EMISSARIES OF EMPOWERMENT

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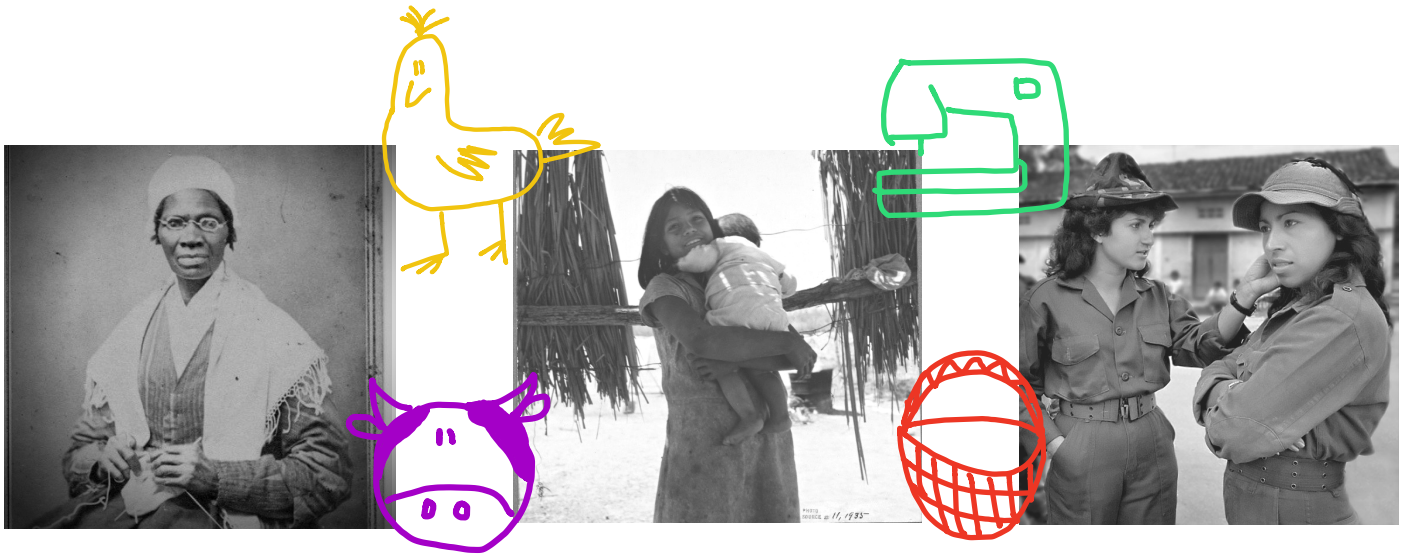

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Emissaries of Empowerment

I. Introduction

In late 2012, the representative of a Western donor organization arrived in Cambodia with a film crew in tow. She requested that a local partner, whose anti-trafficking work the funder supported, introduce her to a victim she could interview. The local organization produced a 22- year-old woman who had previously spoken publicly about her ordeal, only to be told that she was too old and that the child resting happily in her arms interfered with the "image" they were hoping to portray. Wasn't there anyone younger and more obviously traumatized they could film, the donor wanted to know?

This anecdote is a particularly egregious example of something routinely acknowledged by frustrated aid workers over beers and in anonymous internet postings:[1] The more innocent, the more sexualized, the more devastated your victim is, the better. Less frequently acknowledged is the fact that this dynamic is a design feature, not a bug, of the aid industry, especially as it relates to interventions to improve the lives of women. And, troublingly, the degrading and one-dimensional portrayals of women in the developing world that underpin these efforts are advanced by women in the West, many of whom (like the donor in the story above) identify as staunch feminists.

Publicization and amelioration of the problems facing women in the developing world are one core component of the modern (white, Western) feminist project. The impetus for these efforts is generally grounded in the rights of women facing violence, humanitarian crisis, or other hardship. Yet they tend to take as their goal "empowerment", construed in the narrow sense of providing women with economic livelihoods. The result is programming that distributes cows and chickens to rape victims, enrolls former combatants in beauty school, and imposes sewing machines on anyone unlucky enough to be female and in need.

What's the problem with chickens and sewing machines?

We argue that they are hallmarks of an approach that fails to grapple with non-Western women as full subjects and instead collapses their identity to the circumstances of their victimhood. Empowerment programming is explicitly depoliticizing, obscuring women's relationships to power and the state.

In the following pages, we trace the process by which the term "empowerment", which was initially introduced into development discourse by feminists in the Global South and was a profoundly political project, has become the lynchpin of an anti-

[1] See, e.g., Aidleap, "Aid as a Morality Play", May 4, 2013 *available at* https://aidleap.org/2013/05/04/aid-as-a-morality-play.

politics.[2] We show how it has been co-opted into a long-standing history of efforts by white women in the West to "save" women in the developing world, and we document the roots of these efforts in the colonial/imperial project.

We suggest that because modern white feminist interventions retain this implicit orientation towards rescuing non-Western women from their own societies, cultures, and contexts, they also retain many of the same dynamics of these early exercises in white saviordom. Specifically, they center the intervenors rather than marginalized women, and favor the abandonment of complex narratives in favor of simple stories of abject victimhood. These dynamics are further entrenched by the drive to capture the attention of the Western public, generating a feedback loop between donor priorities and media coverage. What gets lost in the process is politics. Consequently, these interventions often inadvertently reinforce, rather than combat, one of the main drivers of women's marginalization and injury: their depoliticization by the state.

II. What Is Empowerment?

In central Bolivia, women crochet indigenous materials into string bikinis ($60) and yoga mats ($42). The products of their labor are marketed as "ethical" and locally sourced. The organization responsible bills itself as a "women's empowerment" project that "combat[s] economic dependence in Bolivia" while allowing white women to "shop[] with purpose".

Ironically, the word "empowerment" was introduced to the development field by feminists from the Global South. Making swimwear for young Americans is not what they had in mind. For them, empowerment was an approach "to begin transforming gender subordination and in the process to break down other oppressive structures as well" through collective "political mobilization." [3]

One of their goals was UN recognition of the concept. And, indeed, empowerment became popularized in Western feminist discourse after the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, at which an "agenda for women's empowerment" was adopted. But although this was initially conceptualized as part of the rights-based articulation of gender parity, it very quickly became limited to technical programming required to improve education and health, and address violence against girls and women.[4] The contraction of the scope of

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[2] Following Ferguson's *The Anti-Politics Machine* on how development discourse allows political decisions to masquerade as "technical solutions to technical problems". James Ferguson. *The Anti-Politics Machine: "development," Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

[3] Gita Sen and Caren Grown. *Development, Crises and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives*, p22. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987.

[4] http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/followup/session/presskit/fs12.htm

empowerment was cemented by the growing mania for measurement in the aid industry.[5] Schools built, charcoal stoves distributed, and first pregnancies delayed all lend themselves much more easily to quantification than does women's political mobilization.

Today, the term "empowerment" has become diluted to the point of complete ambiguity. It appears in the mission statements of everyone from Save the Children to the Islamic State [6] and is used to refer to everything from access to technology to gender equivalence in parliamentary representation.

Despite (or perhaps because of) its lack of definitional clarity, the term is a proven fundraising powerhouse, with billions of dollars raised in the name of "women's empowerment".[7]

III. White Saviors / Brown Victims

One afternoon in London almost 150 years ago, a woman named Annette Ackroyd went to a lecture that would change the course of her life. The speaker that day urged "well-trained, accomplished, English ladies" to come and educate their "Indian sisters." Ackroyd was an unusual case; unlike most women her age, she had never married and was already a teacher at the Working Women's College in London. The idea of going to India excited and enraptured her and, when her father died, off she went.

Once in India, Ackroyd found herself shocked by the "sisters" she had come to educate and empower. Bengali women's clothing, in her opinion, was just not appropriate. The saris, she thought, left Bengali women semi-nude and she found them vulgar and immodest. "There must be a decided change in their lower garments," she wrote. "They cannot go into public in such costumes." A well-to-do Bengali woman struck Ackroyd as a "savage who had never heard of dignity or modesty' for the way she sat and dressed, "in red silk, no shoes and no stockings." The wife of Keshab Chandra Sen, the very man whom Ackroyd had heard lecturing, appalled her. She was "illiterate, secluded and played with jewels like a foolish petted child."[8]

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[5] Sally Engle Merry. "Measuring the World: Indicators, Human Rights, and Global Governance." *Current Anthropology* 52(S3): 83-95. 2011.

[6] "Save the Children as Part of 'Big Ideas for Women and Girls Coalition; Applauds Appointment of First USAID Deputy Assistant Administrator for Women's Empowerment." *Save the Children*. N.p., 14 Aug. 2017. Web. 17 Aug. 2017.

[7] "Save the Children as Part of 'Big Ideas for Women and Girls Coalition; Applauds Appointment of First USAID Deputy Assistant Administrator for Women's Empowerment." *Save the Children*. N.p., 14 Aug. 2017. Web. 17 Aug. 2017.

[8] Kumari Jayawardena. *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Rule*, p72. New York: Routledge, 1995.

Ackroyd's experiences illustrate the spirit of adventure and saviordom that inspired British women to set out for colonial India and to undertake the charge of saving Indian women from the culture, society, religion and men that oppressed them. Rendered superior by the powers of colonial domination, they felt entitled to judge and transform the lesser women they encountered. Nevertheless, it was just these sorts of imperial overtures and attitudes that were the foundation of a "global sisterhood" that touted itself as inclusive and representative of all women.

Colonialism carried with it and depended upon a system of knowledge; of enumeration, categorization and organization. Its construction, through census, historiography, anthropology and even travel narrative, provided a vocabulary for "knowing" and then reforming Indian society. The colonial gaze was rendered into a "fact" via this knowledge created by the colonists. British narratives of Indian history were promoted over preexisting Indian ones. New categories were applied to Indian society that bestowed "identity" on certain groups while ignoring others. The creation of new demographic realities enabled the British to identify and attribute crimes like female infanticide, indicting certain tribes and castes based on newly enumerated gender ratios.

Reviews and periodicals documented the "facts" of colonial life and the colonial project. Among these was the "Englishwoman's Review" (1866-1910), which advertised itself as a "log book of the Women's Movement abroad,"[9] providing information on what one contributor called "the status of women in uncivilized nations."[10] It chronicled the activities of prominent English women like Mary Carpenter, whose visit to India in 1867 sparked popular interest in Hindu female education. Among the Review's readership were women like Annette Ackroyd, unmarried and eager to take on the charge of empowering their lesser sisters in India and elsewhere.

The Review's articles routinely highlighted the terrible plight of Indian, Chinese, and African women relative to Englishwomen. An illustrative item in the January 1888 issue, titled "Opening for Women in the Colonies", advertised outright what most articles about helpless Indian women only implied, calling for English women readers to offer their services to colonial peoples. In this way, the Review acted as "a clearinghouse of information on opportunities for English women in other parts of Empire." Indian women in particular were commodified as "special and deserving objects of feminist concern," passive vessels on which the active feminism of Englishwomen could be performed. In this way, the brown woman became a pretext for "intervention and social reform" in the Empire, all of it painted as the logical next-step to their evolving feminism.

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[9]Antoinette Burton. *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture 1865-1915*, p104. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994.

[10] Ibid.

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Since 2008, high-profile visitors to the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo have followed a well-worn track. A stop at Panzi Hospital in Bukavu or Heal Africa in Goma, both famous for treating the victims of particularly brutal forms of rape. Next, a visit to one of the shops selling crafts made by female survivors of sexual and gender based violence. Then the visiting dignitaries give a statement, decrying Congo's "rape epidemic" and pledging more money to support its victims.

Violence in the region has been ongoing since the end of Congo's second civil war in 2003. But the focus on rape as the defining feature of that violence only coalesced in late 2007, following a visit by American playwright and feminist Eve Ensler to eastern DRC.

Ensler's impassioned account of her trip in Glamour magazine, written for an audience of (mostly white) American women, begins "I have just returned from Hell."[11] She details the brutality inflicted on Congolese women through the lens of her own experience learning about it. This narrative structure offers Glamour's readership an opportunity to see themselves in Ensler's account of "empowering" the victims: "Women line up to tell me their stories. They come into the interview numb, distant, glazed over, dead. They leave alive, grateful, empowered."

Ensler herself was unnerved by the extent to which subsequent Western media coverage centered her: "Eve Ensler can't find the right words to describe what she's seen and heard" (CNN); "Eve Ensler has an audacious plan" (NYT); "Eve Ensler has done what Hillary Clinton failed to do – helped give Congolese women power over their lives" (The Guardian).[12]

The trend of utilizing firsthand accounts of (usually white) Westerners "discovering" the atrocities has been a regular feature of reportage on sexual violence in the Congo. In 2010 and 2011, *New York Times* opinion writer Nicholas Kristof regularly donated his column inches to a feature called "Notes from a Young American in the Congo", which detailed the experiences of a young white woman named Amy Ernst who relocated to eastern DRC to work with rape victims shortly after graduating college. Lisa Shannon, another young white woman, who "could not sit still"[13] after watching an *Oprah* segment on Congo, was the subject of numerous adulatory media

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[11] Eve Ensler. "Women Left for Dead—and the Man Who's Saving Them." *Glamour Magazine*. July 23, 2007.

[12] Ensler interview 8/28/17

[13] Kristi Oloffson. "From Oprah to Congo: One Woman's Attempt to Save Thousands." *Time Magazine*. April 7, 2010.

profiles.[14] Her memoir "*A Thousand Sisters: My Journey of Hope into the Worst Place on Earth to be a Woman*" chronicled her decision to abandon her comfortable life and fulfill her "calling" to help Congolese women.

In most of these articles, the focus on a white intervenor's personal journey is accompanied by graphic details of the suffering of Congolese women. Invariably this includes a mention of very young, very old, or very pregnant victims; rape with implements such as broken bottles or firearms; and, almost always, cannibalism.

The contrast is jarring. While white women are "written as the heroine, occupying the central stage in the story", [15] Congolese women are framed as actors without agency, brutalized by armed groups, abandoned by their husbands, shunned by their communities. While "women in the West are cast as subjects 'who see'", Congolese women "are there 'to be seen'".[16] As one *New York Times* article editorializes, reducing Congolese women to the locus of conflict: "it is as if the real battlefields are women's bodies."[17] The resultant fetishization of Congolese women's victimhood is inextricably linked to the portrayal of Western women as heroic rescuers.

If the Congo rape narrative is a particularly stark example of the damage inflicted by the white feminist gaze, it is not unique. Advocacy and press coverage on topics ranging from child marriage to female fighters replicate these dynamics.[18]

These narratives have clear practical consequences. Conceptualizations of problems that treat women in the developing world as abject victims stripped of all agency lead to responses that prioritize the interveners' judgment about what these women need. Sometimes, this produces laughably off-base interventions. For instance, the 2008 announcement by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that the US government would be providing video cameras to rape victims so they could "document violence". At other times, the misfires are less humorous, like a 2012 campaign to raise money for fistula repair that posted photos of Sierra Leonean sufferers (including underage girls), as well as their private medical information.[19]

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[14] Nicholas Kristof. "From 'Oprah' to Building a Sisterhood in Congo." *The New York Times*. February 3, 2010; Sarah Hampson. "What Congo taught Lisa Shannon." *The Globe and Mail*. May 17, 2010.

[15] Maria Eriksson Baaz & Maria Stern. *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War? Perceptions, prescriptions, problems in the Congo and beyond*, p. 93. London: Zed Books, 2013.

[16] Ibid at 92.

[17] Jeffrey Gettleman. "The World's Worst War." *The New York Times*. Dec. 15, 2012.

[18] Although it is worth noting that they are most pronounced in issue areas like FGM and human trafficking, where the injury is in some sense sexualized.

[19] Amanda Taub & Kate Cronin-Furman. "Point/Counterpoint on Samahope: Our Two Cents." *Wronging Rights*. Sept. 12, 2012 *available at* http://www.wrongingrights.com/2012/09/pointcounterpoint-on-samahope-our-two-cents.html.

IV. The Problem of Culture

While Western narratives of the problems facing women in the developing world strip these women of agency, empowerment programming claims to restore it. But promoting the agency of marginalized women seems to mean only affording them the choice to act in "opposition"[20] to "cultural and social expectations". [21] These interventions aim to free women from "consent and complicity in their own subordination"[22] and enable them to resist "aspects of tradition and culture which are so taken for granted they have become naturalized". [23] This focus on the evils of local cultures and traditions has long served as an argument in favor of intervention as a moral duty, incumbent on feminists who want other, lesser women to be empowered.

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As Bernard Cohn writes in "Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge,"[24] optics were a crucial feature of colonial domination, a visual tableau of the benevolent conquerors who had brought enlightenment and order to primitive natives. As he says, "everyone, rulers and the ruled, had proper roles to play in the sociological colonial theater."[25] In this scripted reality of colonial domination, informed as it was by the pervasive social Darwinism of the Victorian era, Indian natives were allotted roles of the primitive and inferior while Europeans were superior and judged what aspects of their lives required moral reform. The most primitive and visibly heinous practices were selected as examples that substantiated this hierarchy.

Criminalizing these practices accomplished multiple goals: it corroborated with examples the premise of colonial superiority; it posited the brown woman as requiring rescue; and it illustrated the deepening reach of the colonial state that could and did subvert the authority of the native men who sanctioned these practices. More crucially, it situated domination over and reform of the natives as a moral rather than

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[20] Laura Ahearn. "Language and Agency." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30 (October): 109-137.

[21] Stromquist, cited in: Anju Malhotra, Sidney Ruth Schuler & Carol Boender. "Measuring Women's Empowerment
as a Variable in International Development", p11. June 28 2002. The problem with this approach to agency, also highlighted in Nimmi Gowrinathan and Zachariah Mampilly. "Civilian Resistance to Rebel Rule: Oppositional Agency and the Tamil Tigers". Unpublished manuscript.

[22] Naila Kabeer. "Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment." *Discussing Women's Empowerment-Theory and Practice*. Sida Studies No. 3. Novum Grafiska AB: Stockholm.

[23] Anju Malhotra, Sidney Ruth Schuler & Carol Boender. "Measuring Women's Empowerment
as a Variable in International Development", p11. June 28 2002.

[24] Bernard Cohn. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

[25] Ibid., p. 10

a political project. While there may be disagreements on the latter, the former, a belief in what was right and good and represented by the colonial effort to reform was a belief that commanded the support of all good people. Even more importantly, while politics was seen to permit and even require dissent, immorality required and even necessitated elimination and subjugation to permit the good to triumph.

One of the practices that fit the bill for situating intervention and reform as a moral rather than political act was sati, or self-immolation, under which a Hindu widow commits ritual suicide by throwing herself on her husband's funeral pyre. What sort of culture or country or people would condone such barbarity, skeptical questioners were goaded to ask, an exercise that served well to dehumanize natives whose lesser morals were in lurid display.

Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days*, published just about the time Annette Ackroyd was venturing off to India, provides an example of this dynamic. The book's protagonist, Phileas Fogg, encounters the practice as it is about to occur, deep in the Indian forest. As his travel companion says to him, "Yes… burned alive. And, if she were not, you cannot conceive what treatment she would be obliged to submit from her relatives. They would shave off her hair, feed her on a scanty allowance of rice, treat her with contempt; she would be looked upon as an unclean creature, and would die in some corner, like a scurvy dog." However, all ends well in Verne's book, when Fogg, by virtue of a clever plan enacted by his faithful servant Jean Passepartout, manages to rescue Princess Aouda.

The reality, of course, was much more complex. Sati was barbaric, but as British colonial officials well knew, some parts of India did not practice it at all. In some regions it was restricted to certain castes, while in others it retained relative popularity. Yet it became the one thing most Europeans knew about India. Colonial officials promoted the British misperception that all Hindus were raised to consider the act as the "most meritorious in the world and of the utmost benefit to the spirit of the enactor and the souls of all her kindred." Even in 1843—14 years after the legislative ban on the practice—colonial officials were told to publicize the ban widely, stress the inhumanity of sati, and hand down stern punishments to those who failed to prevent self-immolation.

No one, of course, was interested in what Indian women themselves thought of the practice or the real issues (unaddressed by colonial intervention) that undergirded it. Testimonials from Hindu women have called into question the religious basis of sati, and have suggested that the concerns of widows were predominantly economic and social.[26] But the construction of colonial intervention as a moral, rather than political, project required the Hindu religion to represent the antithesis to the colonialists' conquering goodness. There was no room for a wider consideration of the material

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[26] Lata Mani. "Contentious traditions: the debate on sati in colonial India." *Cultural Critique*. 7: 119-156. October 1987.

hardship and social dimensions of widowhood in India, let alone the political repression these communities usually faced. Hence the colonial regime imposed its own mode of silencing on the very women it sought to protect.

V. Avoiding Politics

Hand in hand with demonizing culture, interventions originating out of the gendered white savior / brown victim narratives share a tendency to "approach suffering at the level of immediate relief rather than root causes."[27] In short, depriving women of agency also deprives of them of politics. Nowhere is this more clearly reflected than in the modern empowerment paradigm, which takes an ostensibly apolitical, technocratic approach to improving the lives of women in the developing world.

The avoidance of politics by those intervening in the gender / women's issues space is justified by reference to a commitment to "neutrality".[28] Interviews with female cadres demobilizing during peace talks in Colombia reveal how this plays out: "These NGOs, like IOM, who were brought in by Santos's government, told us they were neutral. They offered us the opportunity to learn to style hair, or make-up. They did ask if we wanted sewing machines."[29]

Despite the overtly political reasons for their presence, interveners see their engagement as technocratic, and politics as an unwelcome distraction. When they face criticism for this approach, it is generally on charges of effecting an "NGO-isation" of resistance. This term is used to describe the significant, if not central, role of international NGOs, and their local partners, in elevating individuals above movements; shaping the political platforms of resistance; and framing social issues in donor-driven terms.[30] But this critique misses the gendered effects of a self-consciously "apolitical" approach.

Most "beneficiary" ("native" in the colonial development framework) women occupy a position of profound marginalization, cut off from the levers of power. In fact, the vulnerabilities that lead to being targets of intervention are largely a product of this marginalization. Furthermore, this dynamic is not the product of happenstance. Although development programming often invokes the bland fiction that it is simply

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[27] Samuel Martínez & Kathryn Libal. "Introduction: The Gender of Humanitarian Narrative." *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 2(2): 167. Summer 2011.

[28] In a 2010 Rockefeller Foundation Conference, "*"Lives in Limbo": Re-imagining Structures and Standards in Refugee Camps*", the language of 'neutrality' created a barrier that made critiques of NGOs' political positioning within conflict zones difficult to discuss.

[29] De-mobilized FARC female fighters, Bogota, Colombia. Personal interviews. August 2017.

[30] Agnieszka Wisniewska. "From civil society to political society". *Open Democracy*. 13 July, 2017.

substituting for government functions in a context where the state has "retreated"[31] or "given up",[32] state policies create and maintain the distance between vulnerable women and power.

States in the developing world are constructed in the image of their colonial predecessors, with the exclusion of segments of the population built into their institutional structures. While contemporary development discourse around "knowing" local societies ostensibly acknowledges the layered forces of inequality, the "reform" of such structures focuses on the "inclusion" of those "left behind"[33], with very little examination of the forces that exclude.

In fact, much of the conversation casts a narrow, limited, lens around the victimized woman, very often focused on the sexualized conditions of her oppression (female genital mutilation, rape, prostitution, and trafficking), overshadowing the larger forces of subordination centered by the Global South feminists who originated the term "empowerment". These narrow discourses include the politicized woman as an afterthought, if at all. Where a politically active woman is considered, she is the peaceful advocate or the parliamentarian pushing forward an agenda on women's rights.

The female fighter, and her uncomfortable positioning in the aid complex, more clearly reveals the process of de-politicizing the marginalized woman.[34] In the binary constructed by the development world, she is neither fully a victim to be saved, nor a political agent to be supported.[35] Even where the *issue* of gender is politicized, as in Afghanistan, the women themselves are de-politicized.[36] While feminist interventions such as livelihood programming can produce some benefits, the funding structure that sustains them and the agendas that drive these structures keep these programs isolated from any possibility of collective political action. The result is an intervention

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[31] Arundhati Roy. "The NGO-ization of Resistance". *Towards Freedom*. September 8, 2014.

[32] Agnieszka Wisniewska. "From civil society to political society". *Open Democracy*. 13 July, 2017.

[33] General Assembly Resolution 70/1. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, p1. A/RES/70/1. 25 September, 2015.

[34] Nimmi Gowrinathan. "Of Monsters and Women: In search of the female extremist, somewhere between fantasy and fear". *Guernica*. February 15, 2017.

[35] Nimmi Gowrinathan. "The committed female fighter: the political identities of Tamil women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam". *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 19(3): 327-241. 25 April, 2017.

[36] Afghan women have been both a focal point of intervention efforts inextricably linked to a military agenda, as well as the critical contentious political subject in a country where "kings and politicians have been made and undone by struggles relating to women's status" (Huma Ahmed-Ghosh. "A history of women in Afghanistan: lessons learnt for the future or yesterdays and tomorrow: women in Afghanistan." *Journal of international Women's Studies* 4(3): 1-14. p1).

that may provide some relief from poverty and/or a temporary salve for emotional trauma, while limiting the ability to achieve long-term political solutions to violence.

The preference for programming that depoliticizes women's issues is evident in the global enthusiasm for building girls' schools. While education of girls has been shown to improve their lives as well as those of their family and community, it is not a panacea for every social issue affecting girls and women. Particularly in contexts of structural inequality further destabilized by violence, the bricks and mortar project of construction of schools is unlikely to do much. And yet, its appeal as an "apolitical" intervention seems too strong to resist.

Take, for example, the donor response to the massive earthquake that hit Pakistan in 2005. The previous year, relief organizations had been overwhelmed with offers of support to tsunami victims. This time, however, the phones were largely silent, even as the death toll climbed above 100,000. In the weeks to follow, the offers received by an LA-based relief organization followed a very clear pattern. As bodies were dug out of the rubble, and millions were displaced, several large donors were very clear. At a moment where communities had no access to water, they would like to help, but "only to build girls schools."

Empowerment programming is most often deployed in contexts where women are already cut off from political power. Because it arises out of modes of advocacy and intervention that fail to see depoliticization as something to be challenged, it takes an approach that is purportedly delinked from politics. But focusing on immediate needs, while turning a blind eye to the structures of repression that *create* those needs simply reinforces women's marginalization. The result of these efforts to improve women's lives without engaging their politics is to exacerbate their depoliticization.

VI. Substituting "Empowerment" for Power

The authors of the original empowerment approach have noted that as it exists today, "empowerment is reduced in practice to its economic dimension".[37] Their approach, which sought to mobilize the political consciousness of the oppressed, rested on three core components: power, conscientization, and agency. As the concept of "empowerment" has been watered down beyond all recognition, each of these components has been subverted and repurposed. Instead of "power", women are given livelihoods. Instead of conscientization about the structures of oppression, skills training. And instead of agency, the choice between raising chickens or cows.

The language employed in fundraising calls for sewing machine dissemination exemplifies the narrow vision of what it means to be empowered that is shared by gender programming around the world: "You can empower poor women in slum areas

[37] Anne-Emmanuele Calves. "Empowerment: The History of a Key Concept in Contemporary Development Discourse". *Revue Teris Monde* 4(200): 735-749. 2009.

and rural villages with valuable sewing skills and a sewing machine so they can earn a respectable living and help their families."[38]

It is not clear that women on the receiving end of these interventions experience them as empowering. As one beneficiary of one of the countless "women's programs" operating in Sri Lanka's former warzone in 2014 explained: "I never considered what I liked to do, I 'chose' this training in sewing, because it was the only option." After a pause, she continued, "I suppose because, this is a fitting job, for girls."[39]

For women who had fought with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), these programs felt even more limiting. In the words of one: "Sewing is of no use to me. Neither do I sew, nor do I want to sew, nor do I own a sewing machine." [40] Yet they were given no choice. Herded into rehabilitation centers at the end of the war, female fighters were subjected to nascent "countering violent extremism" (CVE) programming that fell back on established paradigms of intervention into women's lives entrenched in the development world. The work of de-radicalization, in fact, was contracted out by the Government of Sri Lanka directly to development organizations.[41]

As the former combatants explained, the programming involved "some training: icing cakes, sometimes hairstyling, sometimes we went to garment factors to sew". And yet, as the local Minister of Women's Affairs observed: "We know they were trained to sew. But it's been years, I've never seen any of them actually sewing, or earning a living from it."[42]

While women in the broader community clearly registered the lack of choice in "empowerment" programs, women in the LTTE understood, very clearly, the goal of these programs: to push them away from political life, back into traditional, gender-appropriate roles.[43] Removed from the realm of national security threats, and re-conceptualized as a development challenge, they were defanged, reintroduced to the general population of women in need of saving.

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[38] This language appears on the India Partners website, but is mirrored in the promotional materials of countless organizations. A Google search of "sewing machine" and "empowerment" returns 690,000 results.

[39] Personal interviews. Sri Lanka. July 2014.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Staff member, National Organization on Migration. Personal interview. 2015.

[42] Ananthi Sasitharan. Personal Interview. Jaffna, Sri Lanka. 2015.

[43] Nimmi Gowrinathan & Kate Cronin-Furman. "The Forever Victims? Tamil Women in Post-War Sri Lanka". *Politics of Sexual Violence Initiative*. August 28, 2015.

The traditional arts of sewing, and handicrafts, are not, in themselves depoliticizing. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, an Indian political figure who was central to feminist activism in the early 1900s, considered the production of Indian fabrics, Khadi, a political weapon against British imperialism. When she traveled to the U.S., she carefully clarified the terms of an alliance with Western feminists: "You are fighting the patriarchy, we are fighting imperialism."[44] For her, indigenous craftsmanship was a form of political mobilizing for women where, "working with one's hands serves to de-centralize social and economic (power) from an industry-oriented state" to move towards a pluralistic culture of resistance[45].

But in the contemporary practice of de-radicalizing women through sewing lessons, it is hard to interpret the word "empowerment" as anything other than Orwellian double-speak. These programs re-feminizing focus explicitly strips away the political power of women, and draws them into the very industries of imperialism early feminists from the Global South challenged.

VII. The Measure of "Success"

In 1885, a young woman named Rukhmabai became an international cause celebré. Married at age eleven to a nineteen year old man, Rukhmabai refused to follow custom and go live with her husband when she turned seventeen. Unlike most victims of child marriage, Rukhmabai was a high caste Hindu and had, in the time between her marriage and turning seventeen, educated herself and even visited the American Mission House. In one of these visits, she had made the acquaintance of Dr. Edith Pechey, a meeting that would change her life.

When Rukhmabai's husband filed suit for the "restoration of conjugal rights" (a cause that existed in the U.K. as well until 1914), the judge ruled in her favor. Her husband appealed, however, and a contrary verdict was delivered. Rukhmabai refused to return to him and was held in contempt of court and sentenced to six months in prison. By this time, the case had grabbed international media attention and became a pet cause among feminists. Rukhmabai appealed to the Privy Council. The attention to the case had reached such a height that her husband agreed to a private settlement.

The newly liberated Rukhmabai wrote of her appreciation of Dr. Edith Pechey, thanking her for her support in hard times when the trial began in 1884. She then proceeded, with Dr. Pechey's help, to go to England and study medicine. In this act, too, she was held back by her mother and grandmother who, being conservative Hindus, did not want her to travel over black waters (the ocean), an act that would

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[44] Sanchari Pal. "A Freedom Fighter With a Feminist Soul, This Woman's Contributions to Modern India Are Staggering!". *The Better India*. May, 2017.

[45] Richa Thakur. "Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay: The Feminist Who Revived Indian Handicrafts". *Feminism in India*. March 21, 2017.

cause her to lose caste. She did so, again with Pechey's support, and eventually became a doctor.

Rukhmabai's case was important to feminists and suffragettes alike because it allowed them to frame their struggle as truly global. Their efforts on behalf of Rukhmabai (and the fact that her own mother and grandmother had not supported her) were a substantiation of all that imperial feminists were doing for Indian women. If only these women could be freed from their cultural norms and given the opportunity to educate themselves, they could, like Rukhmabai, achieve incredible things.

Rukhmabai's story is one of courage and bravery. The manner of its telling and its elevation to a unifying cause marks the early development of a paradigm that would later govern which stories of native women would be told. As the scholar Mohja Kahf has outlined, the selected stories were ones in which native women were escapees, victims or pawns.[46] Narratives that were more complex were omitted in favor of those that presented a clear moral binary in which Western interventionists were good and natives were bad.

Unlike the many gendered evils endured by both Indians and Englishwomen, child marriage represented a horror that only affected "native" women. It was therefore perfect as a rallying cry. That is exactly what it became, with eminent British suffragettes like Eleanor Rathbone calling meetings in which British women "interested in India" could consider plans of action to attend to the evil of child marriage.

The tale of Rukhmabai shows that imperial feminists were aware of the need for success stories: women who had been rescued and empowered by their interventions. Critically, these stories situated culture as the oppressive force against which non-Western women's resistance could be enabled. The stories of these women then became the basis for continued activism and even for claims of a global sisterhood, a term that masked the power differentials between Western feminists and their subjects.

Notably, none of the meetings organized by imperial feminists to coordinate action on child marriage included any Indian women. At least one of these ignored and excluded Indian women, Dhanwanthi Rama Rau, spoke out: "I disputed the right of British women to arrange a conference on Indian social evils in London, where all the speakers were British and many of them had never even visited India…We were already assuming responsibility ourselves and we were sure that we could be more successful than any outsiders especially those who were ignorant of our cultural

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[46] Mohja Kahf. *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999.

patterns, of our social group and therefore could not be effective as our own social reformers."[47]

Victim success stories remain a hallmark of feminist interventions today. In 2005, Somaly Mam, a Cambodian anti-trafficking activist, became a global media phenomenon with the publication of her memoir *The Road of Lost Innocence*. Her firsthand account of being sold into prostitution as a child and surviving to become a tireless advocate for trafficked women and girls propelled her onto the *Time* 100 list and *Fortune*'s "Most Powerful Women". She was named a CNN Hero, and *Glamour*'s "Woman of the Year". As her then husband described her: "Every NGO dreams of having its Somaly and every media wants her on camera".[48] With the support of a Who's Who of American celebrities and business leaders, she started the Somaly Mam Foundation, dedicated to helping the victims of sexual slavery.

But only a decade later, the world had soured on Somaly Mam. Inaccuracies in a speech she gave at the UN General Assembly in 2012 sparked scrutiny, leading to the revelation that a story Mam had told repeatedly about her daughter being kidnapped and raped in retaliation for her anti-trafficking work could not be substantiated. Investigations later called into question numerous elements of Mam's own history, suggesting that she had not, in fact, been trafficked. And women and girls helped by the Somaly Mam Foundation came forward to say that they had been coached to lie when speaking to donors and the media, telling gory fabrications about, for instance, losing an eye to an enraged brothel owner.

When the stories justifying the Somaly Mam Foundation's beneficiaries' need fractured into a more complex reality, donors, celebrities, and the media turned against her, and it, viciously. Many seemed to take the loss of Mam's perfect victimhood personally. At a feminist donor meeting on sex trafficking in 2015, one donor remarked, "I'd like to support trafficking, but, you know, I got really burned by the whole 'Somaly Mam' thing. It was devastating."[49]

* * *

Feminist solidarity, the elimination of gender inequality, the institution of laws forbidding female genital mutilation, honor killings, and child marriage are all fixtures of a global moral discourse. Given center state at galas celebrating International Women's Day or other days that highlight an internationalist feminist identity, and at conferences held to promote a universal commitment to the empowerment and

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[47] Barbara N. Ramusack. "Catalysts or Helpers: British Feminists Indian Women's Rights". In *The Extended Family Women and Political Participation in India and Pakistan*. 1981

[48] "East - Truth or Lies: Somaly Mam". Youtube interview: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iiy51eU_yCA. April 28, 2015.

[49] Donor Meeting on Trafficking. New York. 2016

advancement of women, they undergird claims by Western feminists to be making the conversation “global”.

In line with this effort, women from the colonies old and new are gathered, seated at a table on a stage and given a few minutes to speak about the deplorable conditions they face in their homelands. The script to which these women are expected to adhere is clear. And they have little choice; their organizations are funded by Western donors who may well be their hosts and who require a certain sort of performance, ideally one that showcases their own efforts at inclusion. At the end of it all, there are hugs and tears, awards handed out and pictures taken. The formerly oppressed, their countries sore and scabbed from meddling, have been given a “voice” and an all-expense paid trip to a better world.

In 2015, the Commission on the Status of Women publically named Indian activist Ruchira Gupta the Woman of the Year. In private, frantic midnight emails asked her to refrain from mentioning the UN’s status on prostitution or critiquing the UN in her acceptance speech. She wasn’t the only one. Numerous activists from the developing world were explicitly asked to neuter their comments, removing caste, ethnicity, genocide – anything that might suggest a political platform, or evoke a political response.

At the reception, an older Liberian woman took a seat on one of the few scattered chairs and sighed. "I will not come to these things again," said. "I don't know why we come." [50]

VIII. Conclusion

“Empowerment” has come a long way from its origins. What was once a revolutionary paradigm for challenging power relations has become instead a means of re-inscribing them. And although feminists in the Global South called on the development industry to create space for women’s organization and resistance,[51] gender programming by Western organizations is a purportedly apolitical enterprise. Empowerment interventions substitute marginal improvements to the material conditions of women’s lives for the capacity to mobilize to shift the conditions of their repression.

The elision of non-Western women’s politics is clearly on display in the one-size-fits-all deployment of sewing machines to solve every problem. This is especially unfortunate, because many of these women already inhabit a profoundly depoliticized context in which they are marginalized by the state and kept at a distance from the levers of power. These interventions enter this space, and rather than bridging this distance, offer “empowerment” instead of power.

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[50] Nimmi Gowrinathan. “'I Don't Know Why We Come': Inside the UN's Commission on the Status of Women”. *Vice News*. March 20, 2015.

[51] Sen and Grown 22.

Empowerment-based interventions arise in part out of a failure to take women in the developing world seriously as subjects. They therefore undertake programming that further undermines women's agency: requiring them to disclose stigmatizing personal details to encourage donations, or engaging them in inexplicable craft-making projects like making art out of "the wings of butterflies that died of natural causes".[52] These interventions do not even register non-Western women as having preferences, let alone politics.

The reasons for this are multifold, but prominent among them are the deep roots of empowerment interventions in imperial feminism. Today's white savior / brown victim advocacy narratives reproduce "moralistic tropes and modes of activism originating in the late eighteenth century",[53] and in doing so, promote oversimple, paternalistic interventions. As a recent book on sexual violence in the DRC puts it: "Through the notorious (and generalized) 'rape' story', the Congo has, once again, become a site of European (and American) adventurism and benevolence".[54]

The success of white-savior style advocacy at garnering publicity and attention reflects the fact that narratives that center familiar (white) intervenors, rather than foreign (brown) beneficiaries, and avoid complexity in favor of simple stories of abject victimhood are far more appealing to the Western public. And press coverage drives funding, which is in turn targeted towards programs and activities that will draw media interest. This feedback loop reinforces a system in which "white feminist saviors continue to endorse themselves as authentic representatives of the Other women".[55] Women in the West become the ultimate arbiters of the problems facing non-Western women, and their solutions.

The dynamics described above are deeply entrenched and constrain intervenors even as they limit the agency of beneficiaries. Individual intervenors' decisions to teach women beading or offer them goats are not the issue. Rather, the problem is the existence of a set of mutually reinforcing structures that makes the distribution of sewing machines seem like the natural solution to women's marginalization.

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[52] In the early 2000s, the anti-trafficking organization Polaris Project ran an online gift shop selling crafts made by trafficking victims, which memorably included wall art made out of butterfly wings.

[53] Martínez & Libal 167.

[54] Baaz & Stern 92.

[55] Jawad Syed & Faiza Ali. "The White Woman's Burden: from colonial *civilization* to Third World *development*." *Third World Quarterly* 32(2): 357-58, 2011.

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