

Neoliberalism and the international gender-development agenda: Escaping lyrical metaphorical seduction in the Solomon Islands

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Abstract

Neoliberal economic rationalizations promote gender equality and women's empowerment as instrumental to economic development and social justice. Women are simultaneously portrayed as victims and saviours, not only for themselves but for their families, societies and the environment. These neoliberal interpretations of gender equality and action are decontextualized and largely blame culture and social norms for underdevelopment without challenging structural causes of poverty and oppression. However, such formulations are attractive because they are morally uplifting and offer visions of hope and triumph. Using empirical evidence from a logging dispute in a Solomon Islands village, I examine how framing women's action in this incident as women's resistance fulfils neoliberal visions of women's role in sustainable development but fails to capture the reality of gender relations. I touch briefly on a construction of agency in neoliberal discourse about women's empowerment that is based on individual free will and structurally dislocated. I argue that escaping seductive lyrical metaphors is necessary for an understanding of gender relations grounded in indigenous epistemologies and an expanded conceptualisation of agency.

Keywords: Gender, Neoliberalism, Development, Solomon Islands, Agency

The gender agenda and neoliberalism

Discourse in the international sustainable development paradigm constructs women as perennial victims that are culturally, socially and physically disadvantaged in natural resource management issues. Women's interests are often essentialised and aligned with a life giving nature which is being destroyed by men and modernity (capitalist culture) (Bannerjee & Bell 2007: 140). "Women" as a discrete category, with a unified position in developing countries, is further reified by a globally situated position of disadvantage which constructs "traditional" cultures as partly to blame for a lack of "development" and as a cause of women's oppression (Crewe & Harrison 1998).

The “gender agenda” has its roots in feminist aims to transform unequal power relations. The success of feminists in promoting this agenda and in gaining ground in development circles can be traced through the 1970s “women in development” agenda, the 1980s “women and development”, the 1990s “gender and development” and the current policy of “gender mainstreaming”. While it is indisputable that the gender agenda has come to prominence, it is questionable whether original feminist aims of transforming unequal power relations have survived absorption into development institutions and government bureaucracies – their “domestication” (Cornwall 2007b: 69). Cornwall (2007b: 70) claims that “gender” gained power in development discourse when “it began to take the shape of an acceptable euphemism that softened ‘harder’ talk about rights and power”. Murdock’s (2003: 147) ethnographic account of the institutionalization of the feminist agenda in Colombia found that the discourse of gender had moved beyond feminist goals, namely seeking social transformation of unequal power relations, before those goals had been reached. Thus, in the process of becoming institutionalized, the term gender has become depoliticized and uncoupled from a feminist agenda seeking structural social change.

Cornwall (2007b: 70) claims that gender is one of the many terms in development discourse that has gone from being a “buzzword” to a “fuzzword”. Buzzwords are characterised by their “vague and euphemistic qualities”. Buzzwords are terms and concepts put to work in ways that undermine their conceptual historical goals (for some examples see: Hickel & Khan 2012; Hickel 2014; Rist 2010; Cornwall et al. 2008; Cornwall 2007a; b; Murdock 2003; Smyth 2007). Buzzwords become fuzzwords when they conceal ideological differences (Cornwall 2007a: 481). A good example is the ‘gender as smart economics’ approach employed by international financial institutions and multinational corporations that ultimately further neoliberal economic goals while posing as measures to address gender inequality (Chant & Sweetman 2012; Sweetman 2012: 395; Hickel 2014).

Women will save the world: A neoliberal fantasy where gender equity meets sustainable development

International discourses of sustainable development claim a special place for women, who are simultaneously portrayed as “virtuous victims” (Sweetman 2012: 402) “development accelerators” (UNESCO 2012: 1) and saviors of the environment (Foster 2011: 137). The World Bank (2011: xiv) says; “Gender equality is at the heart of development. It’s the right development objective, and it’s smart economic policy”. While the capability approach and the human development index seek to measure human development by more than economic terms, a “women as smart economics” approach provides economic rationale for gender equality and is explicitly instrumental. This approach seeks to make available to women equality of access to resources in the manner of the “rational economic man” albeit in the form of a (good) “womanly” version: a woman whose increased earnings and access to resources will benefit families and thus societies as a whole as she reinvests her earnings in the wellbeing of others (Prugl 2015: 619).

Women’s agency in this discourse is located as an exercise of free will at the individual level (Wilson 2008: 83). This conceptualisation of agency relies on a construction of the ‘good woman’ – altruistic and hardworking, whose priority is to care for her children and extended family, even at the cost of her own health and certainly at the sacrifice of her leisure time or spending on personal consumption (Wilson 2008: 87). Thus, while women are framed as victims, they are also promoted as agents of change working for sustainable development. Wilson (2008: 87) argues that the ‘efficiency’ discourse around women in development, in the absence of structural analysis, implies that efficiency and altruism are uniquely feminine qualities which fit into “new, specifically neoliberal constructions of the ‘good’ woman”. This production of gender identities works ultimately in the service of neoliberal economic goals, legitimising interventions to mobilise women’s ‘productive capacity’ in the formal economy (Prugl 2015; Foster 2011).

Multinational corporation Nike promotes this strategy in their Girl Effect project. They assert that “investing in girls has the potential to save the world”. The Girl Effect project claims that it is “about leveraging the unique potential of adolescent girls to end poverty for themselves, their families, their communities, their countries and the world” (Nike Foundation 2015). In such rhetoric, the onus of action shifts onto women and girls to not only lift themselves out of poverty, but to end poverty for everyone else as well (Hickel 2014). Women and girls are scripted to be changing the world from within oppressive structural contexts (Chant & Sweetman 2012: 525). Promoting the empowerment of women in this way may be seen as a neoliberal version of feminism (Prugl 2015: 619).

Ahikire (2008: 29) describes how gender mainstreaming has resulted in a vicious watering down of the feminist underpinnings of the gender and development knowledge base. I argue here that employing morally uplifting metaphors of women’s empowerment contributes to this erosion by obscuring contextual nuance and actual gender relations. In 2013, while resident in a village in the Solomon Islands, I witnessed an incident where a group of women and a large mob of children stood in front of logging machinery, refusing to let it progress into the forest. In the context of men’s domination of the logging industry in the Solomon Islands, which I describe in more detail below, it is tempting to frame this incident as *women’s* resistance – women, as a group, as environmental champions. Nike, masters of marketing, realise with their Girl Effect project that a narrative of women and girls rising up to take back power, save the environment and improve their lives is inspiring and uplifting. However, closer examination of gender relations in the ethnographic incident I describe reveals that the women’s action was part of a coordinated strategy by those people with primary land rights, men and women, opposed to the logging project.

By taking this approach I seek to ground the concepts of gender and agency in ‘lived relations’ (McNay 2004). I follow McNay (2004: 4), who uses the concept of agency to mediate “the interconnections between cultural and economic forces, identity formations and social structures”. In this way the ethnographic incident I describe, rather than representing an expression of struggle between essentialised gender categories - women aligned with nature and sustainability against men assigned dominance and capitalist culture - remains socially and culturally embedded (Kandiyoti 1998: 146).

(Escaping) seduction by lyrical metaphor in the Solomon Islands

In 2013 I was resident in a village on Kolombangara Island for 7 months for the purposes of PhD research into gender relations at the intersection of natural resource management and development. During the time of my residence in the village, an acrimonious dispute erupted over a proposed large scale logging project by a foreign company. The village community split over the dispute, with close kin positioned on either side of the argument, which sometimes flared into violent confrontation. The history of large scale logging in the Solomon Islands is rife with similar stories. I briefly describe the context of logging in the Solomon Islands, the metaphors that I was tempted to employ in analysing the dispute, and why eventually I decided that they had to be rejected.

Since the 1980s, large scale logging by foreign companies on customary owned land has been the largest single export industry and a major source of national income in the Solomon Islands (Gay 2009; Porter & Allen 2015). This logging regime has been notable for high levels of corruption, unequal distribution of benefits and worst environmental practice (For some examples see Barlow, 1997; Bennett, 2000; Frazer, 1997; Gay, 2009; Hviding, & Bayliss-Smith, 2000; Kabutaulaka, 2000, 2006; URS Sustainable Development, 2006). In the scholarly literature, villagers are often presented as victims of unethical foreign logging companies, their own corrupt politicians and greedy chiefs or kinsmen.

Women are hardly visible in this narrative as anything other than victims. Male actors dominate, be they the foreign logging companies, the corrupt politicians and the chiefs, elders or others involved in business negotiations and land disputes (Kabutaulaka 2000). Solomon Islands is a patriarchal society – men have greater access to important resources as well as greater institutional access to power and privilege (Bannerjee & Bell 2007: 10; Porter & Allen 2015: 1). The sexual division of labor in Solomon's society is distinctive. Forestry and big business generally are considered men's work. The history of logging in the Solomon islands has seen power and financial benefit concentrated in the hands of powerful educated men, often politicians, with minimal benefit to others (Porter & Allen 2015; Bennett 2000).

The opportunity for lyrical metaphorical analysis of gender relations abounds in the Solomon Islands context, and much of Melanesia. For example, rules of pollution dictate that men bathe upstream and women bathe downstream. It is possible to construct a narrative rich in oppositional binaries, with metaphors of women downstream in issues around natural resource management – physically, socially and culturally. For example, Kolombangara Island is named for its abundance of water. *Kolo* means water and *bangara* means chief or king or god; Kolombangara is the king of water, masculine in this aspect. Seen from the provincial capital of Gizo across the Blakett Strait 16 kilometres away, people claim the island profile looks like woman lying down. They note her long hair streaming behind her, the point of her nose, forehead and chin, the mounds of her breasts, a round belly and the length of her legs. So Kolombangara is referred to as “the sleeping woman”, feminine in this aspect.

Villages on Kolombangara are mostly located on the coastal plains, and logging activity usually takes place upstream on forested mountain slopes. Village water supplies are almost always downstream of logging activity. Despite an abundance of water, many villages on Kolombangara Island do not have piped water supply and villagers must carry water to the village from the river or carry things to the river from the village. In many cases, water supply infrastructure has been destroyed by logging activity, or watersheds and river buffer zones have not been respected by logging companies, resulting in siltation of rivers and decreased and/or dirty water supply. Washing dishes and clothes and carrying drinking and cooking water is predominantly women's work. Thus the upstream activity of logging impacts disproportionately on women's activities downstream.

In my village of residence, I witnessed many months of contentious meetings about the advisability and viability of the large scale logging project coming to the forest above the village. This village had experienced a large scale logging project before, and many in the village were opposed to the current proposed project due to their previous experience, from which they claimed they had received minimal financial benefit and a degraded forest. Others supported the proposed project for a variety of reasons, many to do with the possibility of gaining access to resources and financial benefit that they might not otherwise be in a position to gain (see Dyer forthcoming for more detail). The project had the backing of powerful political figures in Honiara (Solomon Times 2013), and despite opposition the logging company barge eventually arrived loaded with machinery. Police from Gizo and “security” men employed by the logging company from a neighbouring village were in attendance when the logging barge arrived in the village, as were both the anti and pro logging villagers.

The only people to overtly challenge the barge landing were three older women from the land owning group, who verbally harangued the logging company staff unloading machinery. Until this point, women's public opposition to logging had been barely visible. Meetings about logging were dominated by men, both in terms of attendance and contributions to the meeting. Meetings of elders and tribal leaders were exclusively male. High level business negotiations took place

mostly in Honiara and did not include any women. Thus, physically and metaphorically, women appeared downstream - exercising minimal influence in decision making over natural resource management and able to register opposition only at a physical level.

After the machinery arrived in the village, the logging company began clearing a road to gain access to the stand of forest to be logged. After several days of operation, a group of men opposed to the logging confronted the logging machinery and men working with the logging company. A minor scuffle broke out with allegations that the anti-logging faction threw rocks at the logging machinery. The following morning, police from Gizo arrived in the village and roused the men involved from their beds, handcuffing them and escorting them to the jail cells at the Gizo police station. The men spent the day in the cells, were charged with intimidation (a charge that was subsequently dropped), and were released in the evening.

After this event the village landowners opposed to the logging met and formulated a new strategy. They decided that the women should physically oppose the logging machinery while the men would lie hidden in bushes nearby. Thus, when the machinery started back up the road and crossed the river (a point of contention and heightened emotion due to the subsequent dirtying of the village water supply), the same three older women who had confronted the machinery when it landed, followed by a large mob of children, gathered in front of the machines. The women did not throw rocks or attack the machines in any way, although one of the women leapt up into a machine, from which the operator rapidly fled. Ultimately the machinery stopped its progression into the forest and returned to the logging camp.

Without knowledge of the background events leading up to this action by the women, it is possible to construct this story as one of women defending the forest and their water supply with their own bodies as a last resort. It was, in fact, the power of the women's embodied morality which made their action effective (Pollard 2000: 9-10). Social norms dictate that the women cannot be manhandled by the male "security" employed by the logging company (who were mostly their relatives from the neighbouring village). This would contravene cultural norms around physical contact between men and women – which is highly restricted in public even between husbands and wives and is mostly taboo between adult men and women related in various ways. The men waiting hidden in the bushes would be justified, culturally, in retaliating violently if their women's moral bodily sanctity was challenged.

However, the women who opposed the machinery were not just any or all of the women in the village. They were senior women with primary land rights from the customary land holding group matriline, resident matrilocally (land rights in this village are inherited matrilineally). They were not "women" defending the forest, they were people defending their land rights using a culturally specific strategy that deliberately invoked sites of power located in gendered bodies.

This background ethnographic information situates the women's action in the context of their land rights and the cultural norms that locate the women's power in a construction of gendered bodies. Without such detail it is possible to frame this incident in rousing metaphors that portray women as environmental defenders; the sleeping woman of Kolombangara awakens! However, employing such lyrical metaphors "(re)produce[s] constructions of distinct and coherent, binarised gender categories, namely man and woman, based on the dichotomised schema of culture and nature respectively" (Foster 2011: 136).

Such discourses, evident in sustainable development rhetoric, echo colonial discourses in which colonized women appear "in the context of their perceived need to be 'rescued' from 'their' men and/or 'backward' societies" (Wilson 2008: 84). I attempt here to ground women's agency in lived gender relations which reveal women's action as embedded in social and cultural gender relations (McNay 2004: 175).

This perspectival shift represents an inversion of the usual knowledge pyramid on three related counts. Firstly, it does not privilege a particular group as the norm (Mohanty 1984: 334), in this case avoiding constructions of what is developed based on socially evolutionist hierarchies and neoliberal ideology of the individual (Hickel & Khan 2012). Secondly, and encompassed by a construction of the “norm”, it rethinks a notion of what gender equality is and how it can be achieved that is not explicitly western. Lastly, it moves beyond a study of women as a discursively constructed category to a study of gender – the interrelations between men and women and their centrality to social organisation (Moore 1988: 6; Cornwall 2003: 1337). This is an essential move in order to bring contextual specificity and to avoid assuming men and women as already constituted subjects in a culturally flattened arena of social relations (Mohanty 1984: 340).

Conclusion

Solomon Islands is a patriarchal society. High rates of violence against women and disparities in income and education levels between men and women give good cause for working for women’s empowerment. However I argue that one must escape the buzz and fuzz of neoliberal development discourse that creates a simultaneously victimized and superwoman caricature.

Starting with an expanded conceptualisation of women’s agency, socially and culturally constituted, allows the space for an examination of *gender relations*, rather than discursively created and separated gender categories. Hopefully such analytical nuance can inform development strategies that are grounded in indigenous epistemologies, rather than simply problematizing culture. While such approaches perhaps provide less tempting lyrical metaphors, they can work to resist explicitly instrumental neoliberal narratives.

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