

Capitalism, postcolonialism and gender

Complicating development

Sara Salemⁱ

In recent years, it has become increasingly important to think about development through the lens of intersectionality. This Thinkpiece explores the ways in which postcolonial theory also has much to offer and draws on these two critical approaches—intersectional and postcolonial feminism—to show how they can help expand our understanding of gender, race, and capitalism.

1. Introduction

Gender and Development, as a concept, was an important addition to the field of development practice and theory. Moving beyond “Women in Development”, Gender and Development instead focused on gender as an all-encompassing category that included social relations between genders, and made space for an understanding of gender as socially constructed. Despite this, the focus remained solely on *gender*, thereby marginalising other social categories such as class, race, nationality, sexuality and so on. This is precisely why it has become increasingly pertinent to think about development through the lens of intersectionality as well as through critical approaches to modernity such as postcolonial theory. In this short piece, I will present both of these perspectives—intersectionality and postcolonial feminism—to show why it matters that we take colonial histories and capitalist development seriously, and ensure that intersectionality does not become co-opted in a way that negates these realities.

2. Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a concept, prevalent in feminist scholarship, that addresses how gender interacts with other social categories and has become increasingly popular in research and practice. First conceptualized by African-American feminists in the United States, it has now been adopted by many other disciplines, as well as more broadly within feminist movements. The context in which intersectionality arose is extremely important in trying to understand the theory itself. Soon after the spread of first-wave feminism in the United States and Europe, critiques began to surface from women who felt excluded by the discourses being used by first-wave feminists. Above all, the claim to represent women universally was problematised by women who felt that their

ⁱ

experiences were very different from the white, western, middle-class women of whom the first wave feminist movement was largely comprised. Moreover, Black feminists argued that white, bourgeois feminism only brought up white, middle-class women's experiences of oppression.

African-American feminists were some of the first feminists to argue that mainstream feminism did not, and could not, represent their experiences by only taking gender into account as the most important variable. They insisted that their realities were far more complex than this: they were women, but they were also black, poor/rich, urban/rural, educated/uneducated and so on. "Myriad feminist scholars have destabilized the notion of a universal 'woman,' arguing that 'woman' itself is a contested and fractured terrain, and that the experience of 'woman' is always constituted by subjects with vastly different interests", argues Jennifer Nash.¹ For this reason, it is problematic to speak of a "universal feminism" or a "universal woman".

The term *intersectionality* itself was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, an African-American legal scholar who was part of the discipline of critical race studies in the 1980s, which aimed at "problematizing the law's purported colour-blindness, neutrality, and objectivity".² Crenshaw wanted to show how the single-axis framework often used by feminists should be replaced by intersectionality, which could better demonstrate the ways in which race and gender interact "to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's experiences".² Crenshaw argues that the experiences of Black women are much broader than the categories provided by discrimination discourse. Crenshaw often uses the imagery of a crossroads to explain:

"Intersectionality is what occurs when a woman from a minority group tries to navigate the main crossing in the city... the main highway is 'racism road.' One cross street can be Colonialism, then Patriarchy Street. She has to deal not only with one form of oppression but with all forms, which link together to make a double, a triple, multiple, a many layered blanket of oppression".³

To concretise this, take one of the examples Crenshaw presents: immigrant women in America, she writes, often suffer from multiple marginalisations, including class, gender and ethnicity, among others. However, if one analyses these women's situations by taking gender as the main marginalisation, it is easy to miss the ways gender and class, for example, interact. Crenshaw writes that,

"immigrant women who are socially, culturally, or economically privileged are more likely to be able to marshal the resources needed to satisfy the waiver requirements (here she refers to a domestic violence waiver in place at that time that allowed women to remain in the US for reasons of domestic violence). Those immigrant women least able to take advantage of the waiver—women who are socially or economically the most marginal—are the ones most likely to be women of colour".⁴ Error! Bookmark not defined.

This example illustrates clearly that elite immigrant women are protected by their class from laws that discriminate against their ethnicity or immigrant status. Thus, analyses tend to assume that there is one primary source of oppression, and all other sources

are secondary, but Crenshaw shows that it is shallow to analyse all immigrant women using the lens of “gender” as the main focus.

What I want to highlight here is the ways in which intersectionality allows us to go beyond a focus on gender that ignores class, race and other social structures. It pushes us to think about why it matters that a woman who is working class will be differently affected than a woman who comes from a wealthy background. I turn next to postcolonial feminism, and the ways in which it theorises capitalism and colonialism as connected to gendered experience. For postcolonial feminists, colonial history has created a postcolonial present in which inequalities created during European empire-building continue to create contemporary inequalities. These inequalities are very much tied to capitalism and class.

3. Postcolonial feminism and the centring of capitalism

Although intersectionality has become well-known as an academic intervention into debates on gender inequality, its roots also lie in postcolonial and African-American feminist histories, as well as Third World Liberation movements. Take, for example, Third World Liberation women who speak of “triple oppression” or “triple jeopardy”, or Arab feminists who articulate a feminist politics that sees nationalism, class, gender and religion as creating differences between women that must be given due attention. These instances show that the idea of taking difference seriously was very much an international reality by the mid-twentieth century. It is important to locate intersectionality within these radical histories because of an increasing tendency to co-opt intersectionality, particularly on the part of liberal feminism. This co-optation refers to attempts or claims to deploy intersectionality while actually reproducing gender as the main category of analysis. In the rest of this article, I discuss how postcolonial feminism and its analysis of capitalism and colonialism can help us avoid some of these moves to co-opt intersectionality, while also providing an important focus on the postcolonial world.

Postcolonial feminism can be understood as one of the bodies of scholarship that took power seriously in relation to questions of gender inequality. Emerging in the mid-late twentieth century, postcolonial feminists argue that colonial legacies across the Global South are central to the forms of gendered oppression or privilege women experience today. Central to this was their focus on capitalism as a key feature of colonialism—and therefore of postcolonial societies. For postcolonial feminists, then, gender inequality is not simply about questions of culture and religion—as Western feminists always seem to argue—nor is it simply about legal and political rights. Instead, gender inequality is about anti-capitalism and anti-colonialism, even in a world that seems to have “decolonised”. While this critique has largely been aimed at Western liberal feminists, I use the term Western feminists to underline that it is not only liberal feminists who remain dismissive of structures beyond patriarchy; socialist feminism in the West—with important exceptions—often centred gender and class, while similarly

not paying attention to either race/nation or the particular ways in which class was constituted differently in the postcolonial world. As Chandra Mohanty notes below, this is a problem not of a particular *type* of Western feminism, but of the ethnocentrism of almost all strands of Western feminism.

Postcolonial feminists were therefore always fighting on two fronts at the same time: against Western feminism, which continued to ignore the particular forms that class took in the postcolonial world and how race was implicated in this, and against postcolonial state-led projects that tended to be dominated by male figures who did not always take questions of gender seriously. A postcolonial feminist analysis, then, does not see gender as the most important source of oppression, nor as the means to liberation; instead, class, race and nation are equally sources of oppression—particularly under colonialism—and are spaces within which to fight for liberation. A postcolonial feminist analysis would therefore start from the assumption that multiple structures impact the way a woman experiences life, and that these structures are *not* universal; instead, they depend on the particularities of a given time and context. The way race, class and gender operate in London today, for example, is not the same way they operate in Cairo. This difference is because of the different ways in which London and Cairo have been formed through the history of colonialism and capitalism.

Part of the legacy of colonialism in the Global South is one of representation: women became understood monolithically as oppressed and therefore as the target of development. As Mohanty argues in *Under Western Eyes*, a “Third World Woman” has been created through colonial ideas:

*“I argue that a homogeneous notion of the oppression of women as a group is assumed, which, in turn, produces the image of an ‘average third world woman.’ This average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being ‘third world’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions”.*⁴

Mohanty outlines what proponents of intersectionality were to argue a few years later:

*“By women as a category of analysis, I am referring to the critical assumption that all of us of the same gender, across classes and cultures, are somehow socially constituted as a homogeneous group identified prior to the process of analysis”.*⁴

What I want to focus on, however, is how capitalism has been central in the perpetuation of present-day colonialism and the reproduction of different forms of gender relations. Feminists who focus on class analysis in the Global South have also produced work that has pointed to the central role of colonialism in capitalist development, and how these two processes have used race, nation and gender to produce specific class structures. Think of colonial theft of natural resources, or the transatlantic slave trade: these both show the ways in which enrichment of the West was predicated on the enslavement and expropriation of the rest of the world. For

these feminists, therefore, colonialism is not peripheral to capitalism but constitutive of it. Capitalism is what it is today because of these brutal histories. These feminists, like Black feminists, thus pose a double critique: on the one hand a critique of a feminism that saw gender as the main source of oppression for women universally and on the other hand a critique of a Marxism that saw colonialism—and by extension race and nation—as peripheral to the capitalist system and its expansion and development.

By drawing colonised countries into the global capitalist system, colonialism created forms of economic exchange that were very much based on exploitation, extraction and dependency. To understand why this is, it is useful to recall work by the Black radical tradition, world-systems theory and postcolonial Marxists, who all point to the fact that European empires needed colonialism in order to become core capitalist nations. Take Egypt, for instance, where cotton became the basis of the Egyptian economy under British colonial rule, thereby weakening all other industries and the ability of Egyptians to grow their own food. Or Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf countries that became oil exporters for global markets. Or the Congo, where cobalt and other minerals have become the basis of the economy at the expense of other forms of economic development, and at the cost of a war that has led to the deaths of many Congolese people. This matters for anyone interested in feminism because it raises questions about the argument that gender remains the most consequential site of oppression for women, and instead suggests that race and class equally create extremely different living conditions for different types of women. Moreover, it demonstrates why a movement that calls for gender liberation alone would not necessarily bring about changes to these economies of exploitation across the world.

Think of, for instance, work done on global care chains by feminist economists. The term “global care chain” was first used by Arlie Hochschild to refer to

*“a series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring. An older daughter from a poor family who cares for her siblings while her mother works as a nanny caring for the children of a migrating nanny who, in turn, cares for the child of a family in a rich country”.*⁵

What we see with the racialised displacement of social reproductive work onto migrant women is once again a division of labour whereby white women are able to make career and personal choices without the burden of reproductive work. This echoes historical instances where a similar racialised division of labour in relation to care work exhibited itself, particularly in settler colonies and colonial contexts where colonised women were forced to do care work for free and under extremely violent circumstances.

Understanding how the global economy works today means understanding how it was structured during the expansion of capitalism. European nations were able to expand capitalism largely through colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade, systems that dramatically affected the Global South and racialised populations in the Global North. These events do not belong to history but continue to affect the present. Colonialism

ended less than 70 years ago across much of the Global South; given that it was a 500 year-long project, are we really surprised that its after-effects reverberate with us still?

One example of such after-effects is the way in which development sectors continue to define objectives for gender liberation in ways that ignore the agency and demands of women in the Global South, reproducing what Mohanty calls a monolithic “third world woman”. In an excellent piece entitled, *Dialects of Women's Empowerment: The International Circuitry of the Arab Human Development Report 2005*, Lila Abu-Lughod points to the way class is erased in discussions on gender and development in the Arab world:

*“The fantasy about the magical value of work for women is a middle-class one—it presumes that jobs are well paid and fulfilling (as they may be, for the most part, for professionals, despite the nearly universal double burden women carry, with housework and child care remaining largely their responsibility). However, one must ask if work that is badly paid, back breaking, exploitative, or boring liberates women”.*⁶

Here Abu-Lughod problematises the ways in which Gender and Development practitioners often valorise women’s work without thinking through the problems with which capitalism presents us in our current moment. Work that is exploitative does not automatically liberate women, nor does it reduce the burden of work women face in the home. Moreover, ignoring class creates a monolithic “third world woman” and de-centres capitalism in discussions of gender liberation. This is contrary to the ways in which Middle Eastern feminists articulate their struggle, which is often framed as being anti-capitalist rather than a call for *more* capitalism.

This example highlights some of the continuing ways that women across the Global South are portrayed and targeted through development. They are often understood monolithically, rather than as divided by class, race, religion and so on. They are often understood through a Western framing in which it is assumed they want the same things Western women want; indeed, for much of the twentieth century, the assumption was that work was good for women, no matter what the work was. This is undoubtedly a legacy of Western first-wave feminism that sees employment, as well as legal and civil rights, as the key to emancipation—if women could be incorporated into institutions of power, they could be equal to men. This is not, however, how postcolonial feminists understand gender liberation; many of them instead adopted anti-capitalism and anti-colonialism—a politics of structural resistance rather than a call to be incorporated within structures. Finally, the example highlights the different ways in which women are positioned within the global economy. As many postcolonial feminist economists have noted, women in the Global South often end up doing the worst paid and most precarious and dangerous jobs *in the world*. The reality is that white Western women—particularly those from the middle classes and the elite—are able to live in ways that are dependent on women in the Global South doing this type of work. This is because the global economy is still made up of countries that exploit and countries that are exploited—and this is a gendered reality. Above all, this is what postcolonial feminism constantly reminds us.

4. Conclusion

In this short piece I have highlighted two critical approaches to feminism that can be enriching for practitioners of Gender and Development. Intersectionality has become an important intervention into feminist debates that centres various social structures such as class, sexuality, nation and race alongside gender, raising questions about whether women ever experience gender as the only—or even the main—form of oppression or privilege. There is also a danger that it will become co-opted and misused. Postcolonial feminism provides a very thorough analysis of the intersection of gender, race, capitalism and colonialism, and the ways in which colonial pasts have constructed unequal presents. Understanding postcolonial feminism is therefore, I would argue, vital for feminists working in the development sector.

Learn more

- **Combahee River Collective Statement**, by Combahee River Collective, 1977
- **Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World**, by Arturo Escobar, 1994
- **Caliban and the Witch**, by Silvia Federici, 2004
- **Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses**, by Chanda Mohanty, 1988

¹ Nash, J.C. 2008. 'Re-thinking intersectionality', *Feminist review* 89.1, 3.

² Nash 2008, 2.

³ Crenshaw in Yuval-Davis, N. 2006. 'Intersectionality and feminist politics', *European journal of women's studies* 13.3, 196.

⁴ Mohanty, C. 1988. 'Under Western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses', *Feminist review* 30.1, 65.

⁵ Hochschild, A.R. 2000. 'Global care chains and emotional surplus value', *On the edge: Living with global capitalism*, edited by W. Hutton and A. Giddens. London: Jonathan Cape, 131.

⁶ Abu-Lughod, L. 2009. 'Dialects of women's empowerment: the international circuitry of the Arab Human Development Report 2005', *International journal of Middle East studies* 41.1, 88.

Acknowledgements

Written by Sara Salem. Sara is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics, specialising in political sociology, postcolonial studies, Marxist theory, feminist theory and global histories of imperialism

GADN *Thinkpieces* are designed to promote reflection and debate. They do not represent an agreed position of the network or its members.

The Gender and Development Network (GADN) brings together expert NGOs, consultants, academics and individuals committed to working on gender, development and women's rights issues. Our vision is of a world where social justice and gender equality prevail and where all women and girls are able to realise their rights free from discrimination. Our goal is to ensure that international development policy and practice promotes gender equality and women's and girls' rights. Our role is to support our members by sharing information and expertise, to undertake and disseminate research, and to provide expert advice and comment on government policies and projects.

Gender & Development Network

c/o ActionAid
33-39 Bowling Green Lane
London EC1R 0BJ

T: 020 3122 0609
E: info@gadnetwork.org
www.gadnetwork.org

Registered charity no. 1140272

For more information

For more information or to join the Gender & Development Network, please email coordinator@gadnetwork.org

Disclaimer

GADN publications do not necessarily represent the views of all our members.