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WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT OR EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN? EXAMINING THE IMPLICATIONS OF ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMMING

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates how international development institutions often overlook the subjective lived experiences of the women they are trying to help. It examines the prevailing economic perspectives on the relationship between fertility rates and poverty, and explores how within a neoliberal economic system, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) often prioritize economic empowerment programming over social- and political empowerment projects. This paper then examines economic empowerment programs implemented by NGOs in Syrian refugee camps in Jordan, to investigate the implications of placing the burden of poverty in “third world” countries on women and their wombs. Throughout, the paper questions whether encouraging women to join the workforce is truly the best way to promote women’s empowerment.

“You have to get into it to see how much development is an alibi for exploitation, how much it’s a scam: the responsibility for the entire world’s ills is between the legs of the poorest women of the South.”¹

— Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in an interview after the Cairo UN Conference on Population and Development in 1994

Notes

¹ Nermeen Shaikh, “Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,” in *The Present as History: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Global Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 194.

Eugenics and the Economics of Population and Poverty

The debate surrounding the impact of fertility and population growth on the economy has influenced how governments and development-minded nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) approach sexual and reproductive health in the modern era. The relationship between fertility and the economy has also shaped the way that development NGOs seeking to “empower” women prioritize programs that focus on economic empowerment. Since the time of Thomas Malthus—eighteenth-century economist who theorized that food production would be unable to keep up with population growth, leading to devastating food shortages—economists have debated the link and causality between population growth and poverty within a development context.² These debates have a dark history of racist, sexist, and classist forced-sterilization and population-control programs. Many of the most well known and celebrated birth control advocates, including Marie Stopes and Margaret Sanger, expressed eugenic sentiments on the subjects of racial purity and mental hygiene.³ During the colonial period, the British eugenics movement spread and implanted itself abroad, sparking the establishment of new eugenics societies and organizations. These organizations advocated for poor women to use contraception or be sterilized in order to create a more fit and hygienic population—a population that would lift “underdeveloped” countries out of poverty.⁴ This history shows that discussions of population growth and fertility rates in impoverished parts of the world are innately racialized and gendered. Furthermore, eugenic ideas about the fertility of women in “developing countries” have been appropriated within the development context, framing women as overly fecund and as potential barriers to economic development.

Since the colonial era, advocating for the use of contraceptives has been a key part of fighting “third world” poverty within a development framework. Similar population-control programs advocated for the sterilization of disabled individuals

² Donald Gunn MacRae, “Thomas Malthus: English Economist and Demographer,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last modified April 5, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-Malthus>.

³ Zoe Williams, “Marie Stopes: A Turbo-Darwinist Ranter, but Right about Birth Control,” *Guardian*, September 2, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2011/sep/02/marie-stopes-right-birth-control>; Jennifer Latson, “Margaret Sanger, Race and Eugenics: A Complicated History,” *Time*, October 14, 2016, <http://time.com/4081760/margaret-sanger-history-eugenics/>.

⁴ Chloe Campbell, “Eugenics in Colonial Kenya,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, ed. Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2018), 229, <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195373141.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780195373141-e-17>.

and women of color in the United States.⁵ Before we delve into the more recent economic theory surrounding fertility and economic development, we therefore must recognize the damage that forced sterilization and coercive family-planning techniques have done in the name of combating poverty. This history should remind us to question exactly whom sexual- and reproductive-health programs are designed to benefit, and whether those programs take into account the lived experiences of the women they are supposed to serve.

Most economists agree that as incomes increase, fertility rates decrease; as people earn more money, they have fewer children.⁶ No such consensus exists, however, on whether “reduced fertility improve[s] the economic prospects of families and societies.”⁷ Those who followed the teachings of Malthus believed that high fertility rates would keep states stuck in conditions of “underdevelopment” and poverty; only under conditions of slow population growth could states prosper, they believed.⁸

After World War II, a neo-Malthusian school of thought gained prominence, arguing that high rates of population growth damage the potential for development. These economists believed that to promote economic development, states should implement population-control policies.⁹ A 1986 report released by the US National Research Council, however, argued that although high fertility rates do have the potential to limit economic development, the extent is not so great as the neo-Malthusians had claimed. The report stated that population growth is only one of the many conditions that affect development and that when it does, the effects are usually weak.¹⁰

Since the publication of this influential report, other development economists, such as David Bloom and David Canning, have examined the impact of population growth and demographic change on the economy.¹¹ They theorize that as a state’s fertility rates decrease, more of the state’s population falls between

⁵ “Black Genocide,” *American Experience*, PBS, accessed April 30, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/pill-black-genocide/>.

⁶ Steven W. Sinding, “Population, Poverty and Economic Development,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* 364, no. 1532 (October 27, 2009): 3023, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2009.0145>.

⁷ Sinding, “Population,” 3023.

⁸ Sinding, “Population,” 3024.

⁹ Sinding, “Population,” 3024.

¹⁰ Sinding, “Population,” 3024.

¹¹ David E. Bloom and David Canning, “Booms, Busts, and Echoes: How the Biggest Demographic Upheaval in History Is Affecting Global Development,” *Finance and Development* 43, no. 3 (September 2006), <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2006/09/bloom.htm>.

the ages of 15 and 65 years. This “demographic bonus” means that more of the population can participate in the workforce and less of the population is reliant on social services.¹² In his article “Population, Poverty and Economic Development,” Steven W. Sinding explains that, “assuming countries also pursue sensible pro-growth economic policies, the demographic bonus ought to translate into a jump in income per capita.”¹³ Sinding therefore argues for fertility-control programs to be integrated into states’ comprehensive economic development plans¹⁴ and that decreasing fertility will not solve the issue of poverty on its own but may be “a necessary condition” of economic growth.¹⁵

Economists have long framed women and their ability to reproduce as a primary burden of economic development. Responsibility for a successful global future is placed, in part, on the backs—or in the wombs—of women in the “third world.” Even though Sinding argues that countries must implement projects other than population control to promote development, women are still constructed as opportunities for economic growth. Speaking years after the 1994 Cairo UN Conference on Population and Development, Gayatri Spivak reflected,

It was so clear that everybody, some in a benevolent way, some in a hardly disguised malevolent way, were thinking to stop poor Third World women from having children would save all the world’s problems. ... The fact that one Euro-American child consumes 183 times what one Third World child consumes was never thought of, much less articulated.¹⁶

It is easy to speak of women in the detached theoretical language of economics, but we must remember that the essentializing of women by NGOs and governments alike as baby-makers has tangible consequences. It affects the programs that NGOs adopt and presents women who have many children as the primary reason their families remain in poverty. This view of the relationship between reproduction and poverty has led many NGOs to overlook the importance of the unpaid care work involved in birthing and raising children in favor of

¹² Sinding, “Population,” 3024.

¹³ Sinding, “Population,” 3024.

¹⁴ Sinding, “Population,” 3030.

¹⁵ Sinding, “Population,” 3030.

¹⁶ Shaikh, “Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,” 194.

programs that encourage women to find paid work outside the home. Framing women's reproductive behavior as an economic tool to fight poverty has the dangerous consequence of erasing the desires and life choices of individual women.

We should note that NGOs' fixation on economic development is part of the much larger neoliberal system within which Western NGOs operate on the global stage. Much simplified, neoliberal ideology celebrates the free market and holds that maintaining economic growth is the best way to "achieve human progress."¹⁷ As would be expected in a free-market capitalist system, NGOs depend on donors for funding to carry out their programming. Often, these funders dictate how the NGOs spend their money and craft their development agendas.¹⁸ Despite the separation from governments indicated by their name, NGOs do receive funding from governments and are hired as subcontractors by local governments.¹⁹ This means that NGOs must account for the money they receive in documentable and quantifiable ways, as well as demonstrate that their programs align with the specified interests of the states that fund them.²⁰ In his article "NGOs and Western Hegemony: Causes for Concern and Ideas for Change," Glen W. Wright argues that this accountability to governments has led NGOs to be less accountable to the people who are supposed to be benefiting from their services.²¹

As Wright points out, Western standards of accountability privilege "numbers, statistics, and efficiency over the qualitative aspects of development" that might take into account local cultures and norms.²² He argues that NGOs may avoid implementing programming that will not yield a short-term measurable result; instead, they opt for setting goals that are easier to measure, "at the expense of a more holistic approach."²³ For example, an NGO funded by the World Bank and the US government might be particularly attracted to programs that aim to increase employment and workforce participation or to decrease fertility rates by

¹⁷ Nicola Smith, "Neoliberalism," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed April 30, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/neoliberalism>.

¹⁸ Nidhi Srinivas, "Against NGOs? A Critical Perspective on Nongovernmental Action," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (August 1, 2009): 619, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764009334308>.

¹⁹ James Petras, "NGOs: In the Service of Imperialism," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 29, no. 4 (January 1999): 433, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472339980000221>.

²⁰ Glen W. Wright, "NGOs and Western Hegemony: Causes for Concern and Ideas for Change," *Development in Practice* 22, no. 1 (February 1, 2012): 126, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2012.634230>.

²¹ Wright, "NGOs and Western Hegemony," 126.

²² Wright, "NGOs and Western Hegemony," 126.

²³ Wright, "NGOs and Western Hegemony," 126.

preventing unwanted pregnancies. This is not to say that these are not worthy causes, but focusing on quantitative results may lead this NGO to overlook the lived experiences, shaped by culture and society, of the people it intends to serve. The programs that lend themselves to these quantitative results may not align with the needs and desires of the target population.

International Development and Women's Empowerment

The global neoliberal system also shapes the lens through which many NGOs view empowerment. Their accountability to governments and other capitalist institutions dictates the areas in which they attempt to empower people in “third world” nations. NGOs tend to focus more on local systems of oppression and disempowerment than on global ones. For example, even though “the male dominated elite world of IMF [International Monetary Fund] privatizations, multinational corporations and local landlords” could certainly be accused of exploiting poor men and women in the “third world,” NGOs more often focus on the “‘patriarchy’ in the household, family violence, divorce, [and] family planning.”²⁴ Of course, exploitation should be condemned no matter where it takes place, but it is crucial to note what kinds of disempowerment and exploitation NGOs fixate upon and which they overlook. As James Petras asserts in his article “NGOs: In the Service of Imperialism,” in their programs to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment, NGOs ignore the areas in which white men are the oppressors and focus instead on local systems of oppression in which “the exploited and impoverished male worker/peasant emerges as the main villain.”²⁵ The programs that attempt to empower women economically by helping them join the workforce and earn money for their families, and thereby promote the economic growth of the state, are therefore often not addressing the systemic exploitation of workers within a free market economy. While some women may feel empowered by working outside the home, other women may feel less empowered in low-wage positions, exploited by wealthy business owners, than they were at home, taking care of their children.

²⁴ Petras, “NGOs,” 436; for more information about the human rights issues associated with privatization, see Philip Alston, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights,” United Nations General Assembly (September 26, 2018), https://srpoverty.org.files.wordpress.com/2018/10/a_73_396-sr-on-extreme-poverty-privatization.pdf.

²⁵ Petras, “NGOs,” 436.

That women's empowerment is characterized as an effective instrument of development can also help us investigate the divide between the rhetoric of NGOs and the subjective experience of their beneficiaries. The discussions surrounding empowerment as a goal of NGO programming demonstrate a neoliberal focus on economic empowerment and economic productivity. Rather than advocating for a holistic approach to improving women's overall well-being, NGOs increasingly pursue market-led growth in the communities and societies in which they operate.²⁶ Many NGOs appeal to their donors by exalting the economic benefits of empowering women. They argue that if a country's women learn vocational skills and join the workforce, the country will be able to grow its economy and reap considerable material benefits.²⁷ Many of the projects intended to economically empower women do not take women's long-term needs into consideration, however. For example, some programs provide short-term employment for women to mitigate the impact of male unemployment on the economy.²⁸ Economic empowerment programs may also inadvertently put women at risk of domestic violence from men who feel threatened or emasculated by women's increased economic power.²⁹ NGOs must place value on the lived experiences of women rather than on the assumption that entering the workforce will always improve women's lives, to better understand the unintended consequences of their programs.³⁰

As noted before, viewing women in the "developing world" as economic opportunities rather than as human beings who deserve to live fulfilling and healthy lives is pervasive in international development rhetoric. The World Bank has channeled this sentiment into a pithy slogan that accompanies many of its gender-

²⁶ Rosalind Eyben and Rebecca Napier-Moore, "Choosing Words with Care? Shifting Meanings of Women's Empowerment in International Development," *Third World Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (March 1, 2009): 296, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590802681066>.

²⁷ Eyben and Napier-Moore, "Choosing Words with Care," 294.

²⁸ Nandita Dogra, "The Mixed Metaphor of 'Third World Woman': Gendered Representations by International Development NGOs," *Third World Quarterly*, 32, no. 2 (March 30, 2011): 340, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2011.560472>.

²⁹ Chilla Bulbeck, "Hailing the 'Authentic Other': Constructing the Third World Woman as Aid Recipient in Donor NGO Agendas," in *Sustainable Feminisms*, ed. Sonita Sarker, vol. 11, *Advances in Gender Research* (Bingley, United Kingdom: Emerald Group Publishing, 2007), 59–73, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1529-2126\(07\)11004-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1529-2126(07)11004-3).

³⁰ For more information about the intersection of economic empowerment and domestic violence, see Mara Bolis and Christine Hughes, "Women's Economic Empowerment and Domestic Violence," Oxfam, N.d., https://www.oxfamamerica.org/static/media/files/Womens_Empowerment_and_Domestic_Violence_-_Boris_Hughes_hX7LscW.pdf.

equality and women's empowerment plans: "The empowerment of women is smart economics."³¹ Rosalind Eyben and Rebecca Napier-Moore report in their article "Choosing Words with Care? Shifting Meanings of Women's Empowerment in International Development" that on International Women's Day in 2009, the Director General of UNESCO wrote, "Gender equality is smart and just economics for many compelling reasons. It can act as a force for economic development and for improving the quality of life of society as a whole."³² Clearly, it is not sufficient to promote gender equality and women's empowerment for their own sake; gender equality and women's empowerment become attractive to donors only when donors realize they will benefit financially from the programs they support.

The attractiveness of an economic justification for women's empowerment within a neoliberal society is perhaps best demonstrated by Nike's 2015 Girl Effect campaign.³³ Speaking about the campaign, Nike CEO Mark Parker stated, "Economists have demonstrated that [investing in girls] is the best possible return on investment."³⁴ This multinational corporation is not particularly well known for treating its workers in the "third world" justly, yet Nike's campaign was not aimed at improving the working conditions in the sweatshops where women make its popular clothing and gear.³⁵ The corporation was, in fact, using the attractive rhetoric of women's empowerment to advertise its goods. By drawing upon this theme, corporations like Nike, which exploits low-wage workers, benefit monetarily by making charitable and benevolent appeals to their consumers. Again, institutions like Nike rely on women whom the neoliberal economic system has abused and exploited for cheap labor, simultaneously using the women's suffering as justification for programs that may not even address the issues that affect these women the most.

Moreover, this focus on economic empowerment as a tool of international development strategically overlooks the exploitation and marginalization that many women experience when they enter the workforce.³⁶ As Eyben and Napier-Moore assert, development NGOs have centered a definition of empowerment that focuses on "formal institutions and individual autonomy."³⁷ The authors go on to argue,

³¹ Eyben and Napier-Moore, "Choosing Words with Care," 293.

³² Eyben and Napier-Moore, "Choosing Words with Care," 293.

³³ Arianne Shahvisi, "'Women's Empowerment,' Imperialism, and the Global Gag Rule," *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research* 4, no. 2 (Winter 2018): 174.

³⁴ Shahvisi, "'Women's Empowerment,'" 174.

³⁵ Shahvisi, "'Women's Empowerment,'" 174.

³⁶ Shahvisi, "'Women's Empowerment,'" 177.

³⁷ Eyben and Napier-Moore, "Choosing Words with Care," 293.

“Even with autonomy the emphasis is more on the economic actor contributing to growth, and less on, say, decent work and the unpaid care economy—and even less on issues of bodily autonomy and the power within.”³⁸ Placing such an emphasis on economic empowerment is often more beneficial to governments and institutions than it is for the women who are supposed to be benefitting from these programs. A focus on growth leads NGOs and other international actors to ignore the real needs and desires of women living in poverty. How can economic empowerment programs be truly empowering if they do not address the exploitation of women within the global neoliberal system? If being economically empowered means having the ability to make economic decisions, then organizations should not devalue the desire of some women to care for their children or to avoid exploitative jobs. Instead, organizations should engage with the women they are trying to empower and should find ways to merge unpaid labor with formal work—ways that fit with, rather than overlook, the women’s own desires and responsibilities.

Syrian Refugees and Economic Empowerment

The experiences of Syrian refugees in Jordan can further demonstrate the limitations of economic empowerment programs. Most Syrian refugees in Jordan experience extreme financial insecurity, with 86 percent living below the Jordanian poverty line of 2.25 USD per day.³⁹ The unemployment rate in Jordan increased 22.1 percent between the start of the Syrian civil war (2011) and 2014.⁴⁰ Many Jordanian citizens therefore struggle to find employment and find themselves having to compete with Syrian refugees for jobs.⁴¹ In 2017, the government of Jordan and members of the international community, including the United Kingdom and the United Nations, agreed to a plan called the Jordan Compact, which intended to address these challenges.⁴² As UNICEF describes in a report, “the central pillar of the Compact is to turn the Syrian refugee crises into a development opportunity that attracts new investments and creates jobs for

³⁸ Eyben and Napier-Moore, “Choosing Words with Care,” 293.

³⁹ Women’s Refugee Commission, “Unpacking Gender: The Humanitarian Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Jordan,” March 14, 2014, 7, <https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/unpacking-gender-humanitarian-response-syrian-refugee-crisis-jordan>.

⁴⁰ Women’s Refugee Commission, “Unpacking Gender,” 7.

⁴¹ Women’s Refugee Commission, “Unpacking Gender,” 7.

⁴² UNICEF, “Empowering Syrian Refugee Women in Jordan,” June 2017, 3–4, https://www.unicefusa.org/sites/default/files/170615%20NextGen%20Jordan%20Full%20proposal_0.pdf.

Jordanians and Syrian refugees.”⁴³ In doing so, Jordan agreed to create 200,000 jobs for Syrians. The agreement thrilled the international community and resulted in pledges for \$12 billion in grants and \$40 billion in loans from Western nations—sums of money that dwarfed the \$3.2 billion that Western countries pledged to the humanitarian response to the Syrian refugee crisis.⁴⁴

Before the Compact, Syrian refugees were required to apply for work permits through the same process required for labor migrants.⁴⁵ The fees were high and required documentation that many refugees had left in Syria. Consequently, the Jordanian government issued only 3,000 work permits to Syrian refugees each year during the period leading up to the Jordan Compact.⁴⁶ According to a report by UN Women, “In 2017, as a result of policy reforms, the government issued 46,717 work permits, of which 5 percent were issued to women. This takes the total number of work permits issued as of April 2018 to 99,443, of which 45,850 are currently active.”⁴⁷ That only 5 percent of work permits were given to women in 2017 demonstrates the barriers Syrian women face in obtaining legal work. Moreover, UN Women found that male family members were more likely to be issued work permits than were female family members, and the men who did receive permits were more likely to be living in the urban centers of Amman and Irbid than in the rural areas of Jordan.⁴⁸

Because Syrian refugees, particularly women, have limited access to employment in Jordan, development NGOs have implemented programs aimed at increasing Syrian workforce participation. Because of the persistent difficulties of obtaining work permits, many of these are short-term cash-for-work programs that do not meet the long-term needs of refugees. For example, the Norwegian Refugee Council runs a cash-for-work program in which women “oversee the management of seedlings which will be planted in the Royal Botanical Garden.”⁴⁹ This provides both Syrian and Jordanian women with an opportunity to earn money needed to survive, yet each group of about twenty women works on this project for only forty

⁴³ UNICEF, “Empowering Syrian Refugee Women,” 3–4.

⁴⁴ Veronique Barbelet, Jessica Hagen-Zanker, and Dina Mansour-Ille, “The Jordan Compact: Lessons Learnt and Implications for Future Refugee Compacts,” ODI, February 2018, 3, <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12058.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Barbelet, Hagen-Zanker, and Mansour-Ille, “Jordan Compact,” 4.

⁴⁶ Barbelet, Hagen-Zanker, and Mansour-Ille, “Jordan Compact,” 4.

⁴⁷ Women’s Refugee Commission, “Unpacking Gender,” 9.

⁴⁸ Women’s Refugee Commission, “Unpacking Gender,” 17.

⁴⁹ Lynn Qashu, “Empowering Women through Small-Scale Jobs,” Norwegian Refugee Council, July 6, 2018, <https://www.nrc.no/news/2018/july/empowering-women-through-small-scale-jobs/>.

days.⁵⁰ Even though these programs benefit women in the short term, they leave women constantly searching for their next cash-for-work opportunity.

In an article that helped inspire the Jordan Compact, Alexander Betts and Paul Collier envisioned a plan to integrate refugees into their host country's economy.⁵¹ Using Jordan as a case study, the pair argued for "a reconsidered refugee policy [that] would integrate displaced Syrians into specially created economic zones, offering Syrian refugees employment and autonomy, incubating businesses in preparation for the eventual end of the civil war in Syria, and aiding Jordan's aspirations for industrial development."⁵² The idea of benefitting both the refugees who need ways to support themselves and their families while simultaneously helping Jordan achieve its development goals is incredibly attractive. Betts and Collier asserted that "special development zones" would provide refugees with "autonomy and opportunity" through integration into the global economy,⁵³ but the authors did not once mention Syrian refugee women in their article; they did not address the fact that women may not be able to pick up and leave their homes and their children to work in industrial zones every day.

A report by Oxfam detailing the organization's failed attempt to recruit Syrian women to formal work in a garment factory provides insight into the challenges faced specifically by women. More specifically, it demonstrates the shortcomings of economic integration programs, such as those envisioned by Betts and Collier, that overlook women's needs. The Oxfam report explains that there were only 5,000 cash-for-work jobs in Za'atari camp and only one third of these jobs were filled by women.⁵⁴ Ten thousand (10,000) work permits were granted to refugees living in Za'atari camp, but Oxfam reports that "these work permits are often used in unauthorized ways as entry and exit permits, exposing refugees to legal and protection risks when leaving the camp."⁵⁵ As a result, Oxfam created the Lel-Haya project, a cash-for-work program in which Syrian refugee women worked

⁵⁰ Qashu, "Empowering Women."

⁵¹ Alexander Betts and Paul Collier, "Help Refugees Help Themselves," *Foreign Affairs*, October 19, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/levant/2015-10-20/help-refugees-help-themselves>.

⁵² Betts and Collier, "Help Refugees Help Themselves."

⁵³ Betts and Collier, "Help Refugees Help Themselves."

⁵⁴ Shaddin Almasri, "Tailor Made: How Syrian Refugee Women Are Finding Their Own Way to Join the Jordanian Economy," *Oxfam International*, August 6, 2018, 3, <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620530/bn-jordan-tailor-made-women-refugees-070818-en.pdf>.

⁵⁵ Almasri, "Tailor Made," 3.

as seamstresses sewing old UNHCR tents into tote bags.⁵⁶ The employment office at the camp then worked with a garment factory located outside the camp to hold a job fair to recruit women into jobs at the factory. Even though the women participating in the Lel-Haya project were interested in formal work at the garment factory, most did not end up choosing to participate in the employment program.⁵⁷ Oxfam was surprised that the women chose not to join “despite childcare incentives of 25 Jordanian dinars (approximately \$35) per month provided by the factory for each child under the age of four, and ILO-arranged buses to transport women from their districts to the camp main gate.”⁵⁸ When Oxfam interviewed the women to find out why they had chosen not to work in the factory, the organization discovered a wide variety of reasons. First, the distance of the factory from the camp was a main barrier for the women, as they could not be away from their families all day. Some women who had children over the age of four—and were therefore not eligible for the childcare incentive—could not afford to pay someone to watch their children. Many women feared leaving their children at home alone, as the shelters could easily catch on fire.⁵⁹ Additionally, women were discouraged by the fact that they could not easily and cheaply return to the camp in case of emergency; cheap transportation was often considered unsafe, and taxis were too expensive.⁶⁰ Women also realized that if they worked at the factory during the day, they would miss aid distributions in the camp. Some women chose not to participate because they had heard that treatment of workers was bad in the factories. Another main barrier was that only women under 35 were eligible to work in the factory, which excluded older skilled seamstresses who were interested in the program.⁶¹

This case demonstrates some of the challenges that Jordan and the international community would face if they decided to integrate Syrian refugees into “special economic zones” as Betts and Collier suggested.⁶² There is simply no easy way to ensure that Syrian refugees can earn money and develop skills that will help them survive once the civil war is over; however, it is clear that seeking to integrate refugees into the Jordanian economy without considering the actual lived experiences of women will be ineffectual. Employment programs such as this one may be beneficial to regional and global economies, but they will not succeed in

⁵⁶ Almasri, “Tailor Made,” 3.

⁵⁷ Almasri, “Tailor Made,” 3.

⁵⁸ Almasri, “Tailor Made,” 4.

⁵⁹ Almasri, “Tailor Made,” 4.

⁶⁰ Almasri, “Tailor Made,” 4.

⁶¹ Almasri, “Tailor Made,” 4.

⁶² “Help Refugees Help Themselves.”

their goals of empowering Syrian women. Women must be able to carry out their roles as mothers and wives if they so desire. Separating women from their families and then considering the women empowered ignores their lived experiences. Women should be able to work close to their homes, and thus the cost and efficiency of transportation must be improved. This would likely include creating formal work programs within the camps. There should also be improved access to affordable childcare and flexible working schedules. Most importantly, there should be open communication with Syrian women (and men) to identify other ways to improve access to formal work that enables women to also carry out their roles as mothers and wives.

Western Feminism and the Patriarchy

Western feminist agendas have also influenced the ways that NGOs approach women's empowerment. The issues that are most important to Western feminists working for and funding NGOs may not resonate with women from the "third world."⁶³ As a result, the projects they prioritize "are not always considered the most pressing by activists and grassroots women in the aid-receiving countries."⁶⁴ In her article "Hailing the 'Authentic Other': Constructing the Third World as Aid Recipient in Donor NGO Agendas," Chilla Bulbeck points out the example of the Ford Foundation's work in China. She explains that local organizations have criticized reproductive-health projects "as reflecting Western notions of individualism, informed consent and choice."⁶⁵ This is not to say that this reaction was universal, but it does demonstrate how Western feminist ideals are exported to the "third world," where they may not align with local cultures, practices, and beliefs. If these feminist organizations listen to women from the communities they are trying to help, women who may have different ideas about feminism and empowerment, perhaps the organizations would be able to implement more successful agendas.

The Western feminist perceptions of patriarchy also demonstrate the potential gap between NGOs' ideas of empowerment and those of women on the ground. There is a persistent idea that women's empowerment is impossible within a patriarchal system, that women's empowerment and patriarchy are mutually exclusive. We see this exemplified in Valentine M. Moghadam's book *From Patriarchy to Empowerment*, the title of which alone suggests that patriarchy makes

⁶³ Bulbeck, "Hailing the 'Authentic Other,'" 60.

⁶⁴ Bulbeck, "Hailing the 'Authentic Other,'" 64.

⁶⁵ Bulbeck, "Hailing the 'Authentic Other,'" 68.

empowerment impossible.⁶⁶ In her introduction, Moghadam describes the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia as part of “the patriarchal belt” and explains that this system of patriarchy has had “dire implications for women’s status and life chances.”⁶⁷ She urges an immediate shift from patriarchy to empowerment.⁶⁸ Although Moghadam does acknowledge the “emergence of vibrant women’s movements” in the region, her statement seems to suggest that women are unable to exert power and agency from within patriarchal social structures.⁶⁹ She feeds into the assumption that “a timeless, fixed notion of female inferiority exists in the [third world].”⁷⁰ It is this assumption that leads development organizations to essentialize the experiences of poor women as victims who need to be saved from the binds of the patriarchy.

I am not arguing that NGOs should ignore the restrictions imposed upon women in patriarchal societies. What I am arguing for is a more nuanced look at the unintended consequences of painting women as the victims of oppression, utterly lacking agency and power. In her article “The Mixed Metaphor of ‘Third World Woman’: Gendered Representations by International Development NGOs,” Nandita Dogra demonstrates the consequences of simplifying the lived experiences of women in societies considered oppressive by the West. She discusses Oxfam and World Vision’s Christmas gift catalogues, which listed “the cost of running a training kit for women against domestic violence” as one of the possible gifts people could buy.⁷¹ Dogra argues that this seemingly benign “gift” assumes that if women from the “third world” could learn that “domestic abuse is wrong,” they would stand up against it.⁷² The training kit draws on the Western assumption that rights are individual and “makes this rights discourse ‘victim-centered and retrospective’ but ‘removed from broader frames of analysis, engagement, and action.’”⁷³ In reality, Dogra points out, women from the global south and the global north “negotiate” and prioritize different interests depending on which needs they view as the most important in any given moment, even if this comes at the expense

⁶⁶ Valentine M. Moghadam, ed., “Women’s Empowerment: An Introduction and Overview,” in *From Patriarchy to Empowerment: Women’s Participation, Movements, and Rights in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia* (NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007).

⁶⁷ Moghadam, “Women’s Empowerment,” 1–2.

⁶⁸ Moghadam, “Women’s Empowerment,” 2.

⁶⁹ Moghadam, “Women’s Empowerment,” 2.

⁷⁰ Dogra, “Mixed Metaphor,” 341.

⁷¹ Dogra, “Mixed Metaphor,” 341.

⁷² Dogra, “Mixed Metaphor,” 341.

⁷³ Dogra, “Mixed Metaphor,” 342.

of other interests,⁷⁴ and a training kit dedicated to teaching women that domestic abuse is wrong ignores this complexity:

At best this is another success for the NGO and at its worst it is an erasure of the complex ways in which [third world] women negotiate their interests *by themselves* as well as of the long history of feminism, awareness and conscientisation *within* [third world] nations. Instead of interventions of sensitization, the (largely missing) portrayals of [third world] women as protestors, for example, could show both agency and knowledge on their part. The existing representations merely become yet more examples of [third world] women as “the passive dupes of patriarchal culture” and “inherently incapable of solving their own problems.”⁷⁵

Here, Dogra eloquently lays out the damage that can be done when NGOs essentialize the experience of women from the “third world” as oppressed by patriarchy and entirely lacking agency and power. A training kit to sensitize women to domestic violence does not pay attention to the hundreds of decisions women must make every day, the agency they exert, and the ways that they negotiate their interests and fulfill their needs from within a social system in which men tend to monopolize authority. The persistent idea that all women from “third world” countries lack agency and must be empowered by Western NGOs can lead these organizations to implement well-meaning but ineffectual programs—programs that ignore the needs and desires of their supposed beneficiaries.

The Crucial Contradiction

The portrayal of “third world” women in NGO materials, paired with the neoliberal preference for low fertility rates, exposes a crucial contradiction within international development: Women are deserving of aid but are also simultaneously fecund and over-reproductive.⁷⁶ They are portrayed as selfless, feminized mothers, worthy recipients of aid from development NGOs, and are also expected to

⁷⁴ Dogra, “Mixed Metaphor,” 342.

⁷⁵ Dogra, “Mixed Metaphor,” 342.

⁷⁶ Dogra, “Mixed Metaphor,” 336.

contribute to economic development by escaping patriarchal gender norms, having fewer children, and joining the workforce. NGOs both “other” and universalize women from the “third world,” Dogra argues.⁷⁷ In a study she conducted of NGO messages in newspapers in the United Kingdom between 2005 and 2006, Dogra found that 72 percent of people shown in images were mothers and their children.⁷⁸ The images show women and children suffering and vulnerable, facing devastating conditions of famine and poverty. In a similar way to the training kits mentioned before, “Such images in essence project the women (and children) as a homogeneously powerless group of innocent victims.”⁷⁹ Images portraying impoverished women holding their babies evoke the universalism of motherhood. Dogra poignantly connects these images with “the many iconic Madonna and child paintings, where a shoulder or another body part of the mother is revealed to signify a physicality and bond between mother and child.”⁸⁰ These women are at once relatable and worthy of aid to a Western audience of potential donors, and also sufficiently apolitical and vulnerable so as to not be threatening or suspicious. Women are again instruments of development because they are “ideal victims.”⁸¹

As discussed before, however, women in the “third world” are not celebrated for having many children. The images of poor women holding their children fit within the racialized “colonial discourse” of women of color being overly fertile and hypersexual.⁸² Dogra asserts that this eugenic and racist narrative was “transformed within the development discourse into the overcrowded [third world], with its over-reproductive women who have a ‘tendency to breed like rabbits.’”⁸³ Women from the “third world” are blamed for not limiting their reproduction and for thereby perpetuating poverty and economic depression. The contradiction that arises when women are characterized as worthy aid recipients and tools of development, as well as fecund and overly reproductive, demonstrates the illogically essentialized identity of “third world” women. By recognizing this contradiction, development organizations may be better equipped to actually improve the lives of the women they aim to empower.

⁷⁷ Dogra, “Mixed Metaphor,” 335.

⁷⁸ Dogra, “Mixed Metaphor,” 335.

⁷⁹ Dogra, “Mixed Metaphor,” 335.

⁸⁰ Dogra, “Mixed Metaphor,” 335.

⁸¹ Dogra, “Mixed Metaphor,” 335.

⁸² Dogra, “Mixed Metaphor,” 336.

⁸³ Dogra, “Mixed Metaphor,” 336.

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