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Viewpoint
The Missing Politics of Female Empowerment
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VIEWPOINT

INSIGHTS FROM THE FRONT LINES

The Missing Politics of Female Empowerment

Humanitarian nonprofits unconsciously reinforce the very conditions of women's oppression they seek to eradicate.

BY NIMMI GOWRINATHAN

Power is universally difficult for women to access. For women in the developing world, the term “empowerment” seeks to remedy this. The definition, as most often used in the world of aid and development, is the transfer of power from the powerful to the powerless. This broad definition has stretched to cover everything from the interventions of Save the Children, to educate young girls, to the recruitment of women into the Islamic State group.

But does empowerment programming actually shift power?

In August 1984, a group of feminists from the Global South gathered in Bangalore, India. Now known as Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era, or the DAWN feminist collective, the group was instrumental in introducing the word “empowerment” into the development sphere. Among them were a reproductive rights expert who founded the first women's center in Brazil, a pioneering anthropologist from Mexico who highlighted the exclusion of indigenous women, and an activist for Dalit rights.

These feminists, emerging from a history of women who fought for power against colonial interests and cultural repression, centered their discussion on the political forces responsible for the conditions of women's oppression. For them, the term “empowerment” was the foundation of an explicitly political project intended to incite collective mobilization around the distinctive politics of marginalized women.

Nearly 50 years later, empowerment programming for women in the Global South ranges from impoverished indigenous women

in Bolivia crocheting string bikinis (so that Westerners can “shop with a purpose”) to ex-combatants in Sri Lanka being offered training in icing cakes, hairstyling, and sewing classes. This re-feminizing programming not only limits the women's ability to participate fully in social and political spheres of society, but also does nothing to address the very real political grievances that led to their collective marginalization in the first place.

Today the term “empowerment” is omnipresent, particularly in the gender-programming language of Western humanitarian organizations. As it entered the lexicon of the United Nations and other international bodies, it quickly morphed from a tool for the powerless to challenge the forces of power that create inequality to an umbrella term describing development strategies that offer women limited technical solutions to issues

of poverty, health care, and education. From the time of its introduction to its use in contemporary interventions, power for women has been deliberately de-linked from politics.

Through this language, powered by a billion-dollar industry of aid, governments and donors alike were now able to answer women's demands for political power with small-scale economic promises of empowerment, often in the form of livestock handouts: a few chickens and cows. What began as an overtly political feminist project has since become the linchpin of an anti-politics.

The Global South feminist agenda for collective political power has been exchanged for individual livelihood and income-generation projects, and political education toward systemic change has been diluted by the increased construction of girls' schools. While both alleviate some aspects of social inequality and benefit individual women, neither addresses the structural issues that perpetuate the marginalization of the communities they serve. The concern is not in these initiatives themselves, but in how they are used to release forces of oppression from their political accountability.

THE INSIDIOUS SEWING MACHINE

As both a disaster aid worker and a scholar researching the motivations of female fighters in conflict zones, I have continually encountered an approach to women in the Global South that denies both their distinctive politics and their desire for political power.

In November 2017, I visited Bogotá, Colombia, and met with Sandra, a senior female combatant in the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the recently disarmed Marxist guerrilla movement. The year before, as the peace process began, the first interveners to visit her and other female ex-combatants were



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international organizations. They offered her something for ex-combatant livelihoods: sewing machines. But Sandra, like many other female cadres, had no interest: “We will do what we have to for the peace process, but I will never be de-mobilized.”

She rejected her sewing machine, she said, and elaborated that she feared these programs are partially responsible for active female FARC members slowly “losing their politics” and being forced into the traditional gender roles they had escaped in the movement. “Today, these groups continue to apply for funds in our name to do these types of projects,” she said. “It’s not what we want.”

Similarly, the experiences of female ex-combatants in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka also represent some of the starkest examples of women who have engaged in overtly political forms of resistance only to be de-politicized through empowerment programming. As they complete the sewing courses required of their de-radicalization, these women see the goal to push them away from political life and into traditional gender roles. One Tamil ex-combatant in Sri Lanka recently told me, “I have no use for sewing, nor any interest in it. It’s only when I finished training that the government considers me de-radicalized.”

In a recent report, *Emissaries of Empowerment*, my coauthors and I argue that empowerment programming fails to grapple with non-Western women as full subjects, instead de-politicizing them by reducing their identities to the circumstances of their victimhood. Their deepest trauma becomes their identity, and perhaps the only identity that comes with benefits in deeply divided societies. The report interrogates the Western feminist ideology driving this kind of programming and the political structures keeping it in place. We also argue that NGOs *reinforce* the subjugated position of women—often through the very programming designed to “empower” them.

Sandra’s experience, by no means isolated, reveals the uncomfortable position of the female fighter in the humanitarian aid world. She is neither fully a legitimate

victim to be saved nor a political agent that the West is comfortable supporting. Though her presence should push the development industry to reckon with women first and foremost as political actors, it is a challenge the NGOs are not prepared to meet.

The female fighter is the latest example of the female “victim” in the Global South, another beneficiary of empowerment programming unable to reckon with her political agency. Alongside “rape victims,” “war widows,” and “mothers of the disappeared,” the “ex-combatant” is reduced to abject victimhood. To these women, interveners most often offer “empowerment” construed in the narrowest sense of providing disadvantaged or traumatized women with individual livelihood projects for small-scale businesses.

Defining individuals through their trauma, tying their identity to sexual violence, allows for interventions into their lives to be justified as a moral obligation. Consequently, a moral intervention is neither subject to critique nor obliged to reckon with the politics that surround victims of trauma. This narrative can be seen in many guises—from the testimonies of Democratic congresswomen who cite the evils of the hijab to justify US military objectives in Afghanistan to media celebrations of young white women on personal journeys to save women in the Congo from the “rape epidemic.”

NGOs focus on local culture to highlight marginalized women’s oppression: dowry payments, sati practices, and sharia law. Beyond a convenient cover for the political agendas of intervention, this particular construction of the traumatized woman and the community she inhabits determines the programming that will save her.

ACKNOWLEDGE COMPLICITY, SCRUTINIZE PROGRAMMING

A woman seen only through her experience of gang rape has no politics; she is simply the product of the violence that entrenches her victimhood. My own research reveals that moments of sexual violence have a distinctive impact in shaping a woman’s politics,

often in ways that can mobilize into radical movements. Empowerment programming fails to acknowledge this. Instead, its solution de-links power from politics.

What follows from this approach to empowerment is a limited understanding of women’s agency. Western feminists often can see the power of women in the Global South only if they act in opposition to social expectations and challenge repressive norms and traditions. This singular perspective serves to re-inscribe the cultural tendency to deprive women of their own distinctive politics and overlooks their capacity to resist the broader structures of inequality and oppression.

This programming may succeed in providing individuals the ability to earn a meager income. In its construction of the victim, however, it cannot shift the structures of inequality that have prevented women in the Global South from obtaining power.

A testament to the desire for simple solutions over complex conversations, the challenge most readily offered to critiques of empowerment has been posed as a question: “What is the solution?”

The solution begins with an uncomfortable conversation within the development industry on the complicity of various actors in the pattern of de-politicizing marginalized women in the Global South; a dismantling of the guise of empowerment in order to reveal the funding, incentives, colonial legacies, and political agendas driving the design of programs. In Sri Lanka, Colombia, and elsewhere, female activists are wary of both the political elites in their own country and the ideological strings tied to Western NGOs. As these collectives eke out their own political spaces, they each offer distinctive ways forward to address the deep-seated causes of inequality.

If donors and practitioners are serious about greater access to power for marginalized women, the entire framework of contemporary empowerment programming needs to be examined and restructured to allow women to find the cultural, economic, and political space required to address inequality in all its forms. ■