

# Developmental States and Gender-Equity

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## Developmental States and Gender-Equity

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ROXANNE KOVACS, APR 13 2013

### Is the Achievement of Gender-Equity Compatible with the Logic of the Developmental State?

#### Abstract

In this essay I show why the logic of the Developmental State is incompatible with the achievement of gender-equity. For this purpose, I examine two features of the Developmental State- namely its capitalist and its authoritarian dimension. I begin my argument by analysing why the capitalist dimension of the Developmental State is detrimental to women. I show how export-led industrialization, which is the strategy for economic growth employed by all Development States, maintains as well as creates new kinds of gender-inequality. I then move on to show why the authoritarian dimension of the Developmental State creates another barrier for achieving gender-equity. I argue that the suppression of civil society by the Developmental State is not in women's interest because the state does not offer them the space necessary of struggle and negotiation. I conclude that even though the Developmental State might be able to achieve many developmental goals, gender-equity is not one of them.

#### Introduction

The Developmental State (DS) is one of the rare success stories in international development practice. The Four Asian Tigers have utilized the DS model to achieve unprecedented rates of economic growth while maintaining an egalitarian income distribution (Önis, 1991). Ample literature theorizes and analyses the success of developmental states (Campos & Root 1996; Cheng, 2011; Doner, Ritchie, & Slater, 2005; Evans, 2007; Fine, 2000; Hillbom, 2011; Kim, 1999; Kohli, 1994; Meisenhelder, 1997; Mkandawire, 2001; Wade, 1998; White & Robinson, 1998). Unfortunately however, this large body of academic writing is completely gender blind (Rai, 2012; Truong, 1999). Surely, this critique applies to most theories of the state, but the lack of a gender-perspective is particularly noteworthy in case of the DS. It is important to analyse the gender implications of the DS precisely because it has been so economically successful, because it has been praised by such a range of institutions[1], and because policy-makers are actively encouraged to re-apply it elsewhere (Evans, 1998).

My study analyses the DS, and the DS in South Korea[2] in particular, from a gender perspective. Korea is a showcase example for the DS, and because it exhibits all the necessary characteristics, my analysis is more widely applicable to other developmental states. I start my argument by settling important definitional issues. I then discuss two specific features of the DS – namely its capitalist and its authoritarian dimension – to show why the logic of the DS is *incompatible* with the achievement of gender-equity. I conclude that, even though the economic success of the DS is undeniable, its structural form is incompatible with the achievement of a gender-equitable society. Importantly, in this essay I do not seek to establish causality. I am *not* trying to show that the DS gives rise to gender-inequality, but that it exacerbates already existing kinds of gender-inequality.

#### I – Conceptual Issues

Korea went through a remarkably successful economic transformation. In the 1960s Korea's GDP was smaller than

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that of newly independent Congo (Minns, 2001). Today, Korea's Human Development Index (HDI) is just below Iceland's, its GINI coefficient is among the most favourable (UNDP, 2011) and its GDP per capita is bigger than that of Portugal (World Economic Outlook Database, 2012). Korea's success is generally attributed to the DS model (Minns, 2001). Even though there is continuing disagreement about which institutional characteristics are most crucial to the DS, there is a shared conviction that a 'highly capable, coherent economic bureaucracy, closely connected but still independent of the business community' is of paramount importance (Evans, 1998: p.69). Furthermore, the 'weakening, flattening or control of civil society' is a 'general condition for the constitution and continuity of developmental states' (Leftwich, 1995: p.416). Moreover, all developmental states make use of a catch-up ideology (List, 2008; Rocha 2006) and have a singular commitment to economic growth (Fraser, 1994; Huff, 2001). Contrary to theorists of the DS, feminist theorists have established that state institutions have complex and sometimes contradictory agendas (Brown, 1992; Rhode, 1994). This means that even if, as I will show, the logic of developmental states is incompatible with the achievement of a gender-equitable society, this does not make them entirely 'bad for women'. Acknowledging that the DS, like any other state, has competing agendas makes it possible to concede that some forms of state power might be detrimental to women's interests<sup>[3]</sup> while others might be supportive.

For the purpose of this essay I will use my own definition of gender-equity. Feminists have associated gender-equity either with equality (meaning that women should be treated exactly like men) or difference (which means treating women differently in so far as they differ from men) (Bartlett & Kennedy, 1991). However, neither of these approaches is satisfactory. The equality approach presupposed 'the male as a norm' and the difference approach reinforces existing stereotypes and gender division (Fraser, 1994: p.594). Fraser (1994: p.595) therefore proposes to 'reconceptualise gender-equity as a complex, not a simple idea'. She holds that gender-equity cannot be identified with a single-value or norm but that it comprises various normative principles, which may have competing goals (Fraser, 1994; Fraser, 1995). My definition of gender-equity is not all encompassing and is specifically designed for the purpose of evaluating the DS. I define gender-equity as comprising equality of opportunity, capability and resources, in the public as well as the private sphere. Gender equity however also requires the move away from androcentric notions of social value.

This essay is based on the assumption that Korean society is unequal in terms of gender<sup>[4]</sup>. In contemporary Korea, women's position at the workplace is clearly inferior to that of men (Park, 2012). Korea has one of the world's highest wage gaps between men and women, fluctuating between 42% and 54% of male wage between 1972 and 1991 (Seguino, 2000) and reaching 70% in 2004 (OECD, 2005). The sectors with the greatest wage gaps also saw the biggest increase in female employment (Park, 2012). The overall picture of the workplace in Korea is that women predominantly occupy low status, low wage and labour intensive positions (Park, 1995). Women's position in the 'private sphere' is by no means less troublesome. Korea has the highest percentage of unpaid female family work in the world (Sung, 2003; Truong, 1999). Furthermore, patriarchal cultural practices play an important role in governing social interactions. Korea still is the country with the highest son preferences in the world (Truong, 1999) and sex-selective abortions are practiced frequently (Chun & Das Gupta, 2009). The family head system, which was only abolished in 2005 (Song, 2008) gave the oldest male in the family, the *hoju*, direct and officially recognized control over all other family members (Park, 2012). Therefore, due to the great disparities in access to resources and opportunities as well as androcentric notions of social value that govern society, I can say with certainty that Korean society is not gender-equitable.

## II – The Capitalist State

In the following sections I will discuss two aspects of the DS, which are incompatible with the achievement of gender-equity. In this section I analyse how the capitalist dimension of the DS, is detrimental to women. The DS in Korea has a deep ideological commitment to economic growth and catching-up with the West (Huff, 2001; Önis, 1991). All developmental states have achieved this goal through export-led industrialization (ELI) (Stubbs, 1999). Therefore, rather than analysing capitalist development in general, and how it maintains or exacerbates women's subordination (Elson & Pearson, 1980; Fox, 1993; Jaquette, 1982; Lim, 1990; Thomas, 1988), I focus my discussion on the specific kind of capitalist development utilized by developmental states, namely ELI.

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The position that capitalist development in the form of ELI is detrimental to women is not universally advocated in the literature (Park, 2012). Modernization theorists for example, assume that any form of capitalist development, including ELI, diffuses modern values and encourages egalitarianism, which undermines patriarchy (Eisenstadt, 1963; Inkeles & Smith, 1974). These modernization theorists also hold that, due to the increased access to capital and technology, women will acquire productive skills and will become more independent. The modernization literature is not completely mistaken; women's status has clearly improved in the past 40 years. But, as I have shown in my discussion above, modernity has not done away with tradition in Korea—as modernization theory predicts. Neo-Confucian values of women's subordination still play an important role in contemporary society (Park, 2012), and even though women's access to resources has improved, it is far from being equal. I will now move on to show how the achievement of economic growth itself, which in case of the DS is achieved through ELI, is ultimately detrimental to women.

Korea's economic development rests on labour-intensive ELI and the competitive advantage of being able to mobilize cheap labour. Large numbers of unskilled women working in so-called 'female manufacturing industries'[5] produce textiles, clothing, rubber and electronic goods which drive Korea's economic growth (Park, 2012). Most women working in these industries do so under 'flexible conditions'—meaning that their wages are low and their job security and working conditions lamentable. This process of large-scale female recruitment under 'flexible conditions' has been called 'feminization of the global workforce' (Elias, 2007). This feminization is however not simply reducible to bad working conditions. Employers and state actors are convinced that hiring women will increase productivity and this assessment depends on certain qualities associated with women workers (Caraway, 2005). Women are expected to be docile, nimble fingered and psychologically suitable for the monotonous work required by ELI (Elias, 2007; Salzinger 2003). The fact that state actors, employers as well as society at large, directly associate women workers with these qualities makes them appear unsuitable for higher status work (Elias, 2007) and therefore creates new kinds of gender-inequality (Pearson, 1998).

As I have shown, ELI reinforces gender-inequality (because women are directly recruited to work in lamentable conditions and receive low wages) and creates new kinds of inequality (because women workers are directly associated with low status work). My analysis is consistent with studies showing that economic development in Korea did not bring the benefits promised by modernization theory (Park, 2012). Importantly, we need to keep in mind that even though gender-inequality is created and reinforced by and in firms in the ELI industry, the DS is to be held responsible. The DS plays an active role in forging and maintaining gender-relations of which these firms can take advantage (Elias, 2007; Elias, 2005) and the DS is the main driver of ELI in the first place. Therefore, due to this export-oriented capitalist dimension, the logic of the DS is incompatible with a gender-equitable society.

## III – The Authoritarian State

In this section I discuss why the authoritarian dimension of the DS is detrimental to women. A 'weak and subordinate civil society' (p.405) is one of Leftwich's (1995) six defining characteristics of the DS. Before democratization, the DS in Korea suppressed civil society in several ways. For example, freedom of speech and of the press were severely restricted and labour unions and other representative organizations were banned (Leftwich, 1995). The state also intervened aggressively in people's reproductive behaviour by 'promoting' contraception, abortion and sterilization (Chun & Das Gupta, 2009; Westoff, 2012). Civil society theorists (Biekart, 1999; Van Rooy 1998; White 1994) have barely engaged with questions of gender, and similarly, most feminists do not contribute to the civil society literature. Given this lack of 'cross-border dialogue' (Howell, 2007) I will analyse the few existing studies to show that the question of whether or not the suppression civil society is in women's interests is a complex one, the answer to which depends on the kind of state to which civil society relates.

I employ a broad definition of civil society offered by White (1994, as cited in Hassim & Gouws, 1998) who defines it as 'an intermediate associational realm between states and family populated by organisation which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interest and values' (p.55). Civil society has a strong emancipatory potential, of which women activists frequently make use (Howell, 2007). Participation in informal organizations helps women with becoming politically active (Gruber & Throm, 2012) and equips them with the skills and confidence necessary for participating in state

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institutions (Cornwall & Goetz, 2005: p.788). An active and strong civil society is particularly important to women when formal state institutions are male dominated (Gruber & Throm, 2012). Civil society however also has a dangerous side. It can be an arena where gendered norms and practices are reproduced and acted out, and where conservative ideologies can limit or prohibit women's participation (Gruber & Throm, 2012).

In summary, civil society is Janus faced for women and other groups. It can provide space for struggle and negotiation but it can also be oppressive and threatening (Rai, 2012). Therefore, suppression of civil society, as practiced by the DS, can be in women's interest *if* the state offers them the space necessary for struggle and negotiation (Rai, 2012). The DS however does *not* provide this space for two reasons. Firstly, as argued by Fraser (2009), in the DS ideas of social inclusion and equity are interpreted solely in a class-centric manner. This focus on class equality (which is based on a commitment to economic growth), combined with the technocratic managerial ethos of the DS, makes equity a depoliticized matter and does not leave any space for the articulation of gender injustices through formal state institutions (Fraser, 2009). Secondly, the literature stresses that civil society is particularly important to women when formal politics is male dominated (Howell, 2007). All developmental states have had authoritarian and militaristic governments, particularly at early stages of development (Slater, 2006). This made military experience of fundamental importance for politics (Park, 2012). Women were however unable to be a part of the military for cultural reasons (Park, 2012) and this intensified women's exclusion from party politics. Therefore the weakening and suppression of civil society is particularly detrimental to women in the DS, because (1) the state does not leave any space for the articulation of gender-injustices and (2) because formal politics is very male dominated. Surely, a strong civil society could still potentially be dangerous to women and, much like the DS, largely leave no space for the articulation of women's interests. However, in this respect we need to concede that civil society is also an educative space. As Cornwall and Goetz (2005) argue, women can learn important skills by participating in civil society organization. Therefore, in a situation where civil society is flourishing, women have the chance to learn the skills necessary for collective action and will be able to mobilize against conservative forces in civil society.

With regards to Korea, we need to address the point that the country did democratize in 1987 and that the relationship between state and civil society was significantly altered (Minns, 2001). The KWAU (Korean Women's Association United) gained political power through democratization and made important advances on women's issues (Kim & Kim, 2011). However, I believe that Korea's democratic transition is only of marginal importance to my discussion for two reasons. Firstly, even if Korea eventually democratized, Leftwich's claim that the suppression of civil society is necessary for the functioning of the DS is confirmed by the fact that the DS in Korea was extremely authoritarian in the preceding twenty-year period. Secondly, it is debateable whether Korea could still be called a DS after 1987.[6] In this section I argue that the suppression of civil society, which is necessary at least at one stage of the DS, will be detrimental to women. This is because (1) the state operates on a definition of equality, which does not leave space for the articulation of gender injustices, and because (2) formal politics is particularly male dominated.

## Conclusion

In this essay I have shown that the logic of the DS is incompatible with the achievement of gender-equity. This is because two structural features of the DS, namely its capitalist and its authoritarian dimension, are detrimental to women. Surely, my discussion, which is the first to analyse the DS from a gender perspective will need further academic review and consideration. It is probable that other features of the DS, which I did not have the space to discuss, are similarly problematic for the achievement of gender-equity. In addition the following questions remain unanswered: Can we really generalize my analysis of Korea to all other developmental states? Is it negligible that the logic of the DS is incompatible with gender-equity, given that it is so successful in other areas and gender-equity is simply not as important in comparison? Can we operate a 'growth now and gender-equity later' strategy? Can we alter the DS in ways that make it compatible with gender-equity? Even though I have not been able to engage with these issues, I hope that further studies will do so.

Importantly, in this essay I did not attempt to establish causality. My aim was *not* to show that the DS causes gender-inequality. The possibility that gender-inequality is simply culturally rooted in East Asian society and is *completely unrelated* to the DS still remains. However, I believe that this proposition is improbable. I have shown ways in which

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the DS exacerbates *already existing* kinds of gender-inequality. Therefore, even if the DS is not the sole factor, it does make a significant contribute to creating and maintain gender-inequality. I have tried to show that the DS is not a silver bullet for all the problems of developing countries. Developmental states might be able to achieve many things – but gender-equity is not one of them.

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Önis, Z. (1991). The Logic of the Developmental State. *Comparative Politics*, 24(1), 109–126.

[1] For example the World Bank (Page, 1994), the IMF (Sarel, 1995), or the OECD (2011). [2] Thereafter Korea. [3] Even though I refer to the 'status' or 'interests' of women in this essay, this does not mean that I assume that women are a homogenous group with unitary concerns. Gender is always mediated by other factors, such as race, ethnicity, class, or sexual orientation (Goetz, 1998; Rhode, 1994; Thomas, 1988). Therefore, when I refer to 'women' one needs to understand that their experiences and opportunities will vary considerably. [4] Even though I cannot discuss this fact any further, similar kinds of gender-inequality can be observed in other developmental states in South East Asia (see Berik (2000) for Taiwan; Lee (1998) for Singapore; Cheung (1997) for Hong Kong) [5] This term refers to industries where more than half of the workforce is female. [6] See (Minns, 2001), Wong (2005) or Leftwich (1995). —

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