

GLOBAL SOUTH AND FEMINIST LEADERSHIP IN SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
'colonial(ist)' and 'white feminist' bias in international development

Soapbox/ Ignite presentation by Sunita Kotnala at the RDI Leadership Conference 11-13 June 2019, Melbourne Australia
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As women from the global south my co-author Rajashree Ghosh and me would like to present an alternative point of view. The pitch is based on what we have witnessed in our careers as development practitioners across countries in the Asia Pacific, in public service and academia- experiencing similar roadblocks to diverse voices and coming to the same conclusions- despite living and working in two separate countries - Australia and the USA respectively. We continue to see the colonial(ist) approach in international development and the 'white feminist' interventions in the field- from conception to implementation of projects. We are learning a lot from established development theories, now it is time to broaden our horizons, go beyond definitions within western feminist paradigms used in international development, to enhance and encourage alternative voices and leadership.

We have personal experience of what Professor Mohanty problematized as "the construction of the "third world women" in the western feminist discourse that describes women from the global south as a homogeneous 'powerless' group, as victims of a particular "socio economic systems" rather than as agents of change. Assumptions about Western women as being secular, liberated and having control over their own lives vis a vis women from the global south remains. Women from the global south are depicted as having truncated lives (read- as sexually constraint) while being limited by "third world issues" (read- ignorant , poor, uneducated, tradition bound, domestic , family oriented, victimised etc.). In our careers we have seen the international development sector continuing to perpetuate this, ignoring the diverse struggles and histories of local women's movements.¹ These are either not recognised or at worst their struggles are reduced to internal strife and remain peripheral to the "feminist" approaches of the "first world", despite having potential to address some of the first world anomalies.

For example, gender balance in political participation and decision making is an agreed target set in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995 and yet two of the world's most prosperous countries, Australia and Canada are ranked 49 and 62 respectively, far behind two of the world's poorest countries Rwanda and Bolivia, that are the world' s top two countries for female representation in parliament.²

The cascades (poverty, gender inequality, governance, economic growth, environmental impacts, disasters etc.) continue to be presented as particular to the global "south". The European- American paradigm of development that has gradually been globalised continues to spread neo-liberal agenda as development, leading to more exclusive rather than inclusive growth. We know based on current research that historically such interventions have created inequalities for women and indigenous communities, leading to competition and conflicts over scarce resources, diminishing livelihoods, leaving ruined habitats and traditional systems- more often than not destroying women's agency and leadership rather than supporting it, as can be seen from the example of Nauru.

The discovery of phosphate by Europeans in the Micronesian state of Nauru at the turn of 20th century and subsequent indiscriminate mining rendered the country infertile, severely undermining the matrilineal way of life and traditional livelihoods. Within a period of hundred years, Nauru experienced near extinction of its population twice from manmade catastrophes, and once again was on the brink of starvation at the turn of the 21st century. Today, Nauru grapples with residual social issues like alcohol abuse, family violence and undermining women's traditional authority. Yet, throughout this struggle, women have shown great resilience and are playing a significant part in nation building- reclaiming the land, culture, language, environment and the oceans. Unfortunately, the western media continues to portray Nauru negatively for refugee settlement forgetting what is essentially an

¹ Mohanty, Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.

² UNWomen <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures>

Australian policy problem, ignoring the environmental and social challenges faced by the country and the consultations continue to mis-interpret the Nauru women's agency.

I would like to mention here three movements from India of transformational leadership provided by largely illiterate, rural and urban poor women to address their economic needs which were ignored by development policies and processes. These are: The Chipko Movement (embracing trees to stop commercial logging <http://edugreen.teri.res.in/explore/forestry/chipko.htm>), Narmada Bacho Andolan (mass movement to save the destruction of Narmada basin and livelihoods from the building of the mega dam (<http://www.ecoindia.com/education/narmada-bachao-andolan.html>) and the SEWA (trade union registered as Self Employed Women's Association http://www.sewa.org/About_Us.asp). The Chipko movement and Narmada Bachao are examples of communities defending their eco-systems and resources while SEWA is a grass- roots organisation that enables women to empower themselves through full employment. All three movements also address poverty in their communities and are good examples of why local voices need to be recognized in identifying and developing strategies to combat poverty. I encourage you to read about them to understand the leadership shown by women with 'third world issues' in addressing their very real needs.

In our experience we have not heard about these examples or others from Africa or South America in academia or international development conversations around gender equality in Australia and the USA. And efforts to highlight these have usually been ignored or not considered significant enough for discussion when compared with 'white feminist' interventions because of the considered bias towards superiority of western systems. The movements demonstrate that a commitment to universal human rights, prosperity and inclusion are not the exclusive domain of western feminist frameworks or approaches and we need to include diverse voices as part of the curricular, practice and organizational milieu in the West. Not as mirror images of western norms from different ethnicities that are agreeable and compliant with the existing paradigm of development but creating spaces and opportunities for diverse and contrary voices and leaders that question and advance a different model of development. The academia, the CEO's and HR/ Talent agencies in international and social development need to unlearn the colonialist construct and the superiority of the 'western' model of development and start recognising diverse 'feminist' leadership approaches from other parts of the world that could inform solutions, even to first world problems.

In most international development organizations, programs are led by expatriates and leadership roles are identified by a donor country. These positions are usually paid much more than the salary of local staff, to impose programmes that are developed and created to fulfil the strategic agenda of the donor agencies rather than the recipient community. The internationally recruited staff, usually from the donor country/aid agency continue to impose the western model of development that leaves little or no space for local approaches and optimal usage of local and specialized skills. Hence, it is not surprising to find that despite years of investment in foreign aid many countries continue to see gross inequalities and violence against women. Voices from the local areas need to be heard, recruited and retained with comparable remuneration both as a learning process and as a specialized approach to long term capacity development. Continuing the remuneration division is continuing with the colonial construct of the 'natives' as being less worthy and competent even when they have comparable education and skills.

With social media and online connectivity, grassroots activists and researchers from small towns and universities across the world have been somewhat able to participate in strategic planning at the international level, as we saw in the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's). However, the representation and opportunities for leadership still remain nominal because discussions are still centred in the UN Headquarters. For most grass roots voices travelling across regions, accessing New York or Geneva is an expensive proposition, even though ever-increasing means of communication and travel afford opportunities for greater participation. Not enough financial support is available for their representation. Online webinars provide a useful tool for participation, however the timing of the webinars continue to be organised at NY and London times, leaving many, especially in the Pacific region out of those discussions- despite my commitment to the SDG's, it is an ongoing challenge to attend a webinar at 3 am Sydney time on the monitoring of the Voluntary National Reviews (NVR's). Much needs to be done for "inclusion" and "diversity" for hearing everyone to ensure that "no one is left behind" as envisaged by the Agenda 2030.