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# “Developing” Gender Equality: A Transnational Feminist Critique of International Development Theory and Practice

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## ABSTRACT

Gender equality is increasingly understood as fundamental to international development, despite how the field differs from feminism in its intellectual tradition and ultimate goals. However, legitimacy, gender and understandings of gender equality are transnational and not global modalities, and even the most well-meaning institutions are not absent from global power relations or individual subjectivities. Often located in the “West,” international development organizations frequently make assumptions shaped by Western hegemony and therefore reproduce the very inequalities they claim to address. I explore the overlaps and asymmetries between transnational feminism and the gender equality programs of international development organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank. These institutions and others like them reproduce hegemonic inequalities in three areas: first, imaginative geographies of power; second, understandings of gender and gendered subjects; and third, definitions of success in gender equality. For a truly transformative gender agenda, development organizations must recognize the politics of their locations, as well as the perhaps surprising extents and limits of transnational power and solidarity.

## INTRODUCTION

Can gender equality be “developed” abroad? Gender equality is increasingly understood as fundamental to international development,<sup>1</sup> despite how the field differs from feminism in its intellectual tradition and ultimate goals. Development organizations have produced substantive change and helped bring feminist thought into mainstream discourses. However, legitimacy, gender and understandings of gender equality are transnational and not global modalities, and even the most well-meaning institutions are not absent from global power relations or individual subjectivities. Often located in the “West,” international development organizations frequently make assumptions shaped by Western hegemony and therefore reproduce the very inequalities they claim to address.

I explore the overlaps and asymmetries between transnational feminism and the gender equality programs of international development organizations. I will examine UN Women, the United Nations gender equality branch, as well as gender programming in the World Bank, one of the largest international development organizations. I select these institutions due to their enormous funding and influence in the development space. I demonstrate how these institutions and others like them reproduce and reinforce hegemonic inequalities in three areas: first, imaginative geographies of power; second, understandings of gender and gendered subjects; and third,

<sup>1</sup> In this piece, I use “development” not in the normative or necessarily national economic sense but rather to denote the industry and organizations claiming to promote human welfare. Similarly, while I do use the categories of the “West” and “womanhood” due to limitations in language, I do so acknowledging their shortcomings and attempting to deconstruct their implications.

definitions of success in gender equality.

## IMAGINATIVE GEOGRAPHIES

International development discourses are predicated on and reify hegemonic imaginative geographies that make some places more legitimate and powerful than others. Marcus Power writes that international development involves the geopolitical imagination, which itself reflects the world political order (Power, 2003). That is, development discourses place certain spaces closer to others in a manner entirely related to ideology rather than physical geography. In practice, these geographies reify the discursive and material global hierarchies they claim to fight, impeding productive engagement and turning their assumptions into self-fulfilling prophesies.

International development relies on and reinforces conceptions of North-South and East-West dichotomies. Organizations such as the World Bank officially use “Global South” to denote poorer “developing” countries; meanwhile, the “West” is a ubiquitous term usually meaning wealthy nations in Western Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Singh Puri, 2010). The opposition between the “Global North” and the “Global South,” as well as the “West and the Rest” paradigm, are historical and ideological constructions rather than geographic realities. The same holds true even for specific regions such as the “Middle East,” which is similarly defined in contrast with the “West.” These axes are meaningless except in relation to themselves; the Global North does not exist without the needy and inferior Global South; nor does the Occident exist without the Orient. The arbitrariness of standard cartographies of identity is apparent when considering Latin America as a site

simultaneously Western in its physical location and “non-Western” in its place in global power structures and development discourses (Shohat & Stam, 1994). Nevertheless, these pseudo-geographical categorizations promote homogenizing and normative understandings of what the “West” and the “non-West” are and should be.

The rigid binary of the “West” and the “Rest” produces falsely homogeneous blocs that prevent true understanding and address of need. Grewal and Kaplan (1996) argue that the deeply constructed “Western” and “non-Western” binary cannot account for the complex positions of modernity. Dividing the world into two categories elides intra- and inter-national difference, within both the supposed “non-West” and the “West” itself. Homogenous categories prevent nuanced and productive engagement with the individual, communal and national subjectivities that also determine welfare. Moreover, focusing on the “non-West” as the exclusive subjects of poor governance and need suppresses discussions of difference and injustice within the “West.” Consequently, development’s assumed geographies fail to adequately promote welfare in both the “West” and the “Rest.” What’s more, these geographies further legitimize the “Rest’s” theoretical inferiority and material subordination.

Imagined geographies are deeply normative and deployed to justify neocolonial influence. These cartographic binaries do not contain equal players; instead, the supposedly developed “West” and “North” are the normative yardsticks by which the supposedly different, underdeveloped and inferior “East” and “South” are measured and to which they should aspire. This is an extension of colonial discourse, in which colonies needed to be “civilized” and “modernized” by the metropole (Grewal & Kaplan, 1996). Developmentalists often claim to seek equal self-determination across the globe and at least pay lip service to self rather than externally imposed “empowerment.” Nevertheless, their insistence on remedying the supposed inferiority of the “East” and the “South” with outside influence parallels colonial discourses and legitimates the global inequalities in epistemology and self-determination that they claim to even (Power, 2003).

“Development” practices for women’s rights also reinforce the material power undergirding these imaginative geographies. The representation of “non-Western” states as intrinsically misogynistic and uncivilized delegitimizes them in the international community and enables the application of “military humanitarianism” (Grewal, 2005). That is, women’s rights may be used to justify military intervention, as was the case in Afghanistan in 2001. Relatedly, women’s rights and other “good governance” metrics often constitute externally imposed conditions for aid (Clisby & Enderstein, 2017). However, the poorest countries are rarely consulted in the formulation of these standards or deemed adequate when measured against them. Accordingly, while intended as a form of pressure for equitable governance, in practice, aid conditionality translates to women’s rights reinforcing economic disparities between the alleged Global North and South.

These material and epistemological hierarchies along imagined geographic lines are damaging and hypocritical in their own right. They also are the foundation for development organizations’ ability to impose the hegemonic ideas and practices described in the remainder of this piece.

## GLOBAL GENDER AND GENDERED SUBJECTS

International development organizations counterproductively reinforce Western hegemony and gender inequalities in their understandings of gender and gendered subjects. For many international development organizations, “gender equality” and “women’s empowerment” are synonymous. That is, these organizations often focus exclusively on aiding “women” within a supposedly universal system of identity. For instance, in its “About Us” page, UN Women repeatedly stresses the status and “empowerment” of “women” but never defines womanhood or claims to target gender itself as an analytic category of power (UN Women, 2020). Focusing development on “women” hegemonically imposes reductive and sometimes inappropriate categories of identity while narrowing the scope for change.

The first issue is that understandings of gender are far from stable or universal. There is enormous variance in socially and individually contingent categorizations and understandings of gender. As María Lugones (2007) and many others note, dichotomous conceptualizations of sex ignore individuals whose bodies do not neatly fall into either traditional category, and the gender binary is a highly historically and spatially contingent construction often tied to violent imposition through colonial power. Similarly, on an individual level, gender may take on an infinite number of meanings depending on other aspects of one’s identity, as well as one’s personal history and subjectivity. Consequently, by relying on their own “Western” and often white understandings of womanhood, development organizations hegemonically impose categories of identity. In addition to a misalignment of specific categories, gender may not always be a politically salient identity. That is, those who these organizations understand as “women” may not understand themselves as gendered subjects as much as individuals defined by their families, communities or other axes of identity (Grewal, 2005). Demanding others conform to and mobilize along rigid and locally specific definitions of identity is a hegemonic practice that ignores local aspirations.

Focusing on “women” as recipients of development also reinforces reductive and misogynistic assumptions about gendered “female” subjects. Women are overrepresented in development messaging. Nandita Dogra (2011) finds that in one year of INGOs’ UK newspapers messages, 72% of people shown were women and children. This female overrepresentation constructs women as the primary objects of charity and care by the West in the feminization of poverty. Moreover, women are overwhelmingly represented as mothers, nurturers and victims – for instance, caring for children and waiting for food or medical aid (Dogra, 2011). These depictions project vulnerability, need and maternity in a manner that reinforces misogynistic notions of female fragility and lack of agency.

**“Focusing development on ‘women’ hegemonically imposes reductive and sometimes inappropriate categories of identity while narrowing the scope for change.”**

Reductive characterizations of male subjects within developmental discourses further reinforce female vulnerability while legitimizing interventionism and narrowing the scope of change. Within development spaces, non-Western men are either underrepresented or portrayed as a “problem” for non-Western women in a manner that legitimizes the “civilizing mission” of women’s empowerment through “saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak, 1988). It also ignores men as subjects that interact with and may be harmed by gender. Accordingly, these reductive categorizations of male gendered subjects further narrow the possibilities for transforming gender itself rather than only specific subjects and behaviors it produces.

### “SUCCESS” IN GENDER EQUALITY

Finally, international development organizations reinforce hegemony not only in their understandings of development environments and subjects, but also in their theories of change. These organizations impose processes and definitions of success that reproduce gendered economic and ideological oppression while ignoring local needs.

Many development organizations center on “Western” neoliberal economics as a central path for gender equality, despite it being a source of women’s subordination. Neoliberalism is generally understood as a political-economic approach favoring unregulated free-market capitalism, although the term has proliferated across non-economic disciplines (Venugopal, 2015). In the context of international development, neoliberalism is most closely associated with Washington Consensus policies such as privatization, trade liberalization and reduced state spending, although in recent years, the “post-Washington Consensus” also includes overtures towards equity and institution-building, implemented to varying effect (Cornwall et al., 2008).

Gender equality is often measured through women’s involvement in the public, market activity promoted by neoliberal economics. For example, the World Bank’s Gender Overview focuses almost exclusively on maternal health, women’s labor force participation, gender earning gaps, legal rights, access to financial institutions and gender-based violence (World Bank Group, 2020). However, market involvement is often neither wanted by women nor a perfect correlate with agency, protection and power (Biewener & Bacque, 2015). Instead of questioning what values are created in economics and for whom, development organizations support women’s integration into a supposedly “empowering” and “gender-blind” market. Further, analyses of women’s economic inclusion center on androcentric measures of wage labor, ignoring care work common among women (Aguinaga et al., 2013). While acknowledging that gendered divisions of labor, as well as the neglect of economies of care and reproductive labor, contribute to women’s economic subordination, the focus of women’s empowerment on participating in the market economy and publicly legible forms of wage labor reproduces a gendered capitalism rather than transforming it.

Neoliberal measures of “successful” women’s empowerment even outside of economics further reinforce misogynistic tropes and undermine the value of women’s rights. Gender equality is measured in many spheres with neoliberal language. For instance, the World Bank claims to “invest” in “endowments” of health and education

and presents the “business case” for gender equality, emphasizing outcomes assessments (World Bank Group, 2020). Occasionally, development discourses are deeply instrumental, seeking gender equality not as an end in itself but as a means of achieving other goals in environmental protection, children’s welfare and sustainable peace (Aguinaga et al., 2013). These arguments are usually predicated on and reinforce reductive assumptions that place women as fundamentally peaceful and nurturing, whether applied to children, the environment or to their country at large. Moreover, neoliberal language hinges the viability of women’s rights on their profitability, including in other spheres, rather than framing them as a non-negotiable necessity.

**“...the focus of women’s empowerment on participating in the market economy and publicly legible forms of wage labor reproduces a gendered capitalism rather than transforming it.”**

Even where local gender activists exist, many aid agencies ignore their mobilization in favor of policies that pre-determine women’s needs with mass-produced gender mainstreaming toolkits and checklists planned and implemented without local consultancy or consent (Clisby & Enderstein, 2017). The universal application of these Western-originated and standardized prescriptions can result in culturally inappropriate ideas that fail to meet local needs. For instance, several authors describe the case of Afghanistan, in which liberation from the Taliban did not result in the abandonment of burqas, understood by Western audiences as a symbol of ultimate gender-based repression (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Perhaps more harmfully, by only counting women’s involvement in the public sphere, aid programming ignored a great majority of rural Afghan women who might have benefitted more from investment in knowledge and skills development in the informal agricultural economy (Ganesh, 2017). Finally, the framework to support women’s rights in Afghanistan depended on and was subsumed by the very military apparatus that killed and injured thousands of Afghans every year (Chishti, 2020). Interrogating the deadly impact of military operations might have constituted a more significant way improve the lives of Afghan women – even if politically difficult.

### CONCLUSION

I have demonstrated that the influence of Western hegemony in international development reproduces inequalities, including those of geography, welfare and gender. Here, I must introduce certain caveats. While the language of development may be “Western”-centric in its assumptions and goals, there are cases where it has produced concrete improvements in human wellbeing, and it remains a powerful tool for the disenfranchised to assert their rights and needs (Grewal, 2005). Similarly, we do not wish to passively accept real violence and harm in the name of cultural relativism or rejecting Eurocentrism (Abu-Lughod, 2020). Accordingly, while we should critique

hegemonic ideology and practice while striving to acknowledge transnational power and to center local subjectivities, there are no simple binaries of useful vs. useless or right vs. wrong engagement.

Ultimately, international development is predicated on the tensions between universality and difference. UN Women's official song "One Woman," launched on International Women's Day 2013, claims that women across the world are "One Woman," sharing the same hopes, dreams and pain (UN Women, 2013). In transplanting their own ideologies and assumptions about legitimacy, welfare and gender, Western feminists assume a global female identity with a common agenda (Grewal, 2005). At the same time, development's *raison d'être* is for the "Global North" to address and improve the inferior and Other "Global South" in its own image. Accordingly, the agents of development project both universality and special, localized "Third World" difference. In the end, the global and the local are rarely absolute and always in dialogue. For a truly transformative gender agenda, development organizations must recognize the politics of their locations, as well as the perhaps surprising extents and limits of transnational power and solidarity.

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