



Film Review

Des Femmes et Des Hommes—A Missed Opportunity

Director Frédérique Bedos

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Director Frédérique Bedos' film *Des Femmes et Des Hommes*, shown worldwide to mark International Women's Day 2017, takes viewers around the world to hear from highly-placed women experts on the plight of women globally and the need for gender equality. Bedos notes, at the beginning of her 2014 film, that she was inspired to make the film in response to then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's statement that women's rights have suffered setbacks in the years since the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were established, which in turn has impeded achievement of those goals.

In a speech to mark International Women's Day in 2014, Ban Ki-moon said, "Throughout the world, discrimination against women and girls is rampant, and in some cases getting worse." The UN Head, almost a week later in his report to the 58th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, shed further light on the global state of the world's women. He prefaced his report by stating, "Countries reported that the persistence of deeply entrenched discriminatory social norms, stereotypes and practices that hold back progress on gender equality remain a significant challenge. In several countries, discriminatory or inadequate laws impede the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals by entrenching the lower status of women in the family, restricting women's access to productive resources such as land or failing to criminalize violence against women. "

He then went on to give details of various countries' efforts and failures to improve the situation of their women globally. Herein lies the missed opportunity for Bedos' film. Bedos could have mined the UN head's report for leads to real-world situations that she could have documented to "show not tell" in direct and concrete terms how concerted efforts have failed to improve the lot of women during the years of the MDGs. Indeed, Ban Ki-moon's report contains numerous specific references to government initiatives that Bedos could have investigated, as any seasoned journalist would have, to explore the tragic reality that, in too many countries, women's lives have not improved since the MDGs, as well as to provide insights as to the reasons for this failure.

Instead, Bedos frames the film's exploration of this subject by beginning with a discussion of why gender equality is so important to the welfare of all human beings. This narrative is propelled through interviews with upwards of nine women, seven of whom occupy positions of power and decision-making in various fields such as research, business, film, and development. The interviewees included the executive director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, and an FAO expert, both of whom provide some thought-provoking statistics and facts on the subject. Bedos then turns to considering the evidence in support of Ban Ki-moon's statement, as well as possible solutions, by interviewing an array of high-profile professional women from around the world, including Nicole Ameline, president of the Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women; the CEO of Artémis, Patricia Barbizet, often described as one of the most powerful businesswomen in Europe; an Oxford University academic, Dr. Rama Mani; the prominent woman fashion editor from China, Hung Huang; the woman founder of Oxford Research Group, Scilla Elworthy; a British-Sudanese film-maker; and two international women journalists who were the target of rapists while on foreign assignment, among others.

However, in discussing the issue of gender inequality and potential solutions, the women experts rehearse much of what has been said already on the topic: the greater success of organisations where women share leadership positions, the need for laws to empower women, the grave demographic imbalances caused by the mass murder of female foetuses, and so on.

The film is, therefore, a good restatement of issues facing women around the world and paints a clear picture of why women's rights are human rights; it would be useful to general audiences not very familiar with the topic since it does deal with fundamental issues. Unfortunately, for policy-makers and activists already fully engaged with and aware of the issues, it serves up little new knowledge on which to base action, whereas reviewing the latest efforts under the MDGs to achieve gender parity may have provided new insights.

Alternatively, the film could have used the opportunity to ask the assembled experts to deliberate on why these efforts have not yielded the expected results. Indeed, such an engagement would have been an ideal opportunity to gain original and interesting insights.

Similarly, no attempt was made to analyse the factors which contribute to women's success in spite of them inhabiting and working within entrenched male hierarchical and patriarchal systems. An inquiry into the lives of women who nonetheless succeed in achieving a measure of autonomy and self-actualisation without overt confrontation would have provided a productive space to unpack another dimension of women's navigating patriarchy in innovative ways. The fact that more Saudi women than Saudi men attend university, with a significant number studying at universities outside of Saudi Arabia, is a case in point. Such women have an intimate understanding of the workings of deep-rooted systems of patriarchy, and they may represent repositories of knowledge on achieving self-fulfilment in the face of entrenched gender inequity.

Such insights would also have relieved the "woman is victim" theme that dominates so much discourse on gender and development. They would also have painted a more realistic picture of the challenges countries face in dealing with gender inequality than that presented by the somewhat, in my view, over-the-top discussion by the Jungian analyst who spoke of the 25,000 years before patriarchy when women were worshipped as the Mother Goddess.

Her contribution seemed inappropriate for a number of reasons. For one, women are not seeking to be worshipped or a return to some supposedly matriarchal society. Further, even in the field of psychology, it is held that acquiring the tools to unlearn detrimental ways of thinking is always more productive than, and in some cases preferable to, spending time in the analysis of how that thinking came about. Finally, the analyst fails to identify how this historical scenario she describes can provide an enlightened solution to

women's present predicament. This analyst's contribution strengthened the overall impression that the film is somehow disconnected from reality.

Indeed, the film fails to depict in real terms the evidence supporting the thesis that discrimination against women has, in some cases, worsened since the establishment of the MDGs. While I see the value of an expert-oriented approach, the primary weakness of the film is the absence of women talking about the unyielding reality of gender discrimination and its consequences to their lives and the lives of their daughters. Interviews with ordinary women, like a sales girl or secretary or schoolteacher, would have provided insights as to how their lives have deteriorated since the MDGs were announced by the UN in 2000, but these are palpably lacking from this film.

The high-profile interviewees should certainly have been in a position to discuss what was lacking in policymakers' decision-making that contributed to this surprising fallout from the MDGs. Instead of doing so, the film provides a vehicle for showcasing some of the most privileged women in the world expounding on gender inequality, covering ground that has already been covered often before.

In contrast, journalistic investigation into the experiences of ordinary women designed to uncover the root causes of the deterioration in women's rights in our modern era may have contributed more usefully to finding solutions for tackling gender inequality.

It is interesting to note that Bedos' approach to *Des Femmes et Des Hommes* differs from her 2010 project *Imagine* which she describes as rooted in her family background, as one of about 20 adopted children from difficult backgrounds. In that project, Bedos said in an interview with France24 in 2013, she sought to shine the spotlight on ordinary people who were using original and creative solutions to help others. In this project, she created videos that highlighted innovative projects that helped handicapped people, prisoners, the indigent

and others. In the interview, Bedos said these films were created to highlight work done to build a better world together [“bâtir le meilleur ensemble”], with the emphasis on ordinary people finding solutions.

In contrast, this 2014 film missed a real opportunity to continue on the track of giving voice to ordinary women whose insights might best explain why women's rights are still very much a work in progress despite more than a century of calls for gender equality, and whose perspectives might have offered realistic solutions for advancing women's interests. And it fails to deliver on its thesis, to explore the then UN Secretary-General's statement that women's situations may have deteriorated rather than improved over the past decade or more. This film, although not very helpful to persons deeply knowledgeable about women's and gender issues and development work, is an ideal intervention for persons who are new to this area. Groups such as first year women/gender and development students or practitioners entering the field would find the content relevant, since it does present the fundamental issues and the challenges of working towards gender equity and equality.

