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Book Review

Gender, Sexuality and Social Justice: Unpacking Dominant Development and Policy Discourses

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Through their volume *Gender Sexuality and Social Justice: Unpacking Dominant Development and Policy Discourses*, editors Silke Heumann, a professor of gender and sexuality studies, social movements and discourse analysis, and Camilo Antillón Najlis, a professor of feminist and gender studies, contest the taken-for-granted assumptions about gender, sexuality, race and class among other such intersections. The authors each have substantive expertise on gender and feminist theory and research with Najlis having expertise on sexuality, gender identity and development studies and Heumann's expertise on a variety of topics – including migration, sex work and abortion – within the 'gender and development' field. Both authors have further worked on creating transnational solidarities. This book and its diverse array of contributors is an example of the networks they have fostered.

The book is aimed at problematising 'development' through the questioning of binary logics around the categories developing/developed, West/non-West or even of global North and South. In the introductory chapter, Heumann introduces the aim of the book – which is to ask 'how contemporary development and policy interventions – including those that aim to promote sexual rights and gender equality – reproduce problematic ideas around gender, sexuality, race, and class, and not least, the "nature" and goal of "development"' (Heumann, and Najlis, 2024: 1). The book proceeds to fulfil its aims through a wide variety of analysis, set in vastly different social, economic, geographic contexts, including those of Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Netherlands, Bangladesh, Colombia among many others. One central feature of these contributions is the effect of blurring the 'West/non-West' boundaries, not only through the involvement of scholarships and knowledges from different paradigms but also through the nuanced analysis of each context. Be the context that of migrant communities situated in the global North or of the developmental gaze cast upon the presumably 'backward and disempowered global South', the book's chapters unwaveringly question the assumed supremacy of one set of knowledges (fixed notions of development) over others.

This book's primary arguments include the following: a) How binaries of 'developed vs developing' produce policies that differentiate on the rights and privileges of different subjects (identified as sexed, gendered, racialised, colonial or othered across a variety of social markers) across the global North and South; b) Involving evidence

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from a variety of geographic and post-colonial contexts to illustrate how development studies and policymaking lack intersectional, qualitative and contextualised perspectives.

The book is divided into three sections: a) Gender, sexual rights and non-normative gender expressions and sexualities, b) Unpacking development and policy interventions in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights, and c) Gender, sexuality and 'race'.

Each section presents chapters with analysis and evidence from rich fieldwork data and evidence generated in a variety of contexts. The contributors to the volume are variously academics, activists, civil society members and associated with development studies and practice -through their expertise. The varied experiences of these academics and practitioners are palpable in the level of depth and comprehensiveness of analysis, offered in the book. Disciplinarily, the contributors are social scientists within the domains of anthropology, development studies, sustainable development and international development.

In section one, three chapters are presented: on incarcerated women in Zimbabwe, on encounters between Colombian women and US servicemen and on conceptualisations of teen pregnancy in Monterrey, Mexico. All three chapters illustrate nuanced aspects of sexual agency, reproductive roles, racial, classed and ageist hierarchies that position women in fixed subject positions. This set of chapters highlights how diverse and intersectional experiences of gender and sexuality and of women's agency therein must be involved to inform development initiatives.

In section two, five further chapters take up the issue of development-related policy concerns, directly addressing policy interventions in various sectors and contexts. The five chapters presented here are on: the issue of sexual and reproductive rights (SRR) frameworks in Nicaragua, power/knowledge in the context of male circumcision in Zimbabwe, the international agendas and outreach done on the issue of child brides, by the Girls not Brides (GNB) network, policymaking for schooling of young mothers from low-income households in Kenya, and a problematisation of LBGTQI languages and labels in the context of Bangladesh. All the chapters of this section contest dominant policy practices – such as the assumptions that male circumcision is to be favoured by policymakers – as the primary recourse to tackling the spread of HIV; that child marriage is universally and unequivocally oppressive and must be 'stopped in all forms'; or the universalisation of the LGBTQI terminologies at the cost of making local sensemaking apparatuses absent from people's exploration of their sexuality. The chapters on young mothers in Kenyan schools and on the SRR policies in Nicaragua specifically highlight the need to understand sexual agency and reproductive choices not (just) as producers of precarity but also as arenas of action and bargaining (Kandiyoti, 1988) for the people in question.

In section three, there are three chapters each analysing gender, sexuality and race and with regards to migrants in various European contexts. The chapters are based on the context of belongingness among young-Muslim migrants in the Netherlands, masculinities in the context of Bangladeshi migrants in The Hague in Netherlands and Nigerian women sex workers in Turin, Italy. These chapters undertake the necessary work of connecting migrant politics to the relations of race and gendered power in development studies. It is often assumed that 'developed' countries are the donors – of financial and knowledge resources (Garín Rodríguez, 2023). Thus, the evidence of migrant experiences of othering and the questioning of gendered power in European settings – completes the book's project of addressing 'the reproduction of other problematic binaries, such as "modern/backward", "west/non-west", and "agency/victimization", which are borne out of (implicit or explicit) processes of racialization' (Heumann and Najlis, 2024: 1). Through these chapters, the reader is introduced to the intricate processes of racial othering, the production of the 'developing vs. developed' binary within Europe and its reverberative effects across global Souths and Norths. The chapter on Nigerian sex workers discusses how the sexual labour of undocumented Nigerian women is invoked to position them into 'innocent victim vs illegal migrant' categories. The chapters from the Dutch context, examine the relational masculinities and gendered power for migrants in the Netherlands including their experiences of negotiating racism and financial precarity while questioning or reinforcing gendered stereotypes.

This book undertakes the task of bringing together theoretical paradigms and empirical contexts from the global Norths and Souths, in order to politicise development. The categorically defined binaries of 'empowered vs disempowered women', 'backward vs progressive', 'superior vs inferior' are not just empty categories of difference. This book illustrates precisely how gendered and racialised power co-constitutes development policies and politics, bringing material vulnerabilities to the lives and bodies of the 'other'.

The analysis undertaken in this book connects to a variety of feminist post-development, poststructuralist, postcolonial, decolonial and qualitative research. For instance, feminist post-development scholars posit that the very idea of agency invoked in development discourses (Rai, 2008), measures and records a small subset of decision-making skills (Kabeer, 1999). Such policymaking essentialises the definition of a 'woman', fixing what or who is 'empowered' and who is a 'woman'. Policy imaginations of agency then treat the 'woman subject' as a rational agent definition of an ideal entrepreneurial subject who often is an atomic, isolated and self-contained agent devoid of social interaction and intersecting vulnerabilities (Grünenfelder and Schurr, 2015). Further, the

chapters in the book confront the politics of knowledge production – introducing examples from issues of gendered power – such as reproductive labour, sex work, masculinities, incarceration, male circumcision, child marriage, etc. Through the empirical data presented, each author produces alternative knowledges, questioning what it means to be 'correctly developed' or 'progressive'. Is child marriage always a 'social evil' or is it a way to foster a secure community? Is a teen pregnancy always a woman's non-agentic underage victimhood or can it also be narratives of resilience and care work? Among other knowledges that are unsettled – about Muslim identities or 'white vs brown' masculinities – fixed ways of thinking about the subjects of development are examined. There is a special focus on the subjects 'in need of' a specific kind of 'development' (for example, Muslim migrants in need of 'secular reform' or Zimbabwean men in need of 'health and safety' reform (in the form of circumcision)). The production of these knowledges about the 'ideal subjects of development' is an important step in questioning the taken-for-grandness of binaries inherent in the 'developing vs developed' imaginations.

A possible critique of the book involves the absence of an ex-post reflection on what alternative imaginaries (Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016) do these forms of inquiry produce. In undertaking an analysis that involves critiques of development, the possible addition of a 'concluding chapter' by the editors would have been helpful. A task that feminist, postcolonial, poststructuralist, post-development and critical policy scholars and activists are being increasingly confronted with is the positing of measures that can improve the ethics of how we generate 'data', and evidence and produce alternative policy proposals based on ethical and decolonial forms of knowledge. While I understand that this might have been outside the aims of scope of this volume for the editors, a short note of collective reflection on differential articulations and possible alternatives, including alternatives to rights-based frameworks, to financing and monitoring measures and to the top-down hierarchical manner of pushing policy interventions onto the 'third world', could be an interesting space for potential collaborations and transnational alliances for the editors and contributors of this volume.

Another critique involves the embedding of postcolonial, critical race and decolonial scholarship in the introduction section. I posit that the introduction lacks an explicit invocation of intersectionality scholarship (Crenshaw, 1994). Intersectional theories offer different modalities of visiblising marginalised communities (Collins, 1990), relating gender and citizenship (Yuval-Davis, 2007) and analysing migration and development (Bastia, 2012). As such this strand of scholarship could help link the varieties of disciplinary, methodological and empirical concerns reflected in the book's chapters. For a potential revised volume, the editors may consider an inclusion of these literatures in the introduction text, which could expand its readability in terms of 'what is to be anticipated' from the different chapters and sections of the book.

Nevertheless, I reiterate that this book is a measured and timely intervention in the fields of feminist and critical studies and critical development studies and could serve as an initiator of discussions into questions of the sexual and gendered politics of development, its international deliberations and intersectional interconnections.

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