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Toward a Vision of Sexual and Economic Justice
Thought Paper

Moving Off the Straight Path in Economic Development Policy

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As a feminist economist who works on gender and development issues, I find that one key constraint to integrating economic and sexual justice is the way that development and international aid initiatives work to normalize gender and sexual identities. Political economy accounts of development often ignore the entrenched nature of heteronormativity in their thinking, in which reproductive heterosexuality is seen as the only functional form of sex (Kleitzi 2000). Because of this, the diversity of economic and affective relations that do not fit the functional model is rendered imperceptible in nearly all discussions of poverty alleviation, social inclusion, and economic rights. While the prioritization of HIV/AIDS has created some space for adding sexuality to the equation in economic development, this has been limited by the general confinement of discussions to HIV/AIDS health concerns (Gosine 2005). The result is a continued lack of explicit attention to sexuality in the mainstream of economic development thought as well as those alternative frameworks which draw inspiration from feminist, anti-poverty, and ecological movements. For instance, recognition of non-normative genders and sexualities is absent from even the most sophisticated feminist economic approaches that take differences of class, race, ethnicity and nationality among women into account. Thus in order to challenge the heteronormative aspects of economic development theory and practice, it is important to explore how and why such framings persist in order to adequately re-frame economic development to move beyond these limits.

There is also a need to recognize and challenge the ways that development policies are implicated in the production and transformation of normative heterosexualities themselves, particularly in regard to how western teleological visions of sexuality have dominated development discourse (Pigg and Adams 2005). The attempt to transform multiple and diverse affective arrangements in the global South into a mythical norm of the stabilized, westernized and "modern" heterosexual family has long been a hallmark of development policy, and forms of resistance to these efforts are often reconstructed as elements of pathology or tradition that need to be contained (Ferguson 1999). While some aspects of the norm have shifted over time - for instance, agrarian reform efforts in the 1970s attempted to institutionalize a male breadwinner/female housewife model, while current gender and development initiatives push for women's rights in the context of equitable marriage - the goal of recreating a mythical western norm of heterosexual relations nonetheless remains relatively untouched.

This issue is a pressing one, as normative models remain central to international development programs, and form the conceptual core of an expanding array of anti-poverty and gender equity initiatives. For example, current feminist attempts to address the negative effects of neoliberal

structural adjustment policies on women in poor households have challenged the mainstream tendency to naturalize the gender division of labor and devalue non-market caring labor. In this effort, feminist economists have been particularly effective in their call for equity strategies that take into account the gendered effects of restructuring on the well-being of women and men in terms of tensions between paid and unpaid work, access to resources, and power relations within the household. This move toward denaturalizing the household has the potential to open up space for imagining and supporting a diversity of economic and affective arrangements. However, because most feminist economists and policy makers deploy an understanding of sexual difference as determined through a “heterosexual matrix” (Butler 1990) of complementary roles, they have reverted to a presentation of heterosexual partnering as the sole form of family life (Bergeron 2007). For example, women-headed households, which make up a large share of the population in many developing countries, often disappear from view in feminist economic development frameworks (Lind and Share 2003). And when women-headed households are taken into account, it is generally through a set of heteronormative assumptions that can only see them “broken” or “headless” because the male is perceived to be missing (Paulson 2006).

These assumptions about sexual arrangements in households have been widely translated into gender equity policy strategies that reinforce prescribed family norms. For example, recent World Bank gender and development initiatives such as PROFAM in Argentina, *Generosidad* in Mexico, and PROGENIAL in Ecuador have given priority to projects aimed at reorganizing behaviors within the heterosexual family in order to create modern equitable partnerships between men and women. While the progressive potential of these calls for equitable partnerships has yet to be realized, these policies as they are currently conceived are questionable from both a sexual and an economic justice perspective. They aim at keeping couples intact rather than supporting women’s self-sufficiency, attempt to fix local arrangements into a mythical western norm of heterosexuality, fail to resolve the work/ care tensions of the many poor households that do not fit these gender and sexual norms, and underwrite neoliberal efforts to privatize caring labor (Bedford 2007).

The discursive power of this approach to understanding care work in development circles is such that even sexual rights advocates have begun to deploy it in making their connections between sexual and economic justice. For example, South Africa’s Equality Project has called for an expanded definition of the normative household through gay marriage by arguing that this will encourage “family involvement in poverty alleviation” through “mutual assistance” in poor gay and lesbian families, assistance that could substitute for dwindling state-funded support for care work (Oswin 2007). While gay marriage is in itself an important sexual right, and without a doubt can offer improved economic well-being to some homonormative constituencies, there are still a lot of poor people, including those who live outside of the prescribed norms, who will be ill-served by this approach to poverty alleviation.

All of this suggests that simply adding non-normative sexualities to existing economic development theories and policies may cause us to fall short of the goal of achieving sexual and economic justice. Therefore one of the many areas that warrant attention in moving toward this goal lies in challenging and transforming hetero and gender-normative political economy frameworks. We need to contend with colonized economic imaginations in order to redefine

sexual identities outside reproduction and the family. We also need to reconceptualize current normative approaches to sexuality in economic development that recapitulate western hegemony. For instance, the colonial tenor of economic development discourse, in which the US and Europe serve as the supposed source of modernity for both opposite and same-sex sexuality, supports the flawed assumption that the importation of western norms is the key to expanding these rights to the developing world. For example, teleological approaches in development circles (borrowing from some movements for sexual rights) presume that the importation of a western model of “out-gayness” is the hallmark of same-sex liberation. This not only implies, incorrectly, that modernization is the key to sexual rights in the global South; it also renders those whose identities and lives do not correspond to labels such as “gay” imperceptible (and thus underserved) in international aid programs (Wright 2006).

The project of challenging and reconceptualizing economic development discourses of sexuality, then, needs to draw upon growing body of research which shows how development policy and globalization transform affective relations and sexual identities in varied and complex ways (e.g. Wilson 2004; Rebhun 1999). It might also build upon the language of diverse economy developed by Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006) to constitute an economic landscape that is represented by a myriad of contingent forms of economic and effective difference. For example, using the case of caring labor described above, current economic justice arguments in development generally can’t think beyond two types of households – the traditional exploitative heterosexual one where caring labor is not shared, and the modern, progressive heterosexual one where it is shared. In contrast, an approach that denaturalizes the household and imagines a diversity of arrangements from the start would not conceal or pathologize the many ways in which caring labor might be practiced. Thus it could open space for kinship and care to broaden its meaning to include same-sex desire, transgender, and homosocial relations among others (Roseneil 2004). By expanding Gibson-Graham’s language of diverse economy to take sexual heterogeneity into account, we might do with economic structures such as the household what Judith Butler and other queer theorists have done with heterosexuality and the binary gender categories that are in its support, and begin to read for “difference rather than dominance” (Gibson-Graham 2006). This conceptual work, I believe, can go far to move economic development thinking off the straight path, and therefore is an important part of the project of integrating sexual and economic justice in international development practice.

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