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A Few Drops of Oil Will Not Be Enough

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Abstract

Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn provide a rich description of the various kinds of violence, deprivation, depredation and exploitation that women experience on a vast scale in the developing world. They write of sex trafficking, acid attacks, “bride burning,” enslavement, spousal beatings, unequal healthcare (something the USA still struggles with), insufficient food, gendered abortions and infant and maternal mortality. They are right to identify the education of women and girls as part of the solution to the widespread “gendercide.” However, their approach focuses too much on the capacity, indeed the virtue or heroism, of individual women. It does not take adequate account of systemic factors, as many IR, peace and development scholars have done.

Keywords

Human rights, Women's rights, Education, Economics, Universal human rights, Systemic change

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Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn provide a rich description of the various kinds of violence, deprivation, depredation and exploitation that women experience on a vast scale in the developing world. They write of sex trafficking, acid attacks, "bride burning," enslavement, spousal beatings, unequal healthcare (something the USA still struggles with), insufficient food, gendered abortions and infant and maternal mortality. They are right to identify the education of women and girls as part of the solution to the widespread "gendercide." However, their approach focuses too much on the capacity, indeed the virtue or heroism, of individual women. It does not take adequate account of systemic factors, as many IR, peace and development scholars have done.

Kristof and WuDunn claim that "the best hope for fighting global poverty" is to educate women. The poorest families in the world are even castigated for their spending habits—their profligacy that leaves them without the means to educate wives and daughters. This is a bit much coming from writers from the developed world where there is such extraordinary overconsumption and waste. The "dirty little secret of global poverty," I would suggest, is not the spending habits of the poor but the systemic dimensions of the world economy. Why is it that transnational corporations (TNCs) operating in the developing world pay their employees so little, that the working conditions there are not comparable to those in the developed world? The authors referred to the World Bank, yet there was no mention of the savage effects of neoliberal structural adjustment programs on the very areas the authors identify as priorities for women's wellbeing: health, education, labor conditions, and, I would add, social welfare.

What are the causes of the disparities between the developed and developing world? These cannot be explored in this short reflection, but a focus on the individual capacities and self-reliance of women who can by their own imagination, creativity, energy and efforts turn their families and communities around through entrepreneurship is a rather romantic account. While our hearts are warmed by such inspirational stories they are exceptional stories: most women in their shoes do not overcome the extraordinary odds stacked against them. Can the education of women overcome poor terms of trade, developing world debt, government corruption, civil and other wars, pandemics, genocides and sexually motivated violence? While Eleanor Roosevelt said that human rights need to start close to home, and was a fervent supporter of education, she also recognized, as did many other drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that war, racism, sexism, poverty and hunger affect what we now term "human security"; and that a focus on women, the family and the individual is not enough. We must attend to the national, regional, international and global levels as well.

In addition to the UDHR's endorsement of the equal human rights and dignity of women and men, two provisions of it (and comparable provisions in the 1966 economic and social rights treaty) are especially important to the prospects for women. One is Article 25. It elaborates a human right to an adequate standard of living, one that guarantees everyone adequate health, housing, food and clothing—that is a form of "security" (apparently, according to historian Johannes Morsink, the reference was meant to be to "social security," and a clerical omission is the reason for the present wording). The other is the very ambitious Article 28 that refers to the

right to a world in which all of the UDHR's human rights can be fulfilled. These articles cannot be realized on the basis of the individual enterprise of women, increased preventive healthcare or education. They can only be realized through the combination of a regulated market, a humane state and a reordering of the priorities of the developed world, not only in terms of consumption, but also regarding the terms of trade, the behavior of TNCs and the conduct of foreign policy. When considering the wastefulness of the poorest families we might also consider the wastefulness of the trillions of dollars spent on arms races, militarization and unwise wars compared with the miniscule proportion of GDP that developed countries devote to foreign aid.

Education is a great thing. No doubt it opens the minds of women and creates opportunities for those who can obtain it. But successful education depends upon capacities, opportunities (for example, the reduced need for women and girls to work) and resources. Kristof and WuDunn conclude that we need dispense only "a few drops of oil in the crankcase of the developing world." But this assumes that there are no systemic problems, that the crankshaft is sound, as good as any in the developed world. Unfortunately this is not true: a complete overhaul rather than a little lubrication is needed.

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