Feminism is for Everybody, Except when It Isn’t: Contemporary Gender Theory and Oppression in Development

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A Brief Introduction to Feminist Perspectives

Feminism and the pursuit of gender equality, in all its complex and multifaceted glory, has been the target of a vast amount of criticism throughout history. With the push for global social and economic development in the modern age, the present day is no exception. Feminists are notoriously and sometimes undeservedly identified as a very vocal and inflammatory social group; the image that comes to mind for most in North America is the bra-burning feminists of the 1960s, though this is only one limited representation of a very diverse movement. Rising with passionate cries for diversification of this image are postcolonial feminists who openly criticize Western Feminism as rooted in dominant European and North American social thought, declaring that it is not and cannot be globally representative of all women or issues of gendered discrimination. Voices of middle- and upper-class white women are most prominent in mainstream contemporary feminism, which limits the agency and ability of women of colour to bring their stories to the table and ignores how the intersection of race & class contribute to significant differences in the manifestation of feminism’s form. This problematic hierarchy of female voices bleeds (whether intentionally or not) into the study and application of international development; the inherent position of economic and political power that many development projects stem from, particularly in Europe and North America, limits their ability to truly encompass and prioritize perspectives of women living in the countries and communities they so desire to help.

The crucial importance of the focus on gender dynamics in the developing world and how contextual awareness of feminist perspectives applies to development studies will be analyzed in this essay by presentation of case studies and critical feminist literature. First, traditional female roles and gender expectations will be examined, especially in developing agricultural economies. Second, the growing trend of women in positions of political power in developing countries, and the implications of this trend, will be addressed. Third, the axes of oppression faced by women in the developing world will be discussed, and how these axes affect their representation in the feminist movement. These components will form the basis of the argument that women in the Global South are underrepresented and misunderstood in modern Western feminism, and this lack of meaningful representation has potentially dire consequences in the push for social, political and economic development in these areas. It should be noted that this essay is not meant to encompass all aspects of the complex webs of feminism and development, nor is it meant to negate or speak over
different lived experiences of individual women in both the developed and developing world. It is simply one aspect of the important discussion on the form contemporary feminism takes in international development studies.

**Understanding Gender Roles and Agricultural Development**

Especially in the developing world, a genuine understanding of gender workloads, relations and norms is very important; development projects implemented by Western institutions often have overtly well-meaning goals but may have potential to increase stress and burden on already overworked women. Wrongful assumptions made by Western feminist theory can contribute to misinformed ideas about what is best for women and their diverse roles in agriculture work in developing countries. Interpretation of research from rural areas in Honduras, by Lauren Classen, and in India, by Dr. Elizabeth Finnis and G. Rajamma, can shed light on the complexities of this issue. Grasping the dynamics of gender roles through local ‘insider’ perspectives, and not preconceived ‘outsider’ notions of gender and oppression often espoused by Western feminism, can aid in the success of development projects and their incorporation of marginal groups.¹ This lesson from rural Honduras can also be applied elsewhere, as understanding social dynamics from within the society itself is key for development in any context.

The theme of gender and/as development, explored by Finnis, focuses on one example of this relationship between gender and its impact on the success of development initiatives; namely, the role of women in rural farming households in the Kolli Hills region of India.² In a time of rapid, globalized, and intensive agricultural change and economic development since the Green Revolution of the 1960s, many small-scale farmers in developing countries, including Honduras and India, are transitioning from subsistence farming to farming of hybridized seeds for supposed increased yields, or cash crops for income production.³ In the Kolli Hills, this means a change from growing traditional coarse grain food crops such as millet to growing crops like sweet cassava for market production, in part due to the devaluation of coarse grain crops on the market.⁴ For women in rural communities, whose contributions to agriculture are enormous and yet often chronically overlooked, there is frequently a double burden of household work and childcare on top of

2 Elizabeth Finnis, “‘Now it is an easy life’: Women’s accounts of cassava, millets, and labor in South India,” *Culture & Agriculture* 31, no. 2 (2009): 88.
3 Classen, “Opening participatory spaces”, 2405.
4 Finnis, "Now it is an easy life”, 89.
heavy manual labour on a farm with virtually zero mechanization. The switch from millet to cassava production means less time and energy spent by women processing millets for consumption as a primary food source, leaving more time for domestic work or other activities. In the context of the Kolli Hills region, the shift towards farming for industrial purposes may actually have specific positive local implications such as reduced manual labour and decreased stress on women’s gender roles. Nevertheless, one must be aware that there are additional aspects to be considered beyond these findings; the decline in coarse grain production in favour of cash crops like cassava can be seen as a detriment to regional food security, even while the ground level interpretation by the women within these contexts may view the switch as positive in terms of labour intensiveness.

This improvement in gender workloads based on economic development is very situation-specific, and continued research into different regional contexts for development and its impact on traditional gender roles is essential. As stated previously, understanding gender and its consequences for development is multifaceted and complex. An opposing position to Finnis’ findings of improved gender workloads can be found in research by G. Rajamma, a former Oxfam Policy Officer in Bangalore, India. In examining one individual woman’s lived experience in the Tumkur district of southern India, Rajamma concluded transitioning from subsistence farming to cash crop farming actually negatively impacted female workloads and widened the gender equality gap. Traditionally, most subsistence crops such as cereals and coarse grains were produced for the community’s own consumption, and labour was paid either in kind, with food and other goods, or less commonly in cash. With production of crops such as groundnut, cotton, and mulberry for profit on the market, the gap between male and female earnings has widened due to societal norms of males being able to demand a higher wage for farm labour. As well, real net income for farmers has not increased as predicted because in addition to the uncertainty of market prices, cash crops using industrialized hybrid seeds need more funding for capital inputs, as well as new technology and expensive pesticides to sustain them, which were not previously necessary for local subsistence crops. This testimony from women in the Tumkur district contradict Finnis’ findings from the Kolli Hills, saying they found they now have less time to fulfil other responsibilities because there is pressure to increase individual work time to generate maximum economic gains.

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5 Ibid, 90.
6 Finnis, “Now it is an easy life”, 90-91.
7 G. Rajamma, “Changing from Subsistence to Cash Cropping: Sakaramma’s Story,” Focus on Gender 1, no. 3 (1993), 21.
agricultural development than simply a supposed increase in income for people in the Global South, and every situation is contextual; what is beneficial to women in some areas may not confer the same advantages in other areas. Considerations of food security, gender workload implications, and societal appropriateness therefore need to be included in development initiatives that intend to create economic benefit for developing countries. Keeping this in mind, Western feminists must be aware there is a danger in generalizing female experiences in developing countries by assuming knowledge of contextual gender roles in order to promote new policies that will better the community or the nation ‘as a whole’. This need for diversification in understanding applies not only to agricultural development, but perhaps even more importantly to the realm of feminist politics. Dismantling the ‘patriarchal state’ and its antiquated construction of gender through inclusion of women across all social, economic, and racial groups is a lofty goal, and as detailed in the coming section, perhaps not quite as close within reach as it may seem.

**Feminist Politics and Representation in the Developing World**

True developmental change stems from engaging people in meaningful action at all levels of society, and yet access to leadership positions and participation in politics continues to be an issue for women in all countries of the world. As recently as 2013, women served as the head of government in only twenty countries and account for only 21.3 percent of parliamentarians around the world.  

Increasing the number of women in positions of political power is expected to have positive effects on women’s unity and political advocacy in both developed and developing countries. Since the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995, the implementation of gender quotas has been a popular method for developing countries to bring a greater number of women into political leadership roles. In an ideal world, “quotas encourage broader social and cultural changes, because they help to build support for women’s political action as well as encouraging changes in people’s perceptions about gender relations.” The question remains whether mandatory exposure to female politicians through gender quotas can really alter social norms of gender stereotypes and oppression. The other underlying assumption made by ardent supporters of gender quotas is that these female

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politicians will automatically subvert patriarchal norms. In fact, not all women are pro-feminism; many women strongly abide by androcentric and/or classist ideologies and values, or lack inclusion of diverse voices in their feminist approaches. In this sense, having women serve in these leadership roles can in fact have little political implication for the betterment of girls and women. This is especially concerning for the indigenous and the rural poor, who are often the most marginalized women in their communities and whose activism and agency is crucial for the politicization of gender issues.

The enduring political gender disparity in both developed nations and developing countries where women are legally entitled vote and run for public office can be seen as a consequence of voter and party bias and attitudes that favour male candidates. Results from a study in the West Bengal state of India, where one third of positions in each village council and one third of chief councillor positions across the state are reserved for women, have shown that villagers still prefer male leaders and have negatively biased prior assumptions on the effectiveness of female leaders, sometimes solely based on their gender if they have identical hypothetical political performance as a male leader. However, forced reservations of positions for women makes male villagers associate women with leadership even if they are not necessarily more sympathetic to the idea of female politicians as a whole, and “by giving voters a chance to learn about the effectiveness of women leaders, they have effectively improved women’s access to political office”. This mandatory exposure to female leaders can have positive impacts on the second generation of female politicians running for office, as women are more likely to stand for and win elected positions in councils where there has been a female councillor in previous elections, meaning negative stereotypes of female roles in the public and domestic spheres can be weakened. Something to bear in mind is that gender discrimination in West Bengal is considered less extreme than in some other Indian states; these results could be interpreted as a moderate success for women in the country as a whole but does not consider the experiences of women in other states and their access to political office.

Cultural and social outcomes of gender quotas in politics are rarely taken into account when evaluating their effectiveness; Western feminists and development theorists often dangerously assume that more

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13 Hassim, “Perverse consequences?” 212.
16 Ibid, 1533.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid, 1499-1500.
women in politics automatically means progress toward greater gender equality.  

This means that the influence of a greater number of female leaders in developing countries is often not actually being evaluated in terms of their impact on the rest of the diverse female population crossing both class and race lines. One aspect of this dilemma is elite capture, the phenomenon that women of higher social class most often hold positions of political power, leaving out voices of lower class or indigenous women. Supporters of political gender quotas cite the concept of critical mass as a motivator; even though discrimination and oppression may undermine the confidence of women to assert themselves, with greater numbers nonetheless comes a greater collective voice. However, the women who hold positions within local political groups may not be the best representatives for the majority of the female population in the developing world. Sacchet explains women need to be aware of gender inequalities and willing to include them in their advocacy and legislative efforts in order to truly provide a space for women to discuss gender issues, as well as connect their experiences to other areas of oppression. Overall, these examples of political access and representation can be brought back to this essay’s underlying argument; without a proper understanding of local context for women within communities in developing countries, their supposed ‘inclusion’ in progress for gender equality may be founded in nothing more than the assumption that one female voice can inclusively speak for all women.

Post-colonial Feminism and International Development

The silencing of certain voices in the contemporary feminism movement, extending beyond the political domain discussed previously, can be encapsulated in one thought-provoking quote from the notable feminist bell hooks:

All too frequently in the women’s movement it was assumed one could be free of sexist thinking by simply adopting the appropriate feminist rhetoric; it was further assumed that identifying oneself as oppressed freed one from being an oppressor.

Western schools of thought have traditionally dominated feminist discourse, contributing to women of colour having a historical mistrust of white women and their actions in development projects. In terms of

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19 Hassim, “Perverse consequences?”
20 Sacchet, “Beyond Numbers”, 370.
21 Ibid, 375-376.
22 Ibid, 377.
23 bell hooks, Feminist theory from margin to centre (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 8-9.
intersections of racial oppression in development studies, white women often assume that they have the knowledge and obligation to aid ‘other’ women, whether these women need or want it.\textsuperscript{24} The inherent racial privilege of white feminists, regardless of other types of oppression they may experience, can lead to the negation of voices of women of colour in feminist discourse if this privilege is not acknowledged and no effort is made to understand and subvert this dynamic. Even in terms of women of colour in positions of political power in the developing world, some are instructed in or influenced by the dominant Western feminist dialogue, perpetuating this racist and classist oppression.

In development discourse especially, women of colour have a tendency to be treated as a homogenous uniform category instead of individuals with their own diverse experiences involving abuse across boundaries of class and ethnicity as well as gender. This creates the stereotype of a ‘Third World Woman’ that is caught in an extremely oppressive and limiting environment. Dr. Cheryl McEwan elaborates:

\begin{quote}
Feminist writings about women in the South, therefore, risk falling into the trap of cultural essentialism. The resulting portraits of ‘Western women’, ‘Third World Women’, ‘African women’, ‘Indian women’, ‘Muslim women’, ‘post-communist women’, or the like, as well as the picture of the ‘cultures’ that are attributed to these various groups of women, often remain fundamentally essentialist.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

This means it is necessary to take a more holistic view of women’s experiences and challenges to identify contextual and systemic factors such as race and class barriers that may be ignored otherwise.\textsuperscript{26} This ‘holistic view’ can nevertheless be a double-edged sword; identifying intersection of oppression is critical, but one must be careful to avoid generalizations of these intersections, because the experiences of an individual cannot be extrapolated to assume the experiences of a community. Believing that one individual can be representative of an entire diverse group can have damaging implications, as seen earlier in the discussion of female politicians and the representation of their constituents. Postcolonial feminism, which demands consideration of the ‘other’ non-dominant and non-Western perspective, has made important contributions to unpacking development discourse and the power dynamics that have very real

\textsuperscript{26} McEwan, “Intersections and dilemmas”, 96.
implications for all people. The fight for women’s human rights cannot be removed from the struggles for a better life by both men and women in developing societies where poverty and a lack of freedom and democratic norms is evident. It must be clarified that simply acknowledging these race and class dynamics is not enough; actively engaging these voices in the global feminist movement is a hurdle that needs to be overcome if the field of development is to be truly inclusive and progressive.

Feminism for the Future

While certain issues such as misogyny, sexual exploitation, and gender oppression may unite women cross-culturally, issues of power, race, class, and other oppression cannot be ignored. In analyzing opposing perspectives on various dimensions of gender and development, the conclusion can be drawn that women in developing world, especially women of colour, are continually misrepresented by the ‘umbrella’ of Western feminism, and that this has a negative impact on overarching development goals such as economic growth and social equality. The ignorance of the variety of traditional female roles in many developing countries, both those in the home and in agricultural labour, tends to limit the scope and success of development projects. Additionally, the connection between a greater number of women in political power in these countries and the tangible impacts on policy change for gender equality is tenuous; to cite an example from two African nations, “it could be argued that in both Uganda and Rwanda, women’s representation provided a kind of alibi for the progressive, ‘democratic’ nature of new governments that at their core nevertheless remained authoritarian.” Finally, the language of discourse in both development and feminist studies can homogenize racial and cultural diversity within both disciplines, ignoring different sources of oppression and the ways people experiencing these struggles endeavour to overcome them.

As Western feminism attempts to deliver ‘change’ to women in the developing world, Jawad Syed and Faiza Ali remind us of a few choice words from American journalist Jessica Hoffman’s open letter to white feminists:

27 Ibid, 97-98.
29 Finnis, “Now it is an easy life”, 91.
30 Hassim, “Perverse consequences?”, 223.
If feminism is about social change, white feminism—a feminism of assimilation, of gentle reform and of strengthening the institutions that are instrumental to economic exploitation and white supremacy, of ignorance and appropriation of the work of feminists of colour—is an oxymoron.\textsuperscript{31}

In closing, Western feminism is simply another form of local knowledge that is limited by its privileges and position in the global community. In order to work effectively in for the future of the development field, feminism needs to allow for more disparate voices among women of all race, class, economic, social, and cultural backgrounds.

Bibliography


