The Anti-Politics Machine of Gender Empowerment Schemes in Nepal

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Abstract

An anti-politics machine homogenises its beneficiaries, depoliticises their rescue, and institutes its own constellation of political arrangements. Gender empowerment schemes in Nepal discursively contribute to the composite figure of the 'Third World Woman', depoliticise her liberation, and institute a political project that instrumentalises gender equality to service global capital. Formal development institutions make the anti-political machine material. These institutions are ontologically legitimated by centres of knowledge production in the Global North. Discourses from these institutions are democratised and commodified to private citizens, perpetuating the pervasive image of the Third World Woman among the popular imagination of the Global North. The anti-politics machine of gender empowerment schemes in Nepal is expansive.

Keywords: Gender empowerment, Nepal, Third World Woman, gender politics

Introduction

Nepalese women are inherently oppressed. They are oppressed because they live in a religious, traditional society that has deformed women into non-humans on the basis of timeless superstitions. This oppression is paradigmatic of bounded cultures in the Global South. Salvation for these women can only occur if their backwards and unchanging society transitions into an egalitarian, modern nation-state that subscribes wholeheartedly to the scientific rationalism of Enlightenment. At the same time, this ancient society can only transition into modernity if its women are saved from the perils of denigration. Women need modernity, and modernity needs women. Or so the dominant discourses of gender empowerment in development dictate.

Nepal is a lower-middle income country in South Asia, situated between the hegemons of India and China. By GDP (PPP) per capita, the country ranks 152nd in the world (World Bank, 2019). This economic underdevelopment is partly due to political volatility in the country's recent past; Nepal has oscillated between monarchism, parliamentary republicanism, and civil war (Riches and Palmowski, 2019). Economic underdevelopment has legitimated the establishment of the development industry to undo the Great Divergence of the nineteenth century. The country is home to 189 INGOs (Karkee and Comfort, 2016). Development schemes range from microcredit to large-scale hydropower infrastructural projects. One category of schemes concerns gender roles in Nepal, or more precisely, the empowerment of Nepalese women.

Schemes of gender empowerment can be situated in the context of the epistemological history of feminism. Feminists in the 1970s and 1980s challenged the idea that gender was a biological given that naturally mandated the subordination of women. Gender was instead a socially constructed relationship between women and men that was discursively sustained. This period of political thought coincided with the emergence of the New Left and a broader atmosphere of political protest, intersecting with civil rights, anti-war movements, and a resurgence of Marxism. Many feminists were particularly influenced by, and heavily critiqued, the latter. While Marxism viewed production as the paramount value of social organisation, Marxist feminists noted that production and reproduction were intimately intertwined. The reproduction of the productive proletariat labour force depended upon the unpaid care labour of women, while scales of global capitalist accumulation simultaneously denigrated reproductive work. Maria Mies (1986), for

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example, argued that the subjection of women to the domestic realm was part of a capitalist mode of production that ideologically ignored women's reproductive labour, while materially requiring reproduction for capitalist forms of accumulation. Women were not naturally subjected but exploited by historically specific forms of socioeconomic organisation. Catharine MacKinnon (1982: 515) similarly argued that 'the organized expropriation of the sexuality of some for the use of others defines the sex, woman'. Just like the expropriation of labour defined the class of the proletariat in Marxism, the expropriation of reproductive and sexual labour defined women in feminism. From these ideas of social, rather than biological, sources of gender inequality, the important concept of the patriarchy emerged, defined as the "system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Walby, 1990: 20). Later developments in feminism brought in ideas of masculinities, the unlinking of gender and sex through performativity, and intersectionality, but gender and development took the patriarchy as its ideological starting point.

The idea of a universal patriarchy is realistic. Only 22.8 per cent of elected national politicians are women, 20 per cent of girls and women experienced violence at the hands of an intimate partner last year, and 200 million girls and women have suffered from female genital mutilation (UN Women, 2020). However, development projects can approach gender equality and the disinterment of the patriarchy from problematic perspectives. The international development movement, Half the Sky, claims to advocate for the global empowerment of women. The movement has spawned books, films, and policy changes. Lila Abu-Lughod (2013), however, drew attention to how the movement claimed that all women suffered from the patriarchy, but only depicted brown and black women as the victims of male social, physical, and sexual violence. The only white women featured in the promotional film were altruistic volunteers from the Global North who flew to Asian and African countries to build schools or lead participatory focus groups with local women. Abu-Lughod noted that the only issue in the Global North that the film discussed were poorly financed women's sports teams. There was no mention that one-sixth of American women have suffered sexual assault. The facts of gender inequality in the Global North are trivialised in the discussion of patriarchy in development. This ostensibly universal gendered oppression is in practice constructed as a problem of a homogeneous Global South, which provides a moral high ground for intervention from institutions and individuals based in the Global North.

The discursive unity implied in the idea of a homogenous Global South patriarchy is moralistic. It is also inaccurate. Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí (1997) argued that categories of 'woman' and 'man' did not exist in precolonial Nigeria. She challenged the idea that these gender categories were universal or that the subordination of women was a given. She argued that among the Yoruba, biological males and females were not ranked according to biological sex or socially constructed gender, but through seniority. Names and pronouns were genderless. Instead, pronouns only made a distinction based on age. People with female reproductive systems enjoyed equal social and political rights as people with male reproductive systems. Precolonial societies in Yorubaland could be anomalous in their divergence from Euro-American ideas of gender. However, Chandra Mohanty (2003) demonstrated that the homogenisation of global gender norms was a pervasive ideological project. She argued that Euro-American centres of knowledge production discursively created a single Third World Woman, which erased local cultural, class, and caste differences. Women in the Global South then became universally defined by victimisation, passivity and dependence vis-à-vis active and independent men, and removed of their agency. However, Mohanty argued that gender norms and gender-based oppression, like enforced veiling, were historically specific. For example, Iranian middle-class women exercised agency and took to the streets during the 1979 revolution in veils as a form of solidarity with working-class women. In contrast, contemporary veiling among the Iranian middle-class is often coercive. Gender-based oppression was not homogenous in the Global South, but both culturally- and historically-specific.

The homogenisation of problems in the Global South is part of a broader discursive project in development. James Ferguson (1994) argued that development institutions discursively create a 'Developing' world, where local realities and conditions are ignored. Countries are presupposed to have a set of homogenous problems that require technocratic solutions. For example, Lesotho was constituted as an agrarian subsistence economy, despite being integrated into colonial forms of exploitative capitalism under the South African Apartheid regime. The homogeneity of developing countries legitimated development as an 'anti-politics machine', which applied technical solutions that were apparently apolitical. However, these supposedly technical processes had political effects - building roads to 'isolated' communities in Lesotho entrenched state domination and power over peripheral areas. These anti-political machines would fail to improve the lives of people in the Global South because they ignored

nuance in local conditions. For example, development projects built markets in remote villages in Lesotho because they constructed Lesotho as isolated from the broader international economy. However, the market had little effect because Lesotho had been connected to the international political economy of colonialism and white settler nationalism for 150 years. Similarly, discourses of gender empowerment in development create a homogenous figure of an oppressed Third World Woman that legitimate development interventions, which have political effects and fail because of their lack of attention to local realities.

This article will combine Mohanty's insight of the discursive Third World Woman with James Ferguson's conceptualisation of development as an anti-politics machine to argue that Nepali women have been ideologically constructed into Third World Women. This homogenisation ignores lived realities, glosses over dynamism in gender roles, and ultimately legitimates development projects that can be damaging to the goal of gender equality. The article will primarily cover discourses from formal development institutions but will also briefly cover the ideological legitimacy granted by academia and the dispersal of these discourses through the phenomenon of voluntourism.

Development Institutions

The World Bank (2017) declared that gender equality in Nepal was challenged by 'superstitions and societal traditions that always seem to place women on a lower rung'. The Asian Development Bank (2016) concurred that '[w]omen in Nepal have long experienced high levels of poverty, social exclusion, and marginalization because of their gender'. UN Women (2017a) added that 'struggle to exercise their rights to political participation and leadership' because of 'social norms and harmful practices that directly limit women's voice and agency'. These portrayals are both reinforced by formal reporting on development challenges. The Diplomat argued that reporting on gender inequality was naturally difficult 'in a country like Nepal', solidifying its rank among the Third World, and that the 'core cause for this is… stigma' and 'family honour' (K.C. 2020). Foreign Policy stated the underlying assumption of development institutions plainly: 'In Nepal, Tradition Is Killing Women' (Cousins, 2019).

Gender inequality does exist in Nepal. 27 per cent of women have experienced physical violence, 15 per cent have experienced sexual violence, and 41 per cent of women were

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married before they were 18 (UNFPA, 2016). However, this inequality assumed to be an inevitable outgrowth of an ancient and unchanging tradition, nor a characteristic of Nepal simply because it is not geographically located in a Euro-American region. Development institutions often make a direct link between ancient orthodox Hinduism and the contemporary status of Nepali women. In a quotation cited above, the World Bank (2017) referred to religion as the 'superstitions and societal traditions' that have 'always' affected Nepali women from time immemorial. This phrasing is paradigmatic of the rationalising schema of the modernity project embedded within development. Nepali women are constructed as timeless victims of an unchanging Nepali tradition that require European secular salvation for liberation. This construction is problematic. First, the relationship between Nepali Hinduism and gender is complicated. Babita and Sanjay Tewari (2017) wrote that in the Rigveda, Goddesses formed the centre of religion. They embodied different roles from motherhood to warriors. Male divine energy required feminine divine energy (Shakti). The Vedas mandated equal inheritance, the right to choose sexual partners, and emphasised the importance of consent in sexual relationships (Tewari and Tewari, 2017: 43). Local villages also had their own goddesses, Gramadevata, which brought prosperity and protection, and women had representation on ancient councils. However, the medieval era saw a significant curtailing of women's freedoms and the introduction of religiously-sanctioned violence again women like Sati. Religion also justified Chhaupadi, a custom in which menstruating Nepali women were deemed impure and forced to live in a menstrual hut, where they were susceptible to pneumonia. Women were therefore not always the victims of an unchanging religious tradition. Religious traditions have changed, and some changes have decreased the status of women. To portray religion as timelessly and inherently problematic is a form of cultural fatalism that forecloses any possibility of advocating for changes in the religion or traditions that women may value, and instead mandates it eradication of Nepali. A focus on changing religious norms could instead preserve some traditions that might legitimate an improved status for women or some traditions that women might value, while challenging those that dictate the subordination of women. However, such an approach would require gender empowerment schemes that are culturally specific, which stands in contrast to the universalising and technocratic proclivities of the anti-politics machine.

The anti-politics machinery of formal development institutions and schemes of gender empowerment also overlook the complexity in the role of Nepalese women in society. Women are not monolithically oppressed in the same way across all developing countries. The gendered burden that Nepali women face is culturally distinct – they cannot be subsumed under a composite category of the Third World Woman. While 58 per cent of Nepali women 'were disempowered with regard to credit', only 11 per cent were disempowered in agricultural production (O'Hara and Clement, 2018: 116). In contrast, Gupta et al. (2019) found widespread disempowerment of women in agriculture in neighbouring India. This contrast suggests that some gender empowerment development projects are mistargeted because of the lack of a culturally-specific needs assessment. For example, a press release from UN Women (2017b) outlines a development project in Nepal that focused on gender equality which was funded by UN Women, the Food and Agricultural Organisation, and the International Fund for Agricultural Development. However, the project appears to have achieved little in the way of female empowerment. The only outcome of note outlined in the press release is the extension of an irrigation system. There is no mention of addressing gendered divisions of labour, improving female inheritance of agricultural land, or decreasing gendered wage gaps in agriculture. The impact of the project on gender equality is limited because, as shown earlier, Nepali women appear to already be comparatively empowered within the sphere of agricultural production. Energies should perhaps be redirected towards access to microcredit, where Nepali women are comparatively disempowered. The anti-politics of gender empowerment, in its discursive production of a homogeneously oppressed Third World Woman, ignores the real and distinct needs of Nepali women. Blindness to diversity leads to ineffective aid projects that divert resources from projects that could improve the position of Nepali women.

The cultural-specificity of gender norms in Nepal are also dynamic. Forms of gendered oppression and empowerment constantly react to external social, political, and economic stimuli. The Nepalese Civil War provided one such stimulus. The war began in 1995 when the democratically-elected Communist government dissolved. Maoist elements of the Communist party began a revolt with to abolish the monarchy. A peace deal only came in 2006, when the government restricted the monarchy's powers and Maoists entered parliament. The status of women changed dramatically during this period. K.C. and van der Haar (2019) wrote that

women formed 30-40 per cent of the Maoist insurgency armed forces. Far from being passive victims of culture, women instead described themselves as agents of change who had political consciousness of their class and gendered interest. Women also created new roles for themselves in the aftermath of the war as Constituent Assembly members, veterans, and rickshaw drivers (Yadav, 2016). However, while male insurgents were successfully politically reintegrated into society, female insurgents reported difficulties in finding suitable jobs and marriage partners. The recent pandemic has also shifted gender norms in response to militarisation. Female soldiers lifted the bodies of COVID-19 victims to ensure hygienic cremation, breaking a cultural taboo of women touching dead bodies in Nepal (Al Jazeera, 2020). The soldiers reported pride in breaking gender norms and received a positive reception from broader society. Female soldiers during the insurgency and the pandemic are proof of dynamism within cultural gender norms. Women are not the timeless victims imagined by development. The faces of oppression and empowerment are in constant movement and must be accordingly addressed by formal development institutions.

Finally, 'gender empowerment' in the context of Nepal can potentially worsen the position of women if conceptualised in narrow terms. Andrea Cornwall (2016) argued that women's empowerment had been reduced to a buzzword in development discourses. Empowerment had once meant grassroots struggles to change power relations in a constant process of negation to address the roots of feminised poverty and inequality through the interrogation of institutions and policies. Instead, empowerment was often evoked as a blurry catch-all phrase that impressed stakeholders and satiated donors. Worse, empowerment was defined strictly along economic lines and instrumentalised the needs of women in service of broader economic interests.

An example of the instrumentalisation of gender empowerment can be found in Esther Hertzog's (2011) confessional tale of a gender empowerment scheme in Nepal. Hertzog (2011: 36) was hired as a gender consultant for an irrigation scheme funded by the World Bank, despite 'total ignorance of women in the country'. As we have seen, the position of women in the Global South is assumed to be homogenous, so a lack of knowledge of culturally-specific nuances is not an impediment to the hiring arm of the development anti-politics machine. The World Bank applied pressure on the Nepali government to implement gender empowerment projects and offered a loan of $500,000. The government contracted an Israeli irrigation

company to enrol Nepali women in literacy courses to improve their economic prospects, alongside its work on agricultural irrigation. Empowerment was interpreted as improving economic opportunities for women. However, Hertzog noted that the women in the villages did not require literacy courses to contribute to the economy and did not request it. They were already assertive and significant actors in familial- and village-level economies. These literacy programmes 'treat them as "illiterate" and consequently marginalize and deny their local experience' (Hertzog, 2011: 32). Defining empowerment as engagement with formal economies as educated workers conceptually disempowered rural Nepali women as somehow lacking in human capital.

Furthermore, the gender empowerment scheme was instrumentalised by both the Nepali government and the Israeli contractor. Government officials superficially opposed the literacy classes on the basis of culture. For example, they insisted that a father's or husband's signature was needed for participation in classes, despite no opposition from rural Nepali men for the classes to go ahead. Then, when signatures were collected, they vetoed the programme on the basis of a limited time frame. Without literacy classes, the $500,000 allocated to women's empowerment became 'free money' (Ibid: 76). Simultaneously, the Israeli contractor pretended to support the classes for gender empowerment but ignored requests to purchase the required books. They simply billed the hours of the gender consultant to the project to claim their share of the allocated budget. When gender empowerment is defined in a procedurally 'tick-box' manner, like holding literacy classes, male government officials and development professionals can use the language of empowerment to divert resources targeted towards women. These instances are not limited to Nepal. Sara Longwe (1997: 149) wrote that gender empowerment has a 'strange tendency ... to 'evaporate' within international development agencies'. Gender empowerment schemes appear apolitical but are politically instrumentalised in a way that can be damaging to the realities of women's lives. They are the paradigmatic anti-politics machine.

Academia

The portrayal of Nepali women as monolithically oppressed in schemes of gender empowerment in development gains ontological weight from academia. An early article by Lucile Duberman and Koya Azumi (1975: 1015) stated that 'Nepali women are among the most

deprived groups on earth'. Recent publications add more nuance. Corey O'Hara and Florain Clement (2018) argued that while Nepali women were disempowered in terms of access to credit, leisure time, and group measurement, they enjoyed relatively equal access to assets, discretion over household expenditure, and working times. However, contemporary authors can still be allured by the persuasive appeal of the oppressed Third World Woman. O'Hara and Clement (2018: 117), for example, still conclude that empowered Nepali men disempower Nepali women despite 'weak correlation between almost all pairs of variables' that link the two genders. This conclusion is underpinned by an assumption that women are passive victims of male assertiveness, even though evidence from their study directly refutes it. The image of the oppressed Third World Woman is difficult to dislodge. Some academics are also not immune from the appeal of economic growth and the instrumentalisation of gender equality. Panta and Thapa (2018) argue that gender empowerment is important for Nepal because of a sex ratio skewed towards women. Economic empowerment therefore unleashes the 'untapped potential of women for economic growth' in Nepal (Panta and Thapa, 2018: 24). In this portrayal of empowerment, gender equality only matters for the growth of the market rather than for any substantive social or political change. Empowerment becomes a means for market growth rather than an end in itself. Empowerment in some academic articles therefore mirrors the anti-politics machine of development in stereotyping Nepali women and by technocratically assimilating gender empowerment to perform a political task of servicing broader economic interests. As a centre of knowledge production, academia reinforces and legitimates the practice of anti-political gender empowerment schemes in the Global South.

Voluntourism

Voluntourism effectively democratises the discourses from formal development institutions and academia. People from around the world can subscribe to the ideals of the anti-politics machine and, for a sum of money, take part in making these ideals material in the Global South. The dispersal of formal development discourses through populations primarily in the Global North can solidify a new form of Orientalism. One tour operator based in the United Kingdom promises that one can 'have a positive impact on the lives of Nepalese women by helping them learn new skills. Enjoy taking in breathtaking views of the Himalayas every day, as you live in this magical and spiritual place' (GoEco, 2021). The realities of Nepali women are subsumed under the

fantasy of Nepal as the 'Other', a spiritual alternative universe in contrast to the rationality of the Global North. Furthermore, anyone can join this programme, regardless of their understanding of Nepal or professional qualifications, under the assumption that anyone from the Global North is more skilled than those in the Global South. The low bar to entry mirrors how the previously mentioned Israeli irrigation company hired gender consultants without knowledge of Nepal. This skills-blind process of hiring is again possible because of the homogenisation of women in the Global South. If every Third World Woman faces the same set of patriarchal restraints, then gender empowerment schemes can demand no particular expertise from their facilitators. Another tour operator continues this project of homogenisation and states that: 'Nepalese women are dependent on men for their welfare and face discrimination and high levels of violence against them' (Love Volunteers, 2021). As we have seen, Nepali women are relatively empowered in terms of agricultural production for their subsistence and have relatively equal power over controlling household expenditures. The reality of Nepali women is transformed in line with stereotypes of oppressed women in the Global South to create a passive, voiceless victim who requires those in the Global North to rescue them - and to pay for the privilege of fulfilling the fantastical role of a saviour. This process appears benign and apolitical, like the anti-politics machine, but creates its own form of politics in sustaining a problematic boundary between the 'Orient' and the 'Occident'. Furthermore, voluntourism replicates the instrumentalisation of gender equality to service wider economic goals. One website sells its gender empowerment scheme by claiming that '[a]n increase in gender equality is linked to upward trends in a range of important sustainable development metrics like an increase in national income (GVI, 2021). Prospective tourists and volunteers buy into the dream that their time is not only helping Nepali women, but also the wider country-level economy. This discourse reduces the importance of gender equality as a goal in itself in favour of market growth. A new political project is created.

Conclusion

Development schemes of gender empowerment can be anti-political machines. They homogenise the lives and needs of Nepali women into a discursive Third World Woman. These schemes appear apolitical but often have unintended political consequences. They freeze Nepali society as static and unchanging. They erase the complexity of gender relations. They

subsume quests for gender equality under capitalist modes of accumulation. These patterns are replicated beyond formal development institutions. Centres of knowledge production mirror and reinforce the normative values of development schemes. Voluntourism packages these values and puts them for sale. Gender empowerment becomes a buzzword devoid of any calls for radical change.

However, this picture is not fatalistic. Developments in feminism can be sticks in the gears of the anti-politics machinery. Early feminist thought that envisioned a global (Southern) patriarchy has given way to multiple different epistemological traditions. The recognition of the intersecting axes of region, ethnicity class, religion, and caste in Nepal prevents a totalising depiction of women's struggles that erases lived realities. Gender empowerment schemes can be tailored to specific communities rather than blankly applied. Literacy classes, for example, will perhaps be most useful in areas without formal labour markets if they accompany job creation. Post-colonial feminism resists the linkages between biology, Third World Women, and victimhood while recognising agency. Socialist feminism challenges the instrumentalisation of political and social empowerment to achieve economic goals.

Some formal development institutions incorporate these insights into gender empowerment projects. While the Asian Development Bank (ADB) projected an anachronistic view of gender equality in Nepal into the past, it also took a multidimensional approach to gender empowerment in the present. The ADB specifically worked with the National Dalit Commission to tailor schemes of gender empowerment to the intersecting identities of caste and gender; Nepali women were not constructed as a monolithic group. The ADB also recognised the changing role of the women in Nepali society, and 'women's involvement as combatants and political cadres' during the Maoist insurgency to 'change their disadvantaged position' (2016: 5). Women were not only portrayed as passive victims, but as actors with agency over their lives. Gender empowerment projects could therefore respond to 'the opportunities [female participation in insurgencies] created' (Ibid: 6). Finally, despite primarily being a financial institution, the ADB explicitly targeted social, legal and institutional empowerment. The goal of gender empowerment was not defined in narrow economic or instrumentalist terms but called for transformations around the 'beliefs and practices relative to girls' education, child and early marriage, and the appropriate role of women within and outside the home' (Ibid: 1). While gender empowerment in development can be problematic, the ADB demonstrates that schemes

of gender empowerment can recognise nuance, change, and structural transformation. The anti-politics machine of gender empowerment is pervasive, but it is not universal.

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