

Who Really Wins when Third World Women are Saved?

Western discourse frequently judges the modernity of developing countries, particularly non-Western Islamic nations, through the status of their women. The widespread belief in the West that women in developing countries are victims to their cultures and governments reinforces gendered orientalist ideas that the West is modern in its “respect for women”, while the Global South is pre-modern in its “oppression of women”. This rhetoric provides justification for Western-sponsored NGOs to operate transnationally in developing countries in the Global South under the guise of “saving” or “empowering” women by providing aid that will transform them into dignified, liberal feminists on the pathway towards modernity. In this paper, I argue that, in reality, many of these Western-sponsored NGOs working in the Global South, despite marketing themselves as champions of women’s rights and empowerment, fail to recognize the varying cultural, historical and social backgrounds in which the question of women’s status is set, and thus reinforce harmful discourses and practices that maintain violent cycles of neocolonialism and orientalism. I will examine the NGOs Beauty without Borders in Afghanistan, and the Grameen Bank and Proshika in Bangladesh, to demonstrate the conflicting narratives between what they claim to do for “oppressed” women and the realities of their transnational presence.

Historically, Western intervention in other countries has always been pursued with a humanitarian component in its intent. This humanitarian assertion often supports Western efforts to “outsource patriarchy”— as Inderpal Grewal writes in her paper “Outsourcing Patriarchy: Feminist Encounters, Transnational Mediations and the Crime of “Honour Killings”, “...such outsourcing requires that many in the USA believe that patriarchy no longer exists, or that if it does, it is limited to zones that are believed to be anachronistic to the rest of the country”

(Grewal 2). That is, U.S. foreign aid is supposedly designed to help developing countries “outgrow” patriarchy as America already has and achieve modernity. At the turn of the 21st century, Western feminists adopted the slogan “women’s rights are human rights” as a common expression addressing gendered forms of violence (Nguyen 368). The slogan, in its claim to universal applicability, ignores the complexities of history, politics and transnationalism in favor of liberal ideals of women’s freedom and individuality. Thus exists the Western linear model of progress and development, where the first step in the path towards modernization is achieving women’s rights. As a result, contemporary modernization regimes have conjoined Western ideals of self-esteem with entrepreneurial individualism through operations administered by NGOs. Many of these NGOs are able to combine their marketed goals of helping poor “Third World women” achieve income and social opportunities with their goals of maximizing profits, whether those profits come in the form of fiscal gain, the production of media narratives that circulate transnationally, or the wars fought to “save brown women from brown men” (Grewal 2).

One such NGO that sought to uplift and empower “Third World women” is Beauty without Borders, which in 2003, opened the Kabul Beauty School in Afghanistan administered by North American and European fashion industry and nonprofit professionals. The goal of the beauty school was to “restore self-esteem and independence” for Afghan women oppressed by Taliban rule (Nguyen 360). However, in establishing a beauty school in Kabul, Beauty without Borders enforces Western ideals of beauty as freedom and condenses knowledge of Afghanistan and its forms of gender through the burqa-clad bodies of Afghan women. Beauty without Borders draws upon dangerous imaginaries of the burqa as “a regressive and premodern remnant, a metonym for a barbaric Islam, a shorthand for the subjugation of women, a violation of the ‘basic principles of international human rights law’” (Nguyen 365). Western feminist objections

to the burqa center around its restriction of movement, access to public space, and the feminine body. In contrast, the hair curler, eyeliner, and nail polish utilized by the Kabul Beauty School's "extreme makeover" of Afghan women represent movement, choice, and independence. The makeover targets the inability of burqa-clad women to exercise sovereignty over the self, and provides instruction for not only how to improve their appearance cosmetically, but also how to evaluate and regulate their bodies in the future.

Thus, Beauty without Borders allows for the creation of a liberal feminist subject who seeks to improve herself alongside Western development regimes that portray women in the Global South, particularly in Islamic nations, as needing modernization. As Mimi Nguyen writes in her article "The Biopower of Beauty: Humanitarian Imperialism and Global Feminisms in the Age of Terror", the establishment of the Kabul Beauty School is emblematic of "knowledge formations informed by civilizational thinking and shared by global feminisms, development programs, human rights regimes, and military humanitarianism" (Nguyen 374). In claiming to empower, esteem, and save Afghan women, Beauty without Borders manifests an attachment to Western imperial violence and state intervention in the Global South that is essential in justifying the enduring wars fought on behalf of freedom and democracy for "Third World" women's liberation (Nguyen 379).

Beauty without Borders is only one of many other NGOs that seeks to popularize secular norms such as the freedom of speech, assembly, religion, and the rights of rural women in predominantly Muslim societies. The Grameen Bank and Proshika, operating in Bangladesh, are microfinance NGOs that (on paper), center around promoting poor women's self-reliance and income-generating potential as entrepreneurs (Karim 70). Both NGOs have consumer bases made up of millions of poor, primarily female borrowers that depend on them for loans, jobs, and

services. In reality however, as Lamia Karim writes in Chapter 3 of her book *Microfinance and its discontents: Women in debt in Bangladesh*, these NGOs often have many types of “unstated collateral written into their practices that produce toxic and dangerous effects contradictory to the stated goals of these NGOs of ‘helping the poorest women’” (Karim 73). For example, the Grameen Bank utilizes a system of hierarchy as a disciplinary technology called “peer monitoring”, in which each individual member of a group of female borrowers is jointly responsible for the loans they take. This constant peer monitoring of one another by individual group members helps protect the financial investments of the NGOs by creating a system of supervision and surveillance where women police other women on behalf of the NGOs. The Grameen Bank publicly reports the instances of policing as opportunities for women to fight patriarchal norms and become empowered, when in reality, the system has resulted in increased friction and animosity within the groups of women borrowers and in the wider community.

Similarly, some Western-sponsored NGOs operating in Bangladesh such as Proshika, create dangerous situations for women as a by-product of their clashes with the rural clergy over their conflicting views regarding rural women’s rights. Proshika and many other more socially progressive NGOs conspire that the clergy is working towards creating a Taliban-like state in Bangladesh. While Proshika villainizes the clergy by linking it with the Taliban, Karim argues in Chapter 5 of her book that in reality, Proshika and the clergy are entangled in very similar motivations. In 1998, Proshika planned to celebrate a five-day developmental fair, expressing views that the fair would empower women and improve Bangladesh’s image abroad. The event was heavily opposed by the clergy, who felt that fairs encouraged un-Islamic acts (Karim 140). Despite the warnings from the clergy and the concern expressed by local peoples for the potential conflict that could arise from the fair, Proshika, committed to its values in development and

modernist work, pressed forward with its plans. The day of the fair, the clergy arrived and attacked the rally-attendees, particularly women, who were beaten and publicly humiliated. With Proshika and the clergy both attempting to establish their governance and opposing ideologies over rural subjects and poor women, such drastic conflict was inevitable. In the end, their violent encounter at Proshika's fair played out through the brutalization of the bodies of the very women they sought to empower. These women, who were neither informed nor willing participants of the rally, were the real victims in the violence that resulted from the conflict (Karim 161).

Beauty without Borders, the Grameen Bank, and Proshika, all serve as examples of Western-sponsored NGOs operating in the Global South with missions to save the oppressed peoples living there. But their missions alone are deeply embedded in historical discourses and practices of orientalism, feminism, and imperialism. In other words, by serving the West's mission to aid "Third World women" along the pathway to modernity, whether it be through achieving beauty and self esteem, or becoming self-reliant entrepreneurs, these NGOs further perpetuate violent orientalist beliefs in an inherent barbarism of other cultures. In the end, those who truly benefit from these transnational exchanges are the Western nations and NGOs that can champion themselves as saviors and humanitarians, while the women the NGOs claim to be fighting for remain caught between the already-existing patriarchal institutions and the governmentality of the NGOs and Western empire at large.

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