

The politics of gender and development in neoliberal times

Unjust Conditions: Women's Work and the Hidden Cost of Cash Transfer Programs. By Tara Patricia Cookson. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018. 192 pp. \$34.95 (paperback), open-access at <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.49>

Engendering Transformative Change in International Development by Gillian Fletcher. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019. 185pp. \$140.00 (hardcover).

Gender Justice and Human Rights in International Development Assistance by Sarah Forti. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019. 192 pp. \$140.00 (hardcover), \$27.28 (ebook).

The Gender Effect: Capitalism, Feminism, and the Corporate Politics of Development by Kathryn Moeller. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018. 292 pp. \$85.00 (hardcover), \$29.95 (paperback).

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What is the end game of gender mainstreaming in institutional and institutionalized forms of “development” in neoliberal times? Can empowerment, gender justice, and inclusion of women in developing countries be planned, particularly when directed by state institutions, Western/international agencies, and corporations? The four books under review here each engage in their own way with these questions, which outline certain contours of and interrogate how gender programs and policies are conceived in contemporary neoliberal developmental times. Gillian Fletcher (2019) examines the potentials for and limitations to transformative change through an analysis of international development frameworks in operation across different local contexts and programs; Sarah Forti (2019) highlights how normative frameworks of gender equality are enacted through international development assistance (IDA) in the field; Tara Patricia Cookson (2018) critically analyses conditional cash transfer programs (CCTs) as an instrument of behavioral change and poverty alleviation; and Kathryn Moeller (2018) places Nike’s philanthropic brand Girl Effect under the microscope in questioning how corporations market, profit from, and reproduce the vulnerability of women and girls. While coming from different disciplinary approaches, each author addresses the contemporary neoliberal developmental era with varying degrees of cynicism through empirically informed critique. Yet it is their respective understandings of the cumulative effect of over twenty-five years of Gender and Development (GAD) policy paradigms that illuminate the increasingly explicit extension of actors from international agencies, governments, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to the corporate sector. It is here that we can identify two striking fault lines within thinking on gender and developmental practice. The first is the pushback against and problematic positioning of universal (Western) concepts within international development projects, aid and funding by experiences and voices from the global South, addressed by Forti and Fletcher. The

second is the manner in which the logic of markets, capital, and profit-seeking seeps into all aspects of neoliberal developmental activity, which Cookson and Moeller delve into through analyses of incentives and corporate appropriation, respectively.

The current neoliberal developmental era of GAD highlights how the definition of “development” as progress, growth, and inclusion has been increasingly narrowed amid the global diffusion of neoliberal regulatory mechanisms and schemes (Sharma 2006). The establishment of GAD as a development policy framework in the mid-to-late 1990s occurred when feminist groups from the Global North and South entered the transnational and supranational UN conversations about the importance of empowerment in addressing the challenges of poverty alleviation, inequity, and the inclusion of women and grassroots communities. As Fletcher points out by quoting Cornwall’s (2000) critique of the haughty nature of institutionalized GAD approaches (“just add women and stir”), one resulting problematic that has emerged out of the push towards universal concepts in projecting gender concerns has been a disconnect between macro-agendas and concerns at the local, grassroots level. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and other international agreements and conventions are very much part of this disconnect, which is indicative of what Fletcher refers to as a categorical approach: “focusing on men and women rather than on the processes that generate inequity and inequality” (5). Herein lies the challenge, according to Fletcher, of generating transformative knowledge. Fletcher follows this up with much empirical illustration of this categorical disconnect, where her analysis is informed by her insider view of international development work in projects across projects and contexts: sex work and trafficking in Cambodia; violence against women in Papua New Guinea; accountability and rights in development assistance in Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Uganda; and the evocation of culture to restore collective wellbeing in indigenous/First People communities in Australia where state ‘intervention’ has had devastating effects on the social fabric.. The span and richness of each example narrative is commendably convincing in terms of its reference to the original question about whether transformation is possible within the straightjacket of categorical agendas.

However, Fletcher attempts to distance herself from her positionality by stating, “I am happiest trying to make change at grassroots level, leaving to others the work of manoeuvring competing interests and agendas driven predominantly by a commitment to economic growth... I think of it as crawling across the sea floor in relative peace

while storms rage above” (46). What would such transformative change look like if it does not engage with or attempt to alter the overarching structures and hierarchies impeding gender justice or equity? For the sea floor (i.e. the grassroots) to be viewed as an autonomous zone from the storm (i.e. neoliberalism/capitalism) that rages above is perhaps an idealized view of development practice and an opaque picture, which requires certain links to be made as a roadmap to achieve transformative change.

Forti, who writes from a position of 20 years of practitioner experience in the area of gender justice and gender equality in IDA, begins by asking, “Who drew the definition of gender equality in IDA and whose interest does it serve?” (3). By embarking on an analysis of international and national legal frameworks, Forti argues that IDA’s response to gender injustice is limited and inadequate due to conceptual weaknesses in how it categorically defines gender equality. The normatively established benchmarks of gender equality in IDA not only present a significant barrier to any real or sustainable impacts, according to Forti, but these benchmarks have emerged out of compromises with interests that either resist the idea of gender equality altogether or that stand in direct opposition ideologically to the vested interests promoting gender equality. This has meant an emptying out or dilution of the concept of gender equality in IDA, with the result of a focus on violence against women as a matter of universal human rights violations and a neglect of issues pertaining to unequal gendered distribution and entrenched patriarchal structures producing injustices for women. Forti adopts a more structural analysis than Fletcher in situating the failures of international development to speak to the concerns and needs of the grassroots in the dysfunctional apparatus of categorical design. Forti identifies how the categorical approach through “‘engineer-like’ architecture” presents what appears to be a neutral technical vocabulary “while actually allowing the lead development agencies to implement neoliberal agenda more effectively and avoiding debating such political interpretation of IDA...” (85). Fletcher and Forti’s identification and critique of the categorical approach to gender equality adopted by agencies such as the Department for International Development (DFID) and the World Bank gives the sense of an apolitical position but, as Forti clearly states, allows leeway for development agencies to reshape and reinterpret buzzwords according to their own priorities. It is no wonder, therefore, that the MDGs, SDGs, and array of other terminologies and agendas have been adopted by actors simultaneously engaged in “access to rights” and “justice delivery” as well as having an “unambiguous and yet political emphasis on trade liberalization and macro-economic stability” (85). Forti, while making a convincing case about the corrosive dimensions of this

pact between IDA and neoliberal processes, also highlights how international legislation on gender equality has been diluted due to the imperatives to include a large number of signatories, which has thus lowered the baseline of the interpretation of gender equality. Ultimately, international legislative and policy frameworks, according to Forti, have failed to address the injustices faced by those who should be the focus of the policies—vulnerable women in developing countries. The contradictions and conflicting language and conceptualization, which become apparent when international frameworks meet local or national contexts, are what make Forti’s critical analysis of gender justice and human rights most convincing and what give the reader an understanding of how “rights” are constructed as instruments by powerful interests at all levels.

The critique of the categorical approach of GAD continues through a political economy lens in Moeller’s *The Gender Effect*, where the otherwise radical notion of “empowerment” has been appropriated by one of the most vivid examples of corporatized GAD intervention, Nike’s Girl Effect brand. The instrumentalization of women and girls presents them as good mothers, good investments, potential consumers, and symbols of altruistic corporate responsibility. Moeller embarks on an extensive analysis of Western development institutions in New York and Washington, corporate headquarters in the US, and an NGO in Brazil funded by the World Bank and the Nike Foundation. A conceptual questioning of the mission and ideological positioning of such a corporate foundation lies at the heart of Moeller’s enquiry. For Moeller, corporatized development is a problematic concept given that “corporations were one of development’s primary customers” and that the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) “were designed from their inception, at least in part, to serve the interests of global capital” (22). Thus, the phenomenon of corporatized development, which can clearly be identified in Moeller’s analysis as a conflict of interest (public good versus private/corporate profit), has become the logic for “market-based rationales for development interventions, the measurement of rates or return in terms of direct and indirect benefits to business, and the branding and marketing of development populations and projects” (23). Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) targets and budgets thus could be seen to merely serve the purpose of doing the PR work for entities that otherwise lack a grounding in social responsibility. This raises the question of whether global corporations operating on a profit maximization model can really be ethical actors or whether the discourse and rhetoric of “doing good” is purposefully designed to conceal the extractive end of corporate practices.

Moeller highlights how between 2008 and 2015 the World Bank and Nike Foundation partnered on the Adolescent Girl Initiative (AGI), the first programmatic partnership between the World Bank and a corporate foundation. Additional partners, including venture capitalists and entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley and the Clinton Global Initiative founded by former US President Bill Clinton—which provided its own corporate membership to the agenda of promoting investment in girls and women—all teamed up with the global corporate girls and women agenda as a solution to the gender/girl “problem.” By tracing how institutions of power are increasingly joining forces around the figure of the vulnerable girl, Moeller poignantly identifies the collusion of corporate, philanthropic, and development interests within a neoliberal logic of developmentalism, the market, and consumerism. “Doing good” is thus embedded in the corporate mantra and practices of corporatized development. Moeller highlights the historical backdrop to exploitative, profiteering trading companies such as the East India Company and other transnational corporations having roots in colonial empires to modern day corporations openly exhibiting their practices of philanthropy alongside extractive practices. Corporatized development, rather than being a new form, has been an in-built part of the expansion of global capitalism as a means of accessing new markets as well as justifying otherwise questionable ethical practices.

Moeller passes a number of convincing verdicts on Nike’s Girl Effect brand, which highlight the problematic position of its existence at the cusp of corporatism and liberal feminist discourse. First, the (Western) savior complex and market fundamentalism come together within this campaign. Second, the apparatus of the Girl Effect has resulted in NGOs funded by the Nike Foundation becoming sites of political negotiation, causing NGOs to get caught in a “double bind” (173) between disenfranchised communities intended to benefit from the program and powerful forces dictating terms and dominating the agenda. Finally, Moeller sees a direct link between Nike Inc.’s corporate strategy and its focus on girls “to specifically target the very demographic it was accused of exploiting” (25). Readers are assumed to have knowledge of the production side of Nike’s notorious sweatshop history and its breach of international labor laws in its factories. For readers lacking this knowledge, a brief summary would have put Nike Inc.’s calculated corporate strategy into sharper relief. However, the rich ethnographic detail Moeller highlights from executives, CEOs, and entrepreneurs associated with the program or participating in the training sessions expose the limits of social responsibility within neoliberal corporate ethics. As a male African CEO commented after attending a Nike Foundation training session: “We came here thinking, what can we do to help

girls?” He then quoted the Nike executive in the session: “Think of girls as a target market for you some day. How do you unlock that market?” (201).

If the Nike Foundation’s Girl Effect epitomizes the limits of corporate responsibility to deliver on a gender-justice or equality agenda, the conditional approach of mainstream poverty alleviation programs through conditional cash transfers (CCTs) highlights the disproportionate burdens placed upon women. Cookson’s *Unjust Conditions* focuses on CCT programs in Peru as a success story as well as a scheme with negative impacts and hidden costs. Cookson contextualises the praise for CCTs in Peru through the quantitatively traceable improvements in children’s interactions with education and health care services, praised by World Bank president Jim Kim at the 2017 World Economic Forum. As can be seen in the Latin American experience of CCTs, available quantitative evidence using experimental and quasi-experimental methods shows that CCTs promote education and health-seeking behavior of poor households (3). With monitoring and regular evaluation being built into CCT programs from the onset, there is no shortage of quantitative evidence on the results and performance of CCTs. Cookson, however, is not convinced that this spate of evidence tells the full story of CCTs.

Cookson provides the historical backdrop to the emergence of CCTs in Latin America, which comes out of the Washington Consensus and neoliberal structural adjustment policies. These policies were imposed by the World Bank and IMF during the 1980s to reduce the public sector and to privatize public services, which then became unaffordable and out of reach of the poor. This led to the post-Washington Consensus period, in which those same international institutions turned to “inclusive development” (7) to remedy the damage this austerity had done to “excluded” groups such as the rural poor, women, and children (7). Cookson poignantly unpacks the underpinnings of CCTs within mainstream economic theory in terms of rational decision-making and cost-benefit analysis within debates around people’s behavior. The essence of the “nudge” effect that Cookson attributes to behavioral economics is that cash incentives can encourage individual households to take actions they otherwise would not have, such as seeking preventative health care such as vaccinations or sending their daughters to school. Another feature of CCTs that Cookson highlights is that they represent a social contract instilling a sense of “coresponsibility” between the state and the household for addressing poverty (9). All in all, the assessment Cookson makes is that the ideological packaging of CCTs to appear to not be giving social welfare away for free is

an appeal to conservative elements such as donors, taxpayers, and voters to show that rewards are being given to deserving recipients. Incentivizing poor women and their children to use poor quality and under-resourced facilities has become a key feature of CCTs, that only require the metrics of attendance for success of a program to be measured. Cookson notes how the success of achieving targets around use of services and attendance at facilities or appointments has enabled Peru's Juntos program to secure further funding without being required to address or ensure quality.

While the infrastructural condition of schools and clinics (i.e. quality) is a blemish on the glowing report card of CCTs, the enforced compliance of women to conditionalities is another. Cookson skillfully elucidates from interviews with women recipients that their compliance is not uncritical. In a tacit appreciation for the little cash that helps in their struggles to run their households, several of the women interviewed explained the limitations of cash transfers for transforming their situations. The lack of local employment opportunities and infrastructure in rural areas continued to plague their struggles for subsistence, and CCT managers showed little concern or reflection. Cookson not only views cash transfers as a limited measure constrained by overarching discourses and policies, but argues that the insistence on compliance through conditionalities has a detrimental effect by paying no attention to infrastructure or unpaid work and time of women. Cookson, who draws on the seminal work of Paul Farmer (2003), has a clearly structural understanding of poverty and thus avoids investing too much analytical conviction into the potentials for change within the existing assumptions about the logic of CCTs. Instead, she insists that women's unpaid labor and increased burdens due to the conditionalities placed upon them must be recognized and addressed when assessing the quantitative metrics of CCT delivery.

While the prominent advocates and architects of GAD of the 1990s may have striven for the implementation of gender audits, gender metrics, and the planning culture of gender frameworks as a victory for the cause of recognizing gender concerns, the resultant programs and case studies these four books focus on have drawn a blotchy picture. The instrumentalization of girls and women through the concepts of inclusion, rights, empowerment, and equality have become established features of the design and architecture of international development discourse, policy, and practice, which is a direct outcome of GAD policies and not despite them. One point that must be said is that while the books in this review outline a number of different mutations of gender and

neoliberal developmentalism, each analysis is limited to a female cisgender framing of gender, as do the institutions and interests they are critiquing. The end game of GAD seems to lie within the converging taxonomy of corporate, philanthropic, and state interests within neoliberal development. The proliferation of projects and programs aimed at women, alongside the penetration of corporate investment and partnerships into a range of different projects, brands, and financial schemes, sees the same actors who are investing in structural inequalities being the financiers and brand managers of development programs who are supposedly “doing good.” The books in this review show that a new body of literature has emerged that not only tracks and charts gender indicators, but also traces and holds to account the partnerships and institutions within the ever increasing blurred boundaries and interests of neoliberal developmentalism.

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