

# United by Strength or Oppression? A Critique of the Western Model of Feminism

Written by Ioana Cerasella Chis

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## United by Strength or Oppression? A Critique of the Western Model of Feminism

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IOANA CERASELLA CHIS, SEP 29 2015

### The Problematic Domination of Gender Based Approaches to Development by a White, Middle Class and Western Model of Feminism

In an important sense it is true that in societies stratified by race, class, or culture there are no such persons as women or men per se; there are only women and men in particular, historically located race and class and cultural relations. There are no gender relations per se but only gender relations as constructed by and between classes, races, and cultures

(Harding 1991:179).

This paper makes visible the hegemonic dimension of the white, middle class and Western (henceforth 'WMW') model of feminism and its relationship of complicity and convergence with the development-industrial complex in reproducing the 'imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy' (hooks 2004:17). I contend that for a feminist social transformation at both material and ideational levels, there is a need for a cross-border, horizontalist and pluriversal praxis which has at its core political autonomy, solidarity, reflexivity and recognition of the epistemic privilege of women and populations in the Global South. The argument is constructed as follows. Firstly, I outline the way in which development furthers colonial, capitalist, white supremacist, heterosexist, modernist, patriarchal and classist ideologies and structures of power. I then show that the WMW feminism and its gender based approaches to development are particularistic due to their sole concern to end sexism, misogyny and gender inequality. They fallaciously claim unity and universal solidarity with women in the Global South, masking their complicity with hegemonic systems that colonise and erase agency, contexts and experiences; 'difference', thus, is subjugated and used as a negative qualifier of 'the other'. Secondly, we will see that the interconnection between gender identity, roles, relations and performance cannot be isolated from power relations and material realities. Finally, I discuss possibilities for feminist solidarity and the recognition of commonalities across geopolitical and epistemological locations which can emerge through decolonial, non-hierarchical strategic alliances that focus on strength/possibility, rather than oppression. Recognising one's positionality and complicity with the neo-colonial matrix of power and acknowledging *difference* as positive would benefit feminist struggle, enabling a move beyond merely resisting systems of domination, towards creating new social imaginaries and realities.

### Locating the white, middle class and Western model of feminism within the development *dispositif*

*Mainstream development studies and development practice are colonial.* The very idea of development[1] has its roots in colonial discourse (McEwan 2001:94), making possible the continuation and reinvigoration of colonialism (Sittirak 1998:32), neo-colonialism (Rojas 2011:572) and the 'civilising mission' of imperialism (Aguinaga et. al. 2013:47). Conceptualising development as a *dispositif* or apparatus of power comprised of material and discursive elements allows for a move away from seeing power as only repressive, and makes visible the agency and bio-power of the subjects of colonial-development (Brigg 2002:421). Thus, colonial-development is a modality of power which operates in a distinctively new way from the old colonial system, seeking the mobilisation of humans and nation-states through positive discourse of 'progress' (Brigg 2002:424). The 'long-standing pattern of power' resulted from

# United by Strength or Oppression? A Critique of the Western Model of Feminism

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colonialism, which still defines the global power relations today is to be called 'coloniality' (Maldonado-Torres 2007:243).

One must look beyond the narratives of benevolence surrounding the colonial-development/aid industry, to recognise how colonial-development has fundamentally benefitted Western patriarchy and Western feminism, more than the people in the Global South. Within mainstream colonial-development studies, the concept of 'development' is ahistorical, appropriating, silencing, erasing, and distorting the past, present and future of the non-West, as filtered through Western frames of reference (McEwan 2001:95); implicitly, the history of the *overdeveloped* West is also distorted (Sittirak 1998:4). The scope of development-industrial complex is to pressure countries towards a Western, modernist, economic model through planning, foreign aid, education, loans and investment (Escobar 1988:433).

The fallacy of colonial-developmental ideology is the presumption that all countries ought and desire to follow the European standard and pattern, assuming that countries marked as 'underdeveloped' need to 'catch-up' with the overdeveloped West (Mies 1993; Dussel 1993:67-8). The implication is that only through imperialism can the Global South survive and flourish (Amos and Parmar 1984:7). This approach leads the colonial-development industry to cosmeticise the perpetuation of violence and penalty implicit within the colonial-development norms (Dussel 1993:75; Dussel 2000:472-3; Brigg 2002:429). Thus, 'development' is imbued with racist, classist, patriarchal and heterosexist ideologies, blocking possibilities for progressive social transformation by appropriating social issues and acts of political solidarity through economic, statist, gendered and racialised discourses and policies. The 'development machine'

is not a machine for eliminating poverty that is incidentally involved with statebureaucracy; it is a machine for reinforcing and expanding the exercise of bureaucratic state power, which incidentally takes 'poverty' as *its point of entrance*

(Ferguson, cited by Rojas 2011:575 – my emphasis).

Since the 1970s, gender, a 'socially defined relationship' (Harding 1991:214) has become yet another point of entrance for extending the colonial-development machine. A view shared among the WMW feminists is that gender equality is solely a Western idea(l), despite egalitarian relations between men and women being 'a living reality in much of the world in precolonial times, which was far from the case in Western culture' (Etienne and Leacock 1980a:vi). Furthermore, patriarchy cannot be defined only in terms of gender relations and/or gender oppression (of women by men) because 'it is also about power relations which are not always gender specific' (Amos and Parmar 1984:9). For instance, Cornwall (2007) emphasises that the power relations between women and men in Ado-Ado in Nigeria are more complex and often troublesome on a daily basis due to social pressures, distrust and competition, than the relationship between women and men: 'men are often the least of their problems' (2007:161). This context refutes the WMW feminism's generalisations regarding the primacy of the heterosexual dyad in women's lives, and shows that power is exerted by women *over and with* men and other women, due to women's relational subject positions and identities/identifications (2007:162-3).

Feminism has been critiqued by women of the Global South as representing solely the desires of white, middle-class Western women (Mohanty 1991:7; Russo 1991:298; Johnson-Odim 1991:315; Harding 1991:191-3), having violent effects on people in the Global South – including women, who are the WMW feminists' object of focus and policies. They isolate 'gender' from class, colonialism and white patriarchy, maintaining racist structures and ignoring the fact that the perception of gendered bodies is socially inscribed, contingent and historically constituted (Harcourt 2009:19). In this respect, Spivak makes a useful distinction between (real) feminism and the (sole) anti-sexism advocated by WMW feminism – the latter does not displace the idea of 'sexual difference', but at times it legitimises it; it only seeks to resist, rather than to positively use power for new social organisation (1990:12). Simply put, the WMW model upholds a white supremacist ideology and is imbued with racist, heterosexist and bourgeois ideas, neglecting, distorting, silencing and benefitting from the history, legacy and material domination of those who are non-white, non-Western and of 'lower-class' within the international division of labour.

Notwithstanding that the WMW feminists' primary focus on 'gender relations' and misogyny does not represent the

# United by Strength or Oppression? A Critique of the Western Model of Feminism

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(sole) priorities of women in the Global South, the former refuse to admit the ethnocentric universalisation of their experiences within development, and the active role of non-Western people in the production of feminist struggle. By extension, the gender-based approaches to colonial-development devised by the WMW model of feminism work *within-and-for* the colonial-development framework, defining populations in 'developing' countries through Western lenses (Lind 2003:227). Implicitly, this approach permeates the structures of colonial-development: both the WMW feminism and colonial-development have converging interests which adhere to a patriarchal framework, acting in complicity with the ideology of modernisation. In effect, the WMW feminism's gender-based policies create mythical problems which ask for colonial-development expansion. Tackling the current architecture of power necessarily requires collective, transformative acts to redefine ideas of *being* and *belonging*, against the hegemonic understanding of bodies, gender, sexuality and race embedded in imperial consciousness, sciences and organisation of society (Harcourt 2009:19-20).

## United by oppression or through strength?

It is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken

(Lorde 2009:43).

At this point, I want to highlight two gender-based approaches to solidarity, to underscore the incompatibility between colonial-development and genuine, horizontal solidarity working towards consciousness and society. The first approach is the WMW model claiming global *unity by oppression*, which (1) creates the myth of the 'victim other' to be 'helped'/dominated and equates 'the oppressed' with 'the distressed' (Grande 2003:332); (2) essentialises and universalises the idea of 'womanhood' and 'women's needs', (3) and operates within colonial-development, seeking *development alternatives* which result in solipsistic, hegemonic and colonial gender-based policies to 'include women' within the patriarchal and colonial colonial-development, where their agency is erased.

At the other end of the spectrum there is the feminist model which makes claims to *unity through strength*, having an activist, decolonial, bottom-up, non-essentialist focus, and being concerned with social transformation and a delinking from the colonial matrix of power. It seeks solidarity between feminists who adhere to the same ethico-political values against hierarchy and the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, recognising the autonomy, agency, strong objectivity and reflexivity of women and the wider population in the Global South. Their focus on strength and decolonial praxis enables strategies for creating new ways of being and belonging, as an *alternative to development*.

Informed by decolonial and postcolonial approaches, I use my position as a socially situated white, working class subject of the 'Eastern margins of Empire' (Boatcă 2007) and my liminal locus of epistemic enunciation and site of access within a 'First World' academic institution, to write in solidarity with the feminist advocates for *unity through strength*, to criticise colonial-development and the WMW feminism connected to it.

*United by oppression, as women: the colonisation of the 'third world' woman and the misuse of difference by the WMW model of feminism*

Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged in concrete, historical and political practice and analysis

(Mohanty 1986:339).

Beyond sisterhood there is still racism, colonialism and imperialism!

(Mohanty 1986:348)

Solidarity with the Global South women is declared by the WMW feminists under the grand narrative of 'global sisterhood' (Morgan 1984), a Western-centric approach which finds its basis on abstract, disembodied universalism

# United by Strength or Oppression? A Critique of the Western Model of Feminism

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and the colonisation of particularities under a hegemonic Western model of particularism (Grosfoguel 2012:95). Historically, international sisterhood started as a liberal, WMW feminist movement claiming unity with all women as *women* due to perceived 'common oppression' and victimisation (hooks 2000:43;45), depicting women as one-dimensional: always-already constructed in relation (of subordination) to men. The WMW feminists implicitly assume a particular construction of womanhood and gender relations, and the essentialised role of *victims*, whilst they reify and colonise the Global South (Narayan 1998:86) by defining the *third world women* 'prior to their entry into social relations' (Mohanty 1986:352). One of the problems which stems from upholding the idea of 'sameness' on the basis of gender within a white supremacist, classist and neo-colonial matrix of power is that experiences, socio-epistemological location and context are eradicated under a discourse of WMW 'benevolence'. The political dimension of the decision taken by women in the Global South's to side with the men in their lives against colonialism, WMW feminism and Western patriarchy, is negated by the WMW feminism. Instead, this political siding is interpreted within the colonial-development framework as evidence for furthering Western intervention and orchestration of divisions between women and men in the Global South, leading to a treatment of Global South women as objects, not subjects of policy (Bruno 2006:7). In the context in which the WMW feminists benefit from the oppression of the Global South, the sisterhood claimed by the former has hegemonic effects. Hence, there is no immediate reason for non-Western people to forge alliances with WMW feminists when these feminists benefit from Western domination.

Although women of the Global North and South may share commonalities of oppression (Rai 2011:34), the former have historically accessed specific privileges. During colonialism, women were differently positioned in relation to gender, capital, colonialism, sexuality and 'race': black women and women of colour on the colonies were colonised, whereas white women were housewifised (Mies 1998:101). In the West, both the bourgeois and proletarian women[2] performed the role of the 'housewife as an agent of consumption', with the upper class women also being engaged in the demand for luxury goods and in maintaining the class system (Mies 1998:104-6). The creation of the 'domesticated housewife' meant the 'withdrawal' of white women from the newly constructed public sphere – her and her family came to be 'the Little White Man's [...] colony' (Mies 1998:110). Concomitantly, 'for every "Aunt Jemima" who was maligned as a nonwoman, there was a "Miss Ann" imprisoned by the definition of her femininity' (Johnson-Odim 1991:318-9). The meaning of 'the feminine' and 'the masculine' was distributed in opposition to what and who *is not*: the femininity available to the white woman was denied to the black woman, whilst the masculinity of the white man was denied to the enslaved black man (Harding 1991:179); and, of course, femininity and masculinity were constructed in a Western-specific binary opposition. In terms of sexualised, racialised and gendered norms, the enslaved women were characterised as sexually aggressive, perverse and strong to do 'any sort of labor', whilst European women were considered fragile and sexually passive (Lugones 2007:203).

Considering the aforementioned interconnections, the priority of a Global South feminist is not only gender but also imperialism, neo-colonialism, racism and classism – all affecting Global South women and the wider population (Harding 1991:193; Johnson-Odim 1991:316-20). A gender-only focus of the master-narrative of feminism does not take into account the multitude of experiences, histories and knowledges:

In fact, black, white, and other third world women have very different histories with respect to the particular inheritance of post-fifteenth-century Euro-American hegemony: the inheritance of slavery, enforced migration, plantation and indentured labor, colonialism, imperial conquest, and genocide

(Mohanty 1991:10).

Within the ideology of white supremacy, whiteness[3] leaves white feminists' racialised identity unexamined, leading to a distorted view of both themselves and those different from them (Harding 1991:209; hooks 1984:55). Through 'othering', the WMW feminist is involved in self-presentation and self-constitution as always-already superior, entitled, liberated, emancipated, empowered, modern, educated and free (Mohanty 1986:337; Moore-Gilbert 2005:455). White supremacy is not only non-white people's 'problem', but it is a white and feminist issue due to its embedding in social reproduction, shaping identities, interactions, experiences and social systems (Russo 1991:299-300).

# United by Strength or Oppression? A Critique of the Western Model of Feminism

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There is a distinction between 'women' as a discursively constructed group and 'women' as 'material subjects of their own history' (Mohanty 1986:337-8). The WMW feminism assumes a universal ideal-type of 'Third World woman' defined in negative terms in relation to the referent. Within colonial-development studies and industry, the signifier 'third world woman' stands in for a monolithic, uni-dimensional, essentialised and fixed category, stripped of agency, history and subjectivity; in other words, the socially constructed identity of Global South women by the WMW feminism subsumes their agency. This top-down fixation of women in ahistoricity and passivity creates the 'Third World Difference' which implies not only that all women are universally oppressed, but that third-world women are even more so (Mohanty 1986:335). Within colonial-development, the WMW approaches make use of a modern imaginary to enact a classificationist machinery to 'transform differences into values' (Mignolo 2012:13). With the inscription of values and classifications upon women, their body becomes a site of struggle, a 'third colony' – 'additional to colonised states and subjected nature' (Aguinaga et. al. 2013:49) against which coloniality and patriarchy enforce systematic violence.

*United strategically through strength, as feminists, for social transformation: decolonisation, difference and solidarity*

how can feminists collectively understand multiple differences and asymmetries of power, use the insights from differences, hear the anger, not the silences, and keep conviction?

(Harcourt 2009:201)

Although differences have been 'misnamed' for the ideal of 'homogeneity' (Lorde 1984:119-20), the radical alterity and autonomous assertion of difference by people in the Global South can replace the WMW enclosures and erasures because women's positions, although different, are 'intertwined and interdependent' (Glenn, cited by Russo 1991:303). 'Difference' can be used positively for transformative purposes to enact borderless solidarity outside of the hegemonic parameters of the WMW feminism and to recognise the plurality of universalisms –without sliding into relativism- which are connected, politically autonomous and particularly situated. To avoid erasing the particular within the universal or dichotomising the two, I follow Mohanty in arguing that 'the particular is often universally significant' (2003:501). The 'common differences' shared between feminists cross-borders, and the commonalities of the particularity of difference are tools for building bridges of solidarity and alliance based on interdependence and the mutual recognition of agency and autonomy[4] inherent in all bodies (Russo 1991:305; Mohanty 2003:502-4). This approach overcomes the Western myth of solipsism which depicts individuals as isolated, self-generated, self-centred, above and beyond history and location (Grosfoguel 2012:88-9), revealing that patriarchy has no gender (hooks 2014), just as whiteness has no colour (Mills 1997:127). Following from this, I argue that feminism does not have gender either – it is a political commitment to which people differently situated on the gender spectrum adhere.

Spivak argues that feminists of the Global North cannot encounter the Global South without carrying a lot of baggage, and for this reason the former ought to acknowledge their complicity and position in the geopolitical, global context (Kapoor 2004:628; 641). Solidarity can be shown through positive acknowledgement of difference and by strategically using positivist essentialism 'in a scrupulously visible political interest' (Spivak 1988:205). One cannot be purely anti- or non-essentialist, as 'the subject is always centered' (Spivak 1990:109); 'strategic essentialism', then, requires being conscious of the (im)possibility of escaping essentialism, and using one's location for social transformation. It is to be noted that some feminists who critique the homogenisation and abstract universalisation of the WMW women's experience, are involved in essentialising and relativising culture instead (Narayan 1998:87-88), thus not committing themselves to challenging injustice and to acknowledging the involvement of the West within 'other cultures'. For instance, gendered divisions in the Global South were consolidated/exacerbated through colonisation and the import of institutions where female-male complementarity was not conceived of in equal terms:

the colonizers addressed their demands and their technical innovations to men, thus favouring men's access to cash, the economic dependency of women and, as a result, the emergence of the patriarchal nuclear family

(Etienne and Leacock 1980b:19).

# United by Strength or Oppression? A Critique of the Western Model of Feminism

Written by Ioana Cerasella Chis

Within mainstream colonial-development studies, solipsism and the dichotomy created between value-free objectivity and judgemental relativism are prevalent (Harding 1991:139); instead, writing needs to take on the perspective of groups and ideas which have been subalternised and left out of conventional knowledge. Standpoint epistemology is a method which shows the positive and objective nature of the 'outsiders within' (Harding 1991:150), being 'in part [...] a struggle against the illiteracy of the elite' (Hirsh and Olson 2005:194). It allows 'the Other to gaze back "shamelessly" at the self who had reserved for himself the right to gaze "anonymously" at whomsoever he chooses' (Harding 1991:150). In other words, the standpoint analysis begins from the perspective of marginalised subjects (Mohanty 2003:511), decentring both Western epistemology as the referent, and the researcher's role as the 'framer of decolonising knowledge' (Langdon 2013:394). It acknowledges embodied realities and the historically-situated and partial dimension of knowledge, which leads to strong objectivity and reflexivity (the 'neutral' objectivism and judgemental relativism have weak objectivity) (Harding 1991:142). As the costs of colonial-development are carried out by Third World women (Harding 1991:206), their experiences give them epistemological advantage.

Decoloniality and the praxis of decolonisation are feminist issues and alternatives to development which allow for self-actualisation and creation of new imaginaries, outside of the confines of the current colonial-developmental, hegemonic gender-based policies and assemblages of laws, ideas and institutions. Decoloniality has at its core the idea of 'pluri-versalisms', and in actuality one cannot discuss decoloniality in a singular form, as its praxis is socially and historically situated, and informed by the local, daily struggles of people who are *positively* different (Grosfoguel 2012). Decolonisation involves the concrete unsettling of settler domination and their use of land, water, air, animals, and the repatriation of Indigenous land (Tuck and Yang 2012:18-22), as well as dismantling the colonial fields of knowledge and being (lived experience), so as to stop the reproduction of the *whitestream* pattern of uncritical thinking, and to make space for inter-epistemic conversations (Aguinaga et. al. 2013:57; Grosfoguel 2012:101). In analysing the Canadian Constitution's impact upon Indigenous people in Canada, Ladner argues that *decolonisation as a gendered project* must be grounded in indigenous understandings of gender, challenging masculinist ideas of sovereignty and nationalism. Conversely, when *decolonising gender*, the focus should not be only on women, but also on the construction of masculinity (2009:72) to reimagine gender roles, loyalties and relations.

## Conclusion

It is not my aim here to offer a solution or a blueprint for yet another 'gender-based approach to development' for two reasons: firstly, 'development', as mentioned before, is intrinsically linked to the ideology of colonialism and its material legacies, being a patriarchal *dispositif* which accommodates neoliberal, neo-colonial, economic fundamentalist strategies and policies. Secondly, due to the institutionalisation of the WMW feminism and its problematic assumptions and hegemonic dimensions within and outside development, the WMW model of feminism cannot be simply reformed – it needs to be replaced. Feminism and solidarity start with unlearning sexism and racism, because discriminatory socialisation alienates people from one another, impeding solidarity (hooks 1984:46-9) and leaving false dichotomies unchallenged. In relation to the colonial-development sphere, feminist solidarity needs to start by devising not 'development alternatives' but 'alternatives to development' (Escobar 1995:215). An alternative to colonial-development and its gender-based approaches requires dismantling the master narrative of the donor – recipient relationship established through development/aid transactions. Instead, reparations for colonialism and imperialism would be a significant step in regressing Western hegemony (Abbas and Ndeda 2009:88).

A cross-border, internationalist feminism would require from the WMW feminist to recognise their problematic location within the colonial nexus of power, and be of assistance, rather than lead feminist initiatives. Taking a standpoint approach, using essentialism strategically and being reflexive about one's relation to the social world, is a first step forward. A horizontalist political struggle of sisterhood is still possible, as the hegemonic role of the WMW feminism has not, and cannot, monopolise and stop solidarity, radical critical thinking and autonomous praxis. We can 'think collectivities without at least some kind of essentialism', avoiding claims of unity on the basis of experience or identity alone (creating 'identity politics'), by setting up groups for particular purposes and periods (Phillips 2010:17-8) to delink feminism from the white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy. A new consciousness, standpoints and common contexts of struggle are needed to consolidate an enabling movement based on the strengths, resources and agency of all women and feminists, rather than solely on their role as victims. Acts of solidarity need to

# United by Strength or Oppression? A Critique of the Western Model of Feminism

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be constantly re-enacted and re-affirmed, to establish new collectives and decolonised modes of being as well as material transformation. In the words of Queensland Aboriginal Activist collective in the 1970s addressing the WMW feminists,

If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But, if you have come because your liberation is bound up in mine, let us work together.

(cited by Langdon 2013:386)

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# United by Strength or Oppression? A Critique of the Western Model of Feminism

Written by Ioana Cerasella Chis

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## **Endnotes**

[1] From here onwards, I will consistently add the 'colonial' marker to 'development' as a constant reminder of the inner implications and effects of 'development'. In a similar fashion, the 'white, middle class and Western model of feminism' referred to in this paper should rather be called 'the white supremacist, classist, imperialist and colonial model of feminism'; however, to make the reading easier, I use 'WMW'.

[2] The separation between the public and private sphere was a historical context which is more relevant to white women's history (Narayan 1998:86).

[3] 'Whiteness is not really a colour at all, but a set of power relations' (Mills 1997:127) which do privilege the white individual within the colonial matrix of power.

[4] Autonomy is to be defined as the capacity to 'participate effectively in shaping the boundaries that define [...] the field of what is possible' (Hayward, cited by Cornwall 2007:165).

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