realm of gender policy, investigating how competition-driving reforms are positioned as the only approach to tackling gender
inequalities, despite their inadequacies.

The first section situates the recent focus on women’s empowerment in aid programming within recent debates over development and gender equality, describing the key critiques that researchers have advanced from program analyzes. The second section outlines the article’s approach, drawn from critical studies of the development sector that have highlighted the depoliticizing technologies of interventions. The third section describes recent reforms to the Bank’s research ecology that position it as the global producer and disseminator of development knowledge. Fourth, the article analyzes how the Bank rationalizes tackling gender inequalities by seeking to increase women’s market competitiveness in \textit{Results-Based Initiatives}. It demonstrates that the claim that women’s empowerment can be achieved through competition-driving measures relies on the exclusion of key works when describing relevant literature; the misrepresentation of the project as objective and value-free in describing its methodology; and apparent critical reflection on the project’s design and identification of areas for improvement. These attributes function in positioning market-oriented approaches to women’s economic empowerment as the only approach, excising alternatives that address the complex interplay of institutional, cultural, economic and political factors through which women are discriminated. The final section reflects on these limitations in knowledge construction in light of the Bank’s recent reforms, and outlines the implications for those contesting the ‘efficiency approach’ from within and outside of development organizations.

\textbf{Women’s Empowerment: Long Live the ‘Efficiency Approach’}

The objective of empowering women has gained substantial visibility over the past two decades. Support has come not only from development institutions but also corporations, with a growing number of public-private partnerships such as the Nike-led ‘Girl Effect’ campaign. This increased support indicates the success of advocates in mobilizing donors and companies to commit resources to women,
however the implementation of this agenda has created a ‘profound sense of unease’ (Cornwall and Anyidoho 2010, 144), and ‘an avalanche of critiques’ (Prügl 2015, 614). Scholarly analyzes of empowerment programs have typically been highly critical, centering on two arguments.

First, programs usually advocate deeply essentialized understandings of gender. Development organizations and companies have harnessed an essentialist narrative to promote gender equality as ‘smart economics’. The figure of this essentialist narrative is the ‘rational economic woman’ that is both poor and financially responsible (Rankin 2001), with her cheap and flexible labor deemed central to driving competition and economic growth, at the same time her reproductive labor fills the welfare gaps arising from structural adjustment programs or austerity conditions (Elias and Gunawardana 2013). This continues the longer framing of women as a development resource (Elson 1991), serving as the buffer for Structural Adjustment Programs by providing the services that were retrenched and addressing household needs in times of increased unemployment—what Moser dubbed the ‘efficiency approach’ to tackling gender inequalities (1989). This essentialist narrative ignores how gender is socially constructed (Risman 2004). Moreover, it overlooks the political economy of households, failing to consider how women’s willingness to adopt the roles of micro-entrepreneur accords with their alternatives (or lack of), as well as women’s bargaining power within the household to determine how earnings are spent (Elias and Gunawardana 2013).

Second, studies have highlighted problems in conflating the goals of gender equality, economic growth, and profit. Chant (2012), Chant and Sweetman (2012), Roberts (2015) and Roberts and Soederberg (2012) demonstrate that this perpetuates an ahistorical and apolitical understanding of gender-based inequalities. It also ignores how measures to achieve these objectives may in fact be in tension with one another, as well as the benefits that gender inequalities yield for the private sector. For example, women are considered attractive for employment on factory lines in footwear and garment manufacturing because they are perceived to be undemanding, reliable, and cheap (Elias 2005; Ong
Tackling gender inequalities means improving working conditions for women (like overcoming abuse in the workplace, or increasing wages). This might be achieved through women organizing around pay and conditions—and demanding this from employers, which is likely to increase a firm’s costs. Conflating the goals of gender equality, growth and profit also obscures the expanding role and implications of private actors in development. The narrowing of empowerment programming to targeting women’s market competitiveness aligns with the broader shift in development policy towards a strong pro-private sector agenda. Private capital has expanded alongside continuing attempts to create enabling environments for markets—what Carroll terms ‘deep marketization’ (2015). Calkin’s (2016) examination of empowerment initiatives finds that conflating gender equality and profit shores up—rather than challenges—the expansion of private activities in the development sector by cultivating a socially conscious brand image that facilitates companies subscribing to ‘soft’ forms of regulation, such as voluntary, non-binding codes of conduct on labor standards, rather than ‘hard’ forms of regulation delivering more certain and tangible outcomes.

Underpinning these critiques of empowerment programs are studies highlighting the narrowing of conceptualizations of empowerment. From the radical goal of mobilizing women to transform the drivers of structural inequalities, programs have increasingly focused on women’s economic empowerment, and within this sphere, measures to increase women’s market competitiveness. Pereznieto and Taylor’s (2014) review of 254 academic and ‘grey literature’ empowerment project evaluations found that of eight thematic areas, projects focused on five: financial services, business development services, skills training, social protection, and access to markets. Moreover, just under half of all evaluations (46%) focused on projects related to financial services, predominantly micro-credit and self-help groups but also micro-insurance schemes. Projects focused significantly less on legal and regulatory frameworks (two out of 254), unions and fair employment (six out of 254), and asset provision, both financial and non-financial (four out of 254). The thematic areas that Pereznieto
and Taylor identify as dominating projects seek to empower women by improving their ability to compete in markets.

The objective of empowering women has, therefore, narrowed to focus on women’s economic empowerment, and within that sphere, measures to drive women’s market competitiveness. This trajectory does not bode well for advancing gender equality, for two reasons. First, it reflects the understanding of markets in neoliberal ideology as neutral spaces, overlooking how markets can exacerbate inequalities and reproduce patterns of exclusion or discrimination. Markets are socially embedded, with their form and function mediated by people’s interactions and relationships and our many social identities, shaping how they distribute resources (Carruthers and Babb 2012, 122).

Second, by driving competition to tackle gender inequalities, dominant project types promote individualizing measures to address structural challenges. Economically empowering women by improving their market competitiveness fails to engage with the structural causes of gendered inequalities. Eliminating gender inequalities means addressing the complex interplay of institutional, cultural, economic and political factors through which women are discriminated against in workplaces, in politics, in public life, and in the home. UN Women (2016) argues, for example, that an entrenched acceptance of men’s power over women fosters an environment in which violence against women is accepted, and hence eliminating it requires action on a variety of fronts. Htun and Weldon (2012), similarly, find that it is feminist movements, and not national wealth, women in government, or leftist parties, that account for policy changes to tackle violence against women. Measures to improve women’s market competitiveness, however, atomize women rather than driving collaborative responses to the drivers of gender inequalities. Dominant project types, consequently, shift the burden of tackling the structural drivers of discrimination onto individuals, rather than movements.

The persistence of the ‘efficiency approach’ to tackling gender inequalities, despite its inadequacies, raises questions regarding how knowledge for gender programming is constructed. The
following section describes how differing conceptualizations of development inform this process, before examining recent shifts in the Bank’s ‘Knowledge Bank’ agenda and how Bank researchers have constructed knowledge for women’s empowerment in the case of Results-Based Initiatives.

**Development and Depoliticization**

Critical studies of the development sector have drawn attention to the depoliticizing processes of development interventions (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1990; Li 2007; Mosse 2005, 2007). These critiques have charted how defining a development ‘problem’ and constructing arenas that are calculable and manageable by practitioners marginalize the politics of interventions, such that ‘policy primarily functions to mobilize and maintain political support’ (Mosse 2005, 14).

Evidence-based policymaking in particular has been identified as a technology through which development interventions are depoliticized. Analyzes have highlighted the erasure of the politics of interventions through results and evidence frameworks drawn from New Public Management, termed ‘New Development Management’ (Eyben 2013; Mosse 2007; Mowles 2007). In the field of international development, evidence-based policymaking has its roots in the inclusion of planning and evaluation mechanisms into donor-funded programs in the US in the 1970s (Berridge and Stanton 1999). The current movement for evidence-based policymaking emerged in the 1990s, with its champions arguing that like the medical sciences, social policy should be informed by rigorous standards of evidence. However, it is not just any evidence that is advocated but—drawing on the medical sciences—scientific evidence, as opposed to tacit knowledge, personal experience, or information gained through organized professional inquiries (Parkhurst 2016, 16).

With this focus on scientific evidence, experimental methods have become influential in evaluating development interventions and measuring effect, with controlled experiments held up as the ‘gold standard’ of knowledge. Controlled experiments in international development have, however,
been widely criticized for their limited applicability. Picciotto (2014, 7), for example, asserts: ‘the potentials and limitations of the experimental approach have been thoroughly probed and the hidden assumptions that underlie experimentalism have been fully unearthed and finely dissected’. He argues that experiments in international development
do not work well unless the operating environment is relatively stable and the intervention being evaluated is fixed and well defined. The melancholy fact is that these conditions are not often met in international development (2014, 8).

Eyben, similarly, notes that results and evidence mechanisms are ‘intended to improve clarity and thought but can have perverse consequences when used in an organizational environment in which hidden and invisible power determines what knowledge counts’ (2013, 8).

These accounts thus draw attention to the depoliticizing impacts of evidence-based policymaking for development interventions. Scholars of depoliticization and anti-politics have, however, noted that the term ‘depoliticization’ is in fact a misnomer, given that politics remain (Flinders and Buller 2006, 295). The form that politics takes changes, however, because of reforms to the structures within which people interact. As argued by Gerard: ‘depoliticization does not entail taking politics out of people’s interactions, but rather reorganizing how politics takes place’ (2017, emphasis in original). This raises questions regarding which social groups are empowered through this process, and why and how it progresses.

In the case of evidence-based policymaking in development interventions, much of the appeal of scientific evidence lies in the assumption that ‘science is value free, hence independent of the uses to which it is applied’ (Stone 2013, 242). Evidence-based claims to constructing development knowledge are based on the conceptualization of development as a technocratic process that can be objectively known by practitioners and policymakers, rather than a process of intervening in established hierarchies and relationships between different social groups in a specific context. Hughes and Hutchison capture
this technocratic conceptualization in their description of donors’ assumptions regarding development: that development is a public good, to be created by policy, rather than a politically contested process of accumulation and distribution; that development policies are objectively known by technical experts and adopted through the advocacy of enlightened actors; and that failure to recognize such policies results from information failures or from temporarily perverse incentives (2012, 19).

Hobbes (2014), similarly, critiques the paradigm of the Big Idea in development, namely that ‘once we identify the correct one, we can simply unfurl it on the entire developing world like a picnic blanket’. Conceptualizing development as a technocratic endeavour depoliticizes development policy by divesting it of certain organizational politics—by positioning policymakers and practitioners as the creators and bearers of development knowledge, and affected communities as knowledge recipients. As described in subsequent sections, this approach persists at the World Bank, despite claims to the contrary.

Donors’ understanding of development as a technocratic endeavour—and the shortcomings of this approach—has been reflected in their limited success in incorporating political economy research into programming (Hughes and Hutchison 2012; Hutchison et al 2014). The critical analyzes of the development sector noted above prompted donors to incorporate political economy research into aid programming, however they have been largely unsuccessful in their attempts (Unsworth 2009). This is because donors’ view of development as a technocratic endeavor relies on a very limited conception of politics that overlooks how policy intervenes in the ongoing conflicts between different social groups, and how it might then be tailored according to these conflicts (Hughes and Hutchison 2012; Hutchison et al 2014). Successful development outcomes require donors to recognize how a policy intervenes in the ongoing conflicts between different groups in a society, with their differing resources and objectives, and then distinguish among these various groups and make alliances with those whose
interests are aligned with donors’ objectives (Hughes and Hutchison 2012).

Conceptualizing development not as a technocratic process that can be objectively tested and known by policymakers and replicated across geographies and contexts, but as a contested process of accumulation and distribution centers its associated politics—struggles over who gets what, when, and how (Lasswell 1936). The following section examines recent developments in the Bank’s approach to knowledge construction as they relate to these debates, before considering the persistence of the ‘efficiency approach’ to gender equality by analyzing knowledge construction processes in the case of Results-Based Initiatives.

The World Bank as Gender ‘Knowledge Broker’

Since the mid-1990s the Bank has undergone a series of reforms to reinvent itself as the broker of development knowledge—the ‘Knowledge Bank’—and as part of this, increase the diversity of its research ecology and its strategies for disseminating ‘knowledge products’, including on gender programming. This agenda has reflected the need to ensure the Bank’s relevance, given its shift from being the dominant source of development finance in the 20th century to being one of multiple competing sources, with cheap credit readily available alongside private sources of development funding, including investment banks that don’t stipulate conditionalities. This agenda has taken different forms since its conception, reflecting the changing Bank leadership.

The ‘Knowledge Bank’ agenda began under the presidency of James Wolfensohn (1995 to 2005). Central to its initial formulation were measures to increase the Bank’s ranks of social scientists, particularly anthropologists and sociologists, as well as staff that had NGO and practitioner connections (Bedford 2009; Enns 2015; Stone 2013). Staff were also moved out of the Bank’s offices in Washington DC and to in-country offices (Bedford 2009; Griffin 2009). Additionally, the Bank’s
methodological repertoire was widened, with data sets supplemented by qualitative surveys and children’s drawings (Bedford 2009). This was captured in the Voices of the Poor project, a global research program of group-based Participatory Poverty Assessments, entailing 60,000 participants across 60 countries to inform the Bank’s annual flagship document, the World Development Report (WDR), which for 2001 focused on the theme of poverty. The Bank also supported the establishment of networks linking Bank researchers to think-tanks and university research centers, such as the Global Development Network (Stone 2013). The movement of people and ideas between academia and the Bank also increased through the expectation that staff in the Bank’s main research engine—the Development Economics Vice-Presidency—were to publish two articles a year in academic journals (Dethier 2007, 475), and some also undertaking adjunct university teaching.

The ‘Knowledge Bank’ agenda lost momentum under Paul Wolfowitz (2005–2007), but was revived under Robert Zoellick (2007–2012). Zoellick sought to respond to critiques that the Bank’s approach to knowledge construction was prescriptive and universalistic by reframing this agenda as widening space for alternative knowledges, and for development practice to play an expanded role in informing policy (Zoellick 2010). This shift was reflected in the development of new knowledge sharing platforms, notably one promoting South-South knowledge exchange.

Analyzes of these first two manifestations of the ‘Knowledge Bank’ agenda, however, highlight its centralized and technocratic framing, argued to reflect the assumption that development knowledge is a public good to be transferred between those that possess it (Bank researchers) and those that do not (the poor) (Mehta 2001). The Bank’s reforms from 1995 to 2012 have been understood largely as a discursive shift rather than the Bank adopting a more pluralist approach to knowledge construction, given the continued inadequacies of measures to engage stakeholders and the absence of a relational understanding of this process (Enns 2015; Kramarz and Momani 2013). Moreover, on the Bank’s measures to diversify its research ecology in these first two periods of the ‘Knowledge Bank’ agenda,
accounts also underscore the continued dominance of (neoclassical) economists (Broad 2006, 2007; Rao and Woolcock 2007; Stone 2013). Broad (2006), for example, draws on Wade’s (1996) earlier analysis of the Bank’s strategies of ‘paradigm maintenance’ to document the incentive structures through which individuals and work that ‘resonates’ with neoliberal ideology are privileged in the Development Economics Vice-Presidency. These rewards include ‘increasing an individual’s chances to be hired, to advance one’s career, to be published, to be promoted by the Bank’s External Affairs department, and, in general to be assessed positively’, with this unspoken incentive structure ‘[undermining] debate and nuanced research conclusions, instead encouraging confirmation of a priori neoliberal assumptions’ (2006, 388).

While these two manifestations of the ‘Knowledge Bank’ agenda did entail greater engagement with and employment of gender specialists, this was not an unproblematic relationship. Bedford (2009, 13) notes that ‘unprecedented space’ was ‘opened up for gender policy entrepreneurs’ from the mid-1990s. This included consultations on key documents, notably the 2012 WDR, which was the first time that this flagship report focused exclusively on gender. Chant (2012) describes, however, her disappointment in participating in a consultation with academic ‘stakeholders’ on the 2012 WDR. Her concerns centered on the limited time provided for preparation, with a key document not circulated until 48 hours prior to meeting; the Bank’s advanced stage of drafting the WDR at the time of the consultation; and the lack of follow-up with participants, including the Bank’s disregard for the extensive list of references and data that participants later provided. Griffin (2009, 100), similarly, notes the limited changes to the Bank’s senior management positions, ‘which remain the preserve of White, Europe- or US-educated males’, despite increased employment of women and foreign nationals. Reflecting the continued dominance of economists at the Bank, its neoliberal orientation on gender programming was also carried forth into the 2012 WDR. Scholarly assessments of this document largely endorse the Bank’s increased focus on gender, as well as the acknowledgement of gender
equality as a goal in and of itself. However, analyzes critiqued its methodology and its limited engagement with relevant literature, alongside highlighting how its focus on gender equality as a goal in itself is in tension with the report framing women as a development resource, and thus continuing the ‘efficiency approach’ (Benería 2012; Chant 2012; Evans 2012; Harcourt 2012; Mahon 2012; Roberts and Soederberg 2012).

Under president Jim Yong Kim (2012–2019), the ‘Knowledge Bank’ agenda was again reframed and reinvigorated. Kim is the first Bank president without qualifications in politics, finance or economics, as a Korean-American physician with a PhD in anthropology and a background working in the health sector in the global South. His take on the ‘Knowledge Bank’ agenda was to reframe it as a strategy to ensure the Bank’s relevance in a multipolar world. This was captured in his keynote speech to the World Knowledge Forum in Seoul on 9 October 2012, where he noted:

60 years ago, when Korea was a poor country, and the World Bank had just been created, people thought power and development expertise could flow in only one direction: from the global north to south. That model has vanished forever (Kim 2012).

Referencing not only the role of emerging economies in accounting for more than half of global economic growth, but also the Arab Spring, los Indignados and the Occupy movement as reflecting ‘people’s demand for participation and a fair share of the benefits of prosperity’, Kim argued it was no longer possible for governments to ‘get away with rhetoric’ (Kim 2012). Arguing for an ‘evolutionary shift’, he reframed the ‘Knowledge Bank’ agenda as creating evidence-based policy and advancing the ‘science of delivery’, this latter component being the ‘new frontier for the World Bank Group’ (Kim 2012). Kim defined ‘delivery’ as the process of implementing development programs, noting that the biggest challenge for many countries is not developing policies and programs, but implementing them according to their specific circumstances. Kim positioned the Bank’s revised role as delivering ‘evidence-based support and advice’ and ‘[laying] the foundations for a new field that will collect and
distribute practical knowledge that countries can use to get delivery right in their unique contexts’ (Kim 2012).

The Bank’s recent ‘knowledge management’ projects have focused on expanding strategies for dissemination, including measures for development training and education. These include the creation of an Open Access Policy for Research and Knowledge, where the Bank adopted a Creative Commons Attribution copyright license for its content, meaning: ‘Now anybody is free to use, re-use and redistribute most of the Bank's knowledge products and research outputs for commercial or non-commercial purposes’ (World Bank 2012). The centerpiece of this policy is the Open Knowledge Repository, through which 27,803 Bank documents can be accessed (at January 2019). Other measures include the Global Operations Knowledge Management Unit (GOKMU), which was established in 2017 and is responsible for improving the organization and flow of project information between the Bank’s organizational units and advancing the Bank’s data analytics capabilities. The Bank’s Open Learning Campus also provides access to ‘knowledge products’ through its MOOCs (the WBx Academy), a range of podcasts, webinars and videos (the WBx Talks), and platforms for exchange and collaboration (the WBc Connect) (World Bank 2018).

Kim’s recasting of the ‘Knowledge Bank’ agenda suggests the potential for greater engagement with the politics of interventions, including on gender programming, through his emphasis on the need to pluralize knowledge construction as well as his acknowledgement of the specificity of differing contexts. This possibility is, however, in tension with how he describes operationalizing this reformed agenda, namely through developing and disseminating evidence-based ‘knowledge products’. This mode of implementation indicates his technocratic conceptualization of development, perceiving it to be a public good that can be objectively known by Bank researchers and disseminated and consumed globally. This approach de-emphasizes how development interventions are positioned in the ongoing struggles between different social groups, a characteristic that is of particular concern for gender
initiatives in tackling the complex interplay of factors through which women are discriminated. In light of this new trajectory and its tensions, the following section evaluates the design and citation practices of Results-Based Initiatives in considering the persistence of the ‘efficiency approach’ to gender programming and how alternatives might be advanced.

Recasting the Politics of Empowerment

This section charts how the Bank has constructed economic empowerment as increasing women’s market competitiveness by analyzing the design and reporting of the project, Results-Based Initiatives. This project was selected for two reasons. First, it is an example of the Bank’s ‘knowledge products’ produced as part of its reformed ‘Knowledge Bank’ agenda, described above. The growing number of empowerment initiatives alongside the declining distinction between public- and private-led development interventions has seen an increased diversity of actors developing and implementing gender initiatives. The Bank’s substantial influence necessitates paying attention not only to the ideas that the Bank advocates, but also to how the Bank constructs and disseminates this knowledge.

Accordingly, the analysis conducted here attends to the writing codes of Bank documents, paying particular attention to how key ideas and research findings are framed in documents’ abstracts, conclusions and executive summaries. These are often the only sections read by busy staff and consequently a significant amount of work goes towards shaping them, with dissenting arguments or controversial information buried within the text, footnotes, or graphs and tables (Bedford 2009; Broad 2007; Wade 2002).

This project is examined, second, because it claims to fill the ‘knowledge gap’ on how to economically empower women. The Bank has prioritized gender, captured in the 2012 WDR. However, as described above, the 2012 WDR recognized gender equality as a goal in and of itself while simultaneously advocating the ‘efficiency approach’. Examining Results-Based Initiatives thus
provides insights into the subsequent trajectory of the Bank’s policy advice on gender programming. This is particularly significant given the project’s claim to address the ‘knowledge gap’ on women’s economic empowerment. A rich literature on this topic, described below, has developed over the past two decades that puts forward a range of ways in which women can be economically empowered.

Results-Based Initiatives claims to conclusively settle this issue, and thus advance these debates.

The Bank developed this project in collaboration with UN Women (now UNIFEM) and the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW). The Bank held an overall supervisory role, while UN Women was responsible for design and implementation, and ICRW for evaluation. It was launched in 2007 to ‘provide comprehensive, coherent, and rigorous evidence on effective interventions to foster the economic empowerment of women’ (Johansson de Silva, Paci, and Posadas 2014, 1). The findings were published as the report, Lessons Learned and Not Learned by a Multicountry Initiative on Women’s Economic Empowerment, authored by Sara Johansson de Silva, Pierella Paci, and Josefina Posadas (2014). At the time of writing, this report had been downloaded from the Open Knowledge Repository 678 times. The authors then published an article in the Journal of Development Effectiveness, outlining ten lessons learned from the project on pilot design and implementation (Johansson de Silva, Paci, and Posadas 2015).

Results-Based Initiatives consisted of five pilots, all entailing different forms of business training interventions. Four focused on skills training to raise earning capacity in self-employment (cassava producers in Liberia, beadworkers in Kenya, bamboo handicraft producers in the Mekong, and micro-entrepreneurs in Peru). The fifth pilot, implemented in Egypt, focused on human resource training by developing a certification program to recognize good gender equity practices in the private sector. The pilots were designed to be implemented and evaluated in just two years, and to be both replicable and scalable. Each had a budget of approximately $US600,000 that was equally divided between implementation and impact evaluation. The pilots targeted a minimum of 250 women
(Liberia) and a maximum of 1,500 (Peru). All were designed to ‘include rigorous impact evaluations and provide measurable and statistically valid evidence on program impact’ (Johansson de Silva, Paci, and Posadas 2014, 11). A range of evaluation tools were used across the five pilots, including comparison between randomized treatment and control groups of women (Peru), and a pre- and post-institutional evaluation alongside a comparison of outcomes for participants versus non-participants (Liberia) (Ofosu-Amaah, n.d.). *Results-Based Initiatives’* impacts were assessed according to three dimensions: economic opportunities, endowments (‘stock of human capital and assets’), and agency (‘ability to make effective choices leading to desired changes’) (Johansson de Silva, Paci, and Posadas 2015, 95). This framework for evaluation was based on the 2011 World Bank study, ‘Gender Equality and Development’ (World Bank, 2011). The pilots yielded little information regarding how to foster women’s economic empowerment, with four of the five not significantly increasing women’s earnings and having little impact on other dimensions of economic empowerment that were measured (Johansson de Silva, Paci, and Posadas 2014, 3).

The project design and reporting is flawed in three, significant, ways. First, the authors’ claim to innovation relies on their lack of engagement with key works in the field. The justification for the project is that ‘rigorous evidence in this area was close to nonexistent, because no systematic impact evaluations had been carried out in developing countries’ (Johansson de Silva, Paci, and Posadas 2014, 1). This claim to fill the knowledge gap ignores the very substantial literature on this topic that has been developed by academics and practitioners on women’s empowerment since the late 1980s until the commencement of the project in 2007 (e.g. Cornwall and Brock 2005; Elson 1999; Kabeer 1999, 2001, 2003, 2005; Mehra 1997; Moser 1989; SIDA 2001; Taborga 2008). It overlooks further key research that was developed over the project’s life until publication in 2014, including leading programs like the collaborative ‘Pathways of Women’s Empowerment’ initiative that commenced in 2006 (e.g. Bexell 2012; Chant 2014; Chhay 2011; Cornwall and Anyidoho 2010; Duflo 2012; Eyben
2013; Pathways of Women’s Empowerment 2018; Sengupta 2013). More generally, the study disregards decades of feminist scholarship arguing that women entering labor markets may further inequalities by adding paid work to the unpaid work already done by women. While studies in this extensive scholarship may not have conducted pilots according to those used in Results-Based Initiatives, there is no attempt to situate the project within the existing literature. Rather than building on the existing literature by investigating its key debates, Results-Based Initiatives is framed as ‘pioneering’ (Johansson de Silva, Paci, and Posadas 2014, 1). This heightens the project’s significance, while at the same time excising approaches that are different, and eliminating the need to justify the project’s approach in relation to existing studies. This is of particular concern for those not already familiar with the existing literature—notably, those designing and implementing the many empowerment initiatives being developed in the private sector.

The researchers’ select engagement with the literature facilitates their conceptualization of women’s economic empowerment as being achieved through business training interventions, underpinned by women accessing labor markets. This conceptualization is justified by pointing to, first, the gap in labor market participation rates between women and men; and second, the argument that ‘jobs for women are likely to be “better” for development than jobs going to men’ (Johansson de Silva, Paci, and Posadas 2014, 8). This second argument references the 2012 WDR, which as noted above adopted the ‘efficiency approach’ to gender programming, despite acknowledging gender equality as a key goal, in and of itself. The referencing of the 2012 WDR to support the view that women’s economic empowerment can be achieved through business training interventions thus relies, again, on a highly select engagement with the literature, while also highlighting the central role of Bank research in sustaining its preferred approach to gender programming. As noted by Broad: ‘within the Bank, it is Bank knowledge that is most accepted’ (2006, 395).

Johansson et al (2014) then elaborate on why jobs for women lead to better outcomes than jobs
for men. Unlike their earlier claim that there is a significant knowledge gap on how to empower women, in this instance the authors cite seven studies in support of the statement: ‘giving women more control over household resources results in more investments in the education and health of children’ (2014, 8). This indicates the authors’ awareness of the extensive literature on the drivers and implications of gendered resource distribution within households. Importantly, this literature intersects with the literature on women’s empowerment (e.g. Kabeer 1999, 2001), suggesting it is not the case that the project designers are unaware of the extensive literature on women’s empowerment, but that they have chosen not to include it. Seeking to economically empower women only through business training interventions therefore relies on a highly exclusionary engagement with the existing literature. This approach is then reflected in the kinds of pilots pursued, with none focusing on, for example, supporting unions or others forms of organization to drive improvements in working conditions; subsidized or fully-funded childcare; or building movements to advocate for reforming discriminatory legal and regulatory structures. Absent from the project are collective responses to tackling the structural drivers of gender inequalities, with the selective literature review removing the need to note, and justify, this absence.

Second, the project is presented as authoritative through how it constructs knowledge, which relies on the misrepresentation of the project’s ideological underpinnings through claims to objectivity and neutrality. This is evident in the justification for the use of pilots:

The idea that policy making should be based on clear evidence of what works, rather than ideological or theoretical considerations, is now central to the design and implementation of policies by development organizations and governments. The use of pilots to pretest the potential effectiveness of large-scale programs is consequently becoming standard practice, especially when the proposed intervention is innovative or is applied in new contexts (Johansson de Silva, Paci, and Posadas 2014, 7).
Using pilots is claimed to yield evidence for economically empowering women that is objective, neutral and value-free, thereby *depoliticizing* gender programming. Absent is broader consideration of the form and function of the pilots—specifically, their focus on empowering women by improving their market competitiveness. The project does not disclose its ideological framing, with all pilots entailing competition-driving measures, nor are alternatives (and their absence) justified.

The paradoxes of trying to technocratically—and apolitically—‘do development’ is captured in the pilots’ failure to generate lessons that would enable them to be replicable and scalable. This is evident in the researchers’ admission that the attempt to tailor projects to country characteristics, while ‘making the interventions more effective at country level,’ undermined the broad goal of ‘learning global lessons… because the differences in the interventions introduced too many degrees of variation’ (Johansson de Silva, Paci, and Posadas 2014, 12). The use of pilots is claimed to enable developing rigorously tested findings that can inform large-scale projects. However, in seeking to make the pilots *effective* by tailoring them to country characteristics, the possibility of developing a ‘one size fits all’ approach is undermined, underpinning critiques of the search for the Big Idea in development and the limitations of the conceptualization of development as a purely technocratic endeavor.

Finally, the Bank’s claim to authority in constructing knowledge is undergirded by its researchers’ assertion of reflexivity. The project report is titled *Lessons Learned and Not Learned From a Multicountry Initiative on Women’s Economic Empowerment*, and it outlines a series of lessons to be taken from the pilots. These include the importance of aligning resources with expectations, the need for mixed-methods approaches to evaluating impacts, and the importance of adequately monitoring projects. This suggests a critical approach to how the project generates knowledge on women’s empowerment, furthering its claims to authority on this topic. However, as described above, the form and function of the pilots is not justified, nor is the absence of alternative approaches explained. These silences, in combination with the claim to reflexivity, shore up market-oriented
approaches as the only route to economically empowering women.

Of the 44 sources listed in the report’s bibliography, just 17 are non-Bank publications, with 21 being Bank publications and another six being reports of *Results-Based Initiatives* published by project partners. The journal article, meanwhile, lists 24 sources in the bibliography, comprising 12 Bank publications and six reports of the project published by project partners, with just six non-Bank publications. The high quotient of Bank sources cited in both the report and the article highlight Bank researchers’ reliance on Bank-produced research. This is particularly significant given the role of Bank research in justifying key aspects of the project’s design, notably its exclusive focus on business training interventions and the criteria for which economic empowerment was to be evaluated, described above. Self-citations thus play a key role in shoring up both the Bank’s reputation as a ‘Knowledge Bank’, as well as its preferred approach to development (Broad 2006).

All three authors hold PhDs in economics from European or US universities. Two have specialized in gender research (Posadas works in the Gender and Development Group at the Bank and Paci previously did), while Johansson de Silva is currently a consultant, having previously worked in the Bank’s Middle East and North Africa Department on growth, employment and poverty analysis. The report is also described as having been ‘academically peer reviewed’ on the Open Knowledge Repository, thereby lending it greater legitimacy as a ‘knowledge product’. However, peer review in this instance refers to the report having been internally reviewed by two senior Bank economists: Jesko Hentschel and Mattias Lundberg (Johansson de Silva et al 2014, vii). The dominance of economists in researching and reviewing ‘what works’ to economically empower women, again, indicates the Bank’s narrow construction of knowledge for gender programming.

The Bank’s privileging of neoliberal ideology in gender programming is notable, given that this is not an area of policy that is the “bread and butter” of development economics. It is characteristic of the ‘deep marketization’ of development (Carroll 2015), indicating the Bank thus remains central in
facilitating the ‘dissemination of the “politics of global competitiveness”’, while supporting states in adoption and implementation (Cammack 2012, 360). Charting how the Bank has rationalized advancing women’s empowerment through measures to drive increased competition—and the associated flaws and exclusions in the project’s design and reporting—is important when considered alongside the politics within development organizations, and specifically on gender policy. Being the ‘gender expert’ in development organizations brings substantial challenges. Chant and Sweetman (2012) note that when it comes to gender policy, projects informed by ‘smart economics’ are often the only source of funds available, and hence they are incredibly welcomed by gender policy advisors and practitioners. Ferguson (2015), moreover, outlines the challenges of trying to push the boundaries of the ‘business case’ for gender equality, and more generally, the difficulties of rejecting the ‘efficiency approach’ in the day-to-day work of the development sector or the need to package policies in ‘efficiency terms’ for them to gain traction (see also Bedford 2009; Griffin 2009).

By documenting the flaws of Results-Based Initiatives, this article provides support for marginalized researchers within the Bank and elsewhere that are seeking to challenge the ‘efficiency approach’ to gender programming. As noted by Cahill (2011, 487), ‘that neoliberalism is ideologically embedded means that a generation of policy-makers has only known neoliberalism as the common sense frame for conducting and evaluating policy’. This creates incredible institutional inertia. However, researchers have highlighted the agency of development policy advisors and practitioners and their everyday acts of resistance as they work within these institutional contexts in which neoliberalism is ideologically embedded (e.g. Li 2007; Eyben 2013). In highlighting the flaws of Results-Based Initiatives, this article seeks to assist gender policy advisors and practitioners within the Bank and elsewhere in pushing the boundaries of how policy is formulated and implemented, providing justification for rejecting the enduring ‘efficiency approach’ and advocating for alternatives.

Advocates within and outside of the Bank can argue for substantive reforms to knowledge
construction practices by leveraging, first, the Bank’s institutional prioritizing of gender, and second, Kim’s recasting of the ‘Knowledge Bank’ agenda as more pluralist and context-specific. These two commitments provide fertile ground for attempting to hold the Bank to account. On women’s economic empowerment, further studies should acknowledge the diversity of ways in which this can be achieved, looking beyond simply employing women and instead tackling the complex interplay of factors through which women are discriminated. These analyzes should engage with, rather than marginalize, the substantive academic and practitioner literature on this topic and seek to advance existing debates.

Moreover, advocates can argue for a genuinely pluralist and context-specific approach to knowledge construction. Women’s empowerment cannot be reduced to a technocratic exercise because it requires the reconfiguration of arrangements and relationships through which women are discriminated, covering women’s underrepresentation in politics to the division of labor in the household to the prevalence of gender-based violence in popular media. This is profoundly political, and requires a much more substantive role for affected women in determining ‘what works’ in specific contexts. Feminist participatory action research offers one such approach. This non-hierarchical and participatory approach assists affected women in generating their own knowledge on an issue of concern that they identify, with this knowledge then informing their advocacy and driving structural change. Such an approach challenges prevailing norms on who generates development knowledge and how it is used. It does not mean that the outcomes of programs cannot be objectively measured, or that there cannot be learning or the cross-fertilization of ideas across programs. It simply means policymakers acknowledge that they are undertaking a profoundly political task and, consequently, must be open-minded about the specific context in which they are intervening and its challenges, and engage affected women in this process in a way that is genuinely open-ended.

**Conclusion**
The objective of empowering women now has many supporters and advocates. However, the implementation of this agenda has been widely criticized for continuing the ‘efficiency approach’ to gender equality, and in doing so, failing to engage with the complex interplay of institutional, cultural, economic and political factors through which women are discriminated. This article has furthered analyzes of this latest manifestation of feminism by considering how women’s empowerment has come to be understood not only as *economic* empowerment, but as measures to drive women’s market competitiveness. It has done this by evaluating how particular ideas are being incorporated into aid programming, and identifying opportunities for contesting gendered power relations through these initiatives.

Specifically, the article documented how the Bank constructed knowledge on women’s economic empowerment by evaluating the design and reporting of its project, *Results-Based Initiatives*. It was found that the Bank’s claim to further our understanding of ‘what works’ to economically empower women relies on: a) the exclusion of key works when describing the relevant literature; b) the misrepresentation of the project as objective and value-free through its methodology; and c) apparent critical reflection, all of which function in positioning market-oriented approaches as the only possible approach, excising alternatives. This indicates that despite the Bank’s recognition of gender equality as a goal in and of itself in the 2012 WDR, the ‘efficiency approach’ persists.

These flaws in *Results-Based Initiatives* are particularly significant when considered alongside the latest version of the ‘Knowledge Bank’ agenda. Kim’s reframing of this agenda as pluralizing knowledge construction and increasing attention to the specific context in which policies are implemented suggests the possibility for greater engagement with the politics of interventions. However, his focus on creating and disseminating evidence-based ‘knowledge products’, of which *Results-Based Initiatives* is one example, reflects the technocratic conceptualization of development, conceiving of it as a public good to be created by policy rather than a process of contested structural
change. This conceptualization depoliticizes interventions by deflecting attention away from their associated politics and underlying values and ideologies, as well as by positioning the Bank as the generator of development knowledge and affected communities as knowledge recipients.

The article’s analysis of Results-Based Initiatives’ design and reporting thus traces how the ‘efficiency approach’ to gender programming continues to be promoted, despite its shortcomings, providing insights into the mechanisms underpinning its centrality in the corporatization of gender equality agendas. The article also documented some of the concrete policy manifestations of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ in the case of gender policy, as well as the Bank’s continued privileging of research resonating with neoliberal ideology despite reforms to develop a more pluralist research ecology. By charting these limitations in the Bank’s construction of knowledge for gender programming, the article provides gender policy advisors and practitioners with grounds to contest the enduring ‘efficiency approach’ to tackling gender inequalities. In advancing alternatives, the Bank’s prioritization of gender alongside its claims to make knowledge construction more plural and context-specific provides fertile ground for holding the Bank to account. Advocates can argue for studies to engage with, rather than marginalize, the rich literature on women’s empowerment and recognize the diversity of ways in which this can be achieved, far beyond business training interventions. Furthermore, advocates can push for the Bank and other donors to acknowledge that empowering women is a profoundly political undertaking, and requires knowledge construction processes that are calibrated to this dynamic.

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References


Recent research highlights the significance of relational dynamics in the process of policy transfer (Bazbauer 2017), extending earlier work emphasizing the Bank’s coercive capacities (George and Sabelli 1994; Peet, Born, and Fehrer 2003).