“Empower Women to Foster Freedom,” proclaimed Ivanka Trump as she rolled out the Trump administration’s Women’s Global Development and Prosperity Initiative (W-GDP) in a Wall Street Journal opinion piece on February 6. The first daughter claimed that women could bring about peace and prosperity, enhancing both economic growth and national stability, if only we could eliminate barriers to their labor force participation and income generation, moving them from the informal to the formal economy. “One of the most undervalued resources in the developing world,” she argued, is “the talent, ambition and genius of women.” The US would come to their rescue through a package of initiatives to be coordinated by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in conjunction with corporate and NGO partners. Workforce development, vocational education, and skills training, as well as access to capital, markets, networks, and mentorship would “unleash” prosperity for “families, communities, and nations.” Such is the Trumpian version of Eleanor Roosevelt’s Depression-era maxim, “It is up to the women.”

W-GDP is hardly innovative. It is a return to past thinking that ignored power relations between nations as well as between men and women. And it seems unaware of feminist understandings that fitting women into development is not the same as empowering them as a group. By the 1990s, the Gender and Development school of feminist thought exposed
the ways that normative conceptions of gender are woven through structures of economy and society, connecting the sexual division of labor in the home to other workplaces. More recently transnational feminist critique has underscored the ways that multinational capitalism, displacement of people from land, structural adjustment, and other global forces curtail opportunity and life chances. In focusing on individual entrepreneurs, then, W-GDP neglects the vast majority of the world’s women, who labor for wages or as unwaged subsistence producers. Cast in terms of rescue and uplift, the initiative seeks to extend paternalism and neoliberal individualism to wrap aid in ideological binders that overlook both geopolitical forces and women’s understandings of their own lives.

Broadly, the W-GDP proposal also apes past efforts to practice foreign policy by targeting women.

During the period of US global dominance following WWII, various international agencies underscored the need for women’s involvement in economic life, education, training, peace, and access to resources. During the Cold War, Western market economies, including former colonial powers, touted the modernization of women’s status and movement from subsistence to employment and from seclusion to public participation as keys to economic progress.

Before Ivanka Trump was born, the United Nations claimed that “the status of women was a sure indication of the level of a country’s national development.”

It charged the International Labour Organization with encouraging nation states to improve their “human resources” by training and educating women toward integration into development. In turn, the ILO advocated for advancing women’s status by eliminating cultural and social barriers: recognizing “equality of opportunity” as non-discrimination in educational, training and employment policy and practice,” the organization promoted equal pay and spoke of “social protection of women in relation to their maternity function.” Indeed, efforts “to assist women with family responsibilities” became essential to “progressive social action.” For the ILO, these measures required worker rights: world employment could not alleviate poverty unless women had access to public resources as varied as clean water and child care as well as work that offers decent wages, accommodating hours, and safe labor conditions.

The new feminism of the 1970s further embraced “women and development” as a surefire path to freeing women from patriarchy.

Many found in Ester Boserup’s 1970 Women’s Role in Economic Development a blueprint for improving lives by directing technology and credit to rural women in Africa and Asia. The US Congress passed the Percy Amendment of 1973, which required US development aid be provided equally to women; feminists at USAID sought to carry out that mandate. Building upon the original 1975 UN Conference on Women, the fourth one in Beijing (1995) concluded, “When they gain access to and control over capital, credit and other resources, technology and training, women can increase production, marketing and income for sustainable development.” Like other planks and proclamations over the previous two decades, this one looked to state action and guarantees as necessary for insuring women’s rights. It saw economic rights as part of a larger bundle of rights, including access to health and reproductive control, freedom from violence, and sexual self-determination. The consensus was that “women’s rights are human rights.” More radical voices, however, went beyond legal equality to speak of justice and redistribution.
The big difference with the Trumpian initiative lies in its explicitly tying women’s empowerment to a neoliberal economic and foreign policy regime.

Bypassing current critiques of the inequalities generated by multi-national corporations and the global supply chain, it calls for lifting regulations to end women-only labor standards not to curtail discrimination but to end all worker protections. W-GDP seeks an update of freedom to contract doctrine that allows all workers to make individual pacts with employers. Yet Trump’s focus neglects most women to concentrate on business women. That means extending the funds available for private enterprises to “eliminating the legal, regulatory and cultural barriers that prevent women from participating in their local economies” in keeping with World Bank calls for deregulation of the world of work.

Trump insists that women's empowerment is within reach, without changes to the power relations that generations of reformers have deemed barriers to real change. Freedom for hardworking “third world” women can be bought for a mere $50 million dollars, a pittance compared to the cost of “the wall” that would block the freedom dreams of the women and children who dare to ask for refuge in this land of opportunity. In this, Ivanka Trump neglects what women from “non-aligned” nations recognized over forty years ago: In the 1975 words of Mrs. Esponda de Torres, a Mexican government advisor to the ILO, “The women workers of the Third world are fully aware of the fact that their opportunities and sources of employment cannot be opened up to them while systems of exploitation exist which limit their possibilities.”

Put simply, individual empowerment is not enough to counter histories of dispossession, appropriation, and exploitation grounded in global inequality between nations.

So, as I argue against deregulation, I suggest those US policymakers who wish to empower women around the world push for ratification of the fundamental ILO conventions that the US has not yet accepted and then develop enforcement mechanisms: Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize (#87), Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining (#98), Forced Labor (#29), Minimum Age (#138), Equal Remuneration (#100), and Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) (#111). (The US has ratified two of the fundamentals – Abolition of Forced Labor (#105) and Worse Forms of Child Labor (#182) – and fourteen of 189 conventions in total, two of which are no longer in force.) In addition, international instruments on migration, multinationals, home work, marriage, cultural and sexual self-determination, citizenship, and non-industrial labor, like domestic work, require action on country and regional levels. Trade policies and monetary policy that allow for social justice, collective action, and self-determination of peoples can help right the balance between nations. But the global upsurge against low wages and forms of unfree labor will not be enough until we recognize care work as central to insuring that all other forms of activity can flourish.

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