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Erasmus University Rotterdam
Making Minds Matter

Feminist co-optation and body politics in development

Wendy Harcourt

p. 231-252

EDITOR'S NOTE

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

A longer version of this paper is published as a chapter in Harcourt (2017).

FULL TEXT

Introduction

1 A growing literature on feminists' engagement in body politics in the development process charts narratives that call for reproductive rights, sexuality and embodiment to be acknowledged in the development agenda in debates around women's agency, gender equality, health, population and environment (Petchesky 2002; Cornwall and Jolly 2008; Harcourt 2009; Lind 2010; Truong and Harcourt 2014; Jolly, Cornwall and Hawkins 2013). These studies show how body politics has brought issues of domestic violence; rape as a weapon of war; denial of sexual and reproductive rights; sexual oppression of women, children, homosexuals and transgender people; racism; and ageism into development policy and projects (Hartmann 1994; Lind 2010; Wieringa and Sivori 2012; Baksh and Harcourt 2015). They chart feminists' engagements in the UN and feminist advocacy through campaigns for rights, legitimacy, legality and freedom over their . These texts analyse feminist engagements in development by making visible the lded power relations within development processes, making what is private public nal is political) – in other words, charting "development with a body" (Jolly and all 2008).

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say reflects on that analysis, exploring whether there has been co-optation of feminism by the development processes (development industry, Aid-land) via a process of dilution and misinterpretation of feminist demands around body politics, following Patrick Coy's concern that co-optation "may have a diluting, demobilising, depoliticising and disempowering effect on the movement, its organisations, and on its leadership and key activities" (Coy 2013, 280). I explore co-optation in three overlapping areas. The first is the co-optation of feminist discourses, concepts and frames by development policy frames. The second is the co-optation of feminists into development institutions and

organisational structures. And thirdly I look at my own concerns about co-optation as a feminist working in development.

3 The growing literature on co-optation shows that these concerns have been on the minds of feminist researchers (Fraser and Naples 2004; Naples 2013; Ferguson 2014; Roberts 2015). My contribution to it reflects on a recent meeting in South Asia where I interrogated the co-optation of feminist understandings of body politics in development practices and programmes. By sharing this narrative, I aim to contribute to ideas on how to work with and against co-optation as part of feminist discursive and material practices that can embrace what Nancy Fraser calls the "strange shadowy version of itself" with an "uncanny double that it can neither simply embrace nor wholly disavow" (Fraser 2013a).

Self-reflection as a methodology of analysis

4 In writing about my engagement as a feminist working in gender and development policy and advocacy, I am contributing to an emerging literature of self-reflection among feminists working in gender and development (Harcourt 2005; 2009; De Jong 2009; Eyben 2012; Eyben and Turquet 2013; Sandler 2015). I am openly, passionately involved in the story I am telling. Such "insider-outsider" literature aims to critically analyse developmentalism by addressing our own personal experiences and the institutions where we work in dialogue with others. The literature situates the "we" who engages in gender and development. It analyses knowledge practices as political questions that engage with the epistemic and ontological assumptions behind feminism in development practices. Such analysis calls attention to the compromises and ambiguities of feminists working inside development and their struggles with what Ferguson (2015) calls internal and external understandings of gender in development policy and practice, and with the frustrating and depoliticising ways in which hegemonic male privilege continues to shape gender in their work (De Jong 2009; Fraser 2013b; Ferguson 2015).

What is body politics?

5 In my analysis of feminism in gender and development practices, I have written about body politics, focusing on the multiple processes where transnational feminist struggles [illegible]d gender equality, human rights and public health have been mainstreamed into [illegible] and national development agendas via gender, population and women's health [illegible]mmes (Harcourt 2005; 2009). As referred to above, the narrative that feminists [illegible]rought into development discourse sets out how women's experiences of bodily [illegible]ssion, violation, exploitation and commodification have long catalysed their [illegible]al engagement. Via a number of discursive practices, the narratives have aimed to re-centre embodied experiences in development processes and policymaking, without essentialising women (and also, though more muted, raising the issue of men and other genders). This sort of work brings up feminist questions about tradition, modernity, and the struggle for women's autonomy and rights, and acknowledges the legacies of gender bias, racism, homophobia, fundamentalism and militarism (Baksh and Harcourt 2015).

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6 My specific focus in body politics has been on sexual health and reproductive rights, with the goal of making visible diverse gendered embodied experiences, working within and

outside of mainstream development processes. In bringing body politics into development, this narrative has tried to displace the definition of women as being tied to their biological abilities to give birth and to their socialised roles as mothers, wives, daughters, sisters and grandmothers. It also focuses on how social and economic inequities have manifested in reproductive rights and health programmes. These discourses challenge maternity as the only female experience of embodiment, and increase the visibility of multiple forms of sexual and gender-based violence, including domestic violence, rape, femicide and honour killings, as well as the targeting and policing of women's (and other) bodies. Body politics, in recent years, has also put on the agenda the right to pleasure, calling attention to hetero-normativity (Hartmann 1995; Miller 2004; Cornwall and Jolly 2008; True 2012) and the diverse sexual needs of people of different cultures, classes, races, ethnicities, ages and genders – all under the term "erotic justice". Issues of masculine experiences of body politics and the inclusion of men and boys in gender discourse have been more contested, though acknowledged, and similarly, transgender has been threaded through the narrative (Connell 2012).

7 Previous work on population and reproduction, sexual and gender-based violence, sexuality, and development has contrasted "the lived bodily experiences of the violated women and the comfortable lives of women leading gender and development debates" (Harcourt 2009, 12). It has complemented that by looking at how "knowledge on bodies is irreducibly interwoven with other discourses, social, colonial, ethical and economic" (Shildrick and Price 1998, 3). With others in this literature, I have assumed that if we analyse how gendered bodies are constructed in different discourses, we can then challenge norms and oppressive practices and understand how to exercise different forms of power that can transform and change oppressive conditions (Cornwall and Jolly 2009; Harcourt 2009).

8 Other authors have explored global body politics around the series of UN conferences held in the 1990s that opened up public health policy to include sexual and reproductive rights and the issue of violence against women. Rosalind Petchesky (2002) gives an insider's analysis of women's participation in UN conferences, transnational networking and advocacy to promote sexual and reproductive rights and health. Her accounts of [illegible] UN conferences on population, women, social development and rights are linked [illegible] critique of World Bank, World Health Organization and national-level health [illegible]s in the period and describe economic, political and ideological forces confronting [illegible]n's health movements. She reviews the problem of NGO-isation and donor [illegible]dency for gender and development advocates. Peggy Antrobus (2004) presents another inside account of how southern-based transnational women's movements entered into national and UN discourse in order to advocate for more awareness in development policy about feminist issues of gender and sexuality, social justice and human rights, political economy and power. Antrobus documents the challenges and successes about the difficulties of building up from grassroots women's everyday lives to the global policy arenas where transnational feminists operate. The writings of Andrea Cornwall (Cornwall 2007; Cornwall and Jolly 2009; Pereira 2014) critique the co-optation of feminist issues around the body, sexuality, health and rights in development. They

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argue that feminist agendas on the body and sexuality have been "pushed out of the frame" of international development programs on gender (Cornwall, Corrêa and Jolly 2008, 4). Their work interrogates the relationship between knowledge production and power relations in feminist engagements with gender and development around sexuality, rights and health within "empowerment" discourses. Cornwall candidly raises the issue of co-optation, stating that gender in development has been

> blunted not only by the lack of specificity in its use, but also by the process of its domestication by development agencies… Transplanted from domains of feminist discourse and practice onto other, altogether different and in many ways inherently hostile institutional terrains, it would seem that "gender" has retained little of the radical promise that was once vested in its promotion… In the hands of the development mainstream, women's empowerment becomes a double-edged sword. Not only does it shift the spotlight away from structural issues of social and economic justice and onto the self-improving individual. It dislocates the "gender agenda" from precisely the concern with the relational dimensions of power that animated it in the first place. (Cornwall 2007, 69)[1]

9 In this exploration of whether doing gender as a feminist project in development has been co-opted, I am also discussing the issues raised by Lucy Ferguson in her article on the "messy business" of working as a gender expert in international institutions. She questions the feminist academic concerns that feminist agendas "evaporated" as gender has been "mainstreamed" into institutional and political circumstances in a process that simply served as a legitimation of neoliberal capitalism. Reflecting on her own struggles as a gender expert in development institutions, she asks if in some contexts "feminist strategies have turned from a model of resistance to an instrument of power" (Ferguson 2015, 381).

10 It is the tensions between feminists' awareness of co-optation and "the domestication" and taming of their political passions as they try to engage meaningfully in development processes that I explore in this essay.

Situated knowledge

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…te myself in development processes as a feminist engaged in various layers of …l processes and as an academic encountering "the objects of inquiry" in …hops, UN spaces and teaching arenas. In line with feminist methodologies …ng 1991), I state my own position while being open to the uncertainty of what I …about myself and others. In looking candidly at co-optation, I question my complicity in the contradictions at the heart of body politics, namely my position of privilege and unknowingness of the "other" (Rose 1997). In acknowledging and trying to come to terms with this inability to know the other in relation to differences in class, gender, age and race, I see the process of reflexivity as an ethical and political practice that enables me to engage critically with development practices as a problem space for feminist strategies.[2]

12 In order to explore in more detail body politics in development and to discuss my concern with co-optation, I now turn to a recent encounter in South Asia. I have chosen not to make explicit the country or exact place of encounter due to ethical concerns of privacy of the individuals involved. In addition, I see these as multiple encounters taking place over the years. I am interested in feminist development imaginaries that are being pursued in the encounters of feminist professionals "doing gender", in this case in relation to body politics. I aim to look at how these imaginaries are connected to other visits, stories and texts, which can serve to obscure the tensions and fail to engage with other lives (and bodies) that they are seeking to reach. The training involved three Europe-based trainers and one locally based trainer, and 15 selected participants. The time, travel and accommodations for the training were funded in full by a European government. The narrative is told from my point of view as one of the Europe-based trainers, and recounts conversations with the other trainers and participants.

Another hotel room, another city, another training workshop

13 A lasting memory from the training held in late 2014 is of me sitting at the top of the hotel each morning, high above the busy road, eating toast and eggs, and looking across at the water, the rubbish and the slums. Around me were young, well-dressed consultants of different nationalities and genders who were eating as they scanned their iPads, mobile phones or laptops, or held early meetings to discuss evaluations or plan projects. Such a setting clearly illustrated that I was participating in one small piece of a flourishing feminist streak in the development industry. Shortly before 9 am, a car picked us up to go the training centre. Though it was within easy walking distance along side streets, the pollution at that time of year made breathing difficult. My bodily awareness and physical discomfort at the pollution set out my otherness in a landscape where many thousands had to walk, whatever the pollution level. Once in the training centre, we did not leave until the end of the day. We had our tea breaks and lunches in the canteen along with the other training groups, and queued behind the counter reserved for our group. We used the same meeting room throughout the two weeks. The name of our workshop was printed on a slip of paper that fitted into a nifty slat next to the wooden nd could be easily removed for the workshop to follow. Inside the room, there was was required: white boards, PowerPoints and moveable wooden desks. I recall, as ost all such trainings I have attended, that the "air con" was a source of contention s too cold, but too hot if turned off – and if the windows were open, there was too noise as the windows opened onto busy suburban streets. As one of the local trainers commented, she could not survive without "air con" in her car, in her house, or at the training workshops. So we stayed cocooned in our cooled meeting space throughout the two weeks. Our days back and forth from the hotel to the training centre's room were only interrupted by a field trip to view a successful project, another evening to listen to NGOs discuss their work, a visit to a university, and tea with an embassy staff member, as well as an afternoon off for shopping and sightseeing. As we were ferried back and forth in traffic that went slower than the many people walking along the unpaved streets, we spoke about the day's work and planned how to run the next. Or we exchanged views on

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where to buy gifts for family back home. We chatted about other projects, gossiped about people with whom we had worked. All of the trainers had been to the country before, and we commented on the changes since we had last been – particularly one person who had been there nearly 20 years before. We reminisced about the greener, more authentic past. We expressed surprise and then resignation about the endless shopping streets with the bright lights, the fast fusion food, the terrible traffic, the pollution and the anonymity of it all. We all spoke English, and all of us, most of the time, lived in Europe. We were in a bubble of "Aid-land" (Mosse 2011), though as progressive feminists, we tried to make sense of what we could interpret, conscious of our otherness, while recognising the familiarity of the modern landscape (the traffic, food, etc.). The sense of loss of some imagined authentic past was also part of our otherness as we reflected, uncomfortably, on the damage to the culture by modernising development processes, of which we were a part. There was a sense that western cultures from where we came could be diverse and contradictory whereas "other" cultures should carry something unique and "pure" and recognizable. Our conversations about such tensions connected us back to other visits in other places, creating our sense of being part of the wider international community of development experts who were "doing" gender in difficult landscapes of "otherness" that we could, with support, manoeuvre, while at the same time lamenting change.

14 There are other aspects of this narrative that can be described as "development tourism" – the curiosity to visit the other, taste the local food, see the sites, and visit the homes and witness the lifestyles of people met elsewhere, as well as earn money. All of these desires are part of a deeply problematic interweaving of power and privilege that are rarely looked at critically by the professionals who are part of these routines (Stirrat 2008).

15 Such anonymous details of development training programmes are familiar to those engaged in today's streamlined development industry that "efficiently" produces such activities in modern anonymous cities – it is part of the landscape development has delivered. Our concerns, actions, and even emotions about our role, regrettable though necessary, fit well into the literature on the ethnography of development that describes ...d policy is carried out, looking at the social life of the projects and organisations ...e interactions of the different actors (Mosse 2004). We could have been ...pment professionals anywhere in modern South Asia, staying in a comfortable ...oom delivering a training programme in a well-appointed professional centre. We, ...her "experts", move from place to place as the bids for projects are made, the funds agreed upon, the training planned, the evaluation sheets completed, the costs monitored, the knowledge given, and the twinge of discomfort felt about our role in the development machinery.

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16 There seems nothing noteworthy in my description of the norms of modern development practice, but in considering co-optation of feminist practice, it becomes relevant to ask: What difference did it make that we were delivering feminist knowledge on gender, generation and sexuality in a development setting? Did our personal

engagement as feminists who had fought for abortion rights, campaigned to end gender-based violence, and lobbied for adolescent sex education, male engagement in reproductive health, and transgender rights, enable us to deliver this knowledge differently in the development practice? What were the histories that led to us "delivering" such knowledge in a package that brought us together with people from five different countries to do body mapping, debate body politics and discuss how to teach sex education in South Asian schools?

17 To look at those questions we need to continue to fill in the story further.

Patterned dances, connections and histories

18 The possibility for the training to happen was constructed out of multi-layered histories of connections created by feminist networks and solidarity movements. The invitation to set up the training programme emerged from several desires and needs. On a personal level, there was the Europeans' desire to come back to the area – to revisit past places, friends and sights. Two of the trainers had lived for some years in rural areas in the country – one spoke the local language fluently, had maintained close connections with one village and visited when consultancies (such as this one) allowed. Their professional and personal-political histories were intertwined with the country as solidarity workers and progressive feminists in the north and south, working in the 1980s campaigns to end "population control" and address violations and exclusions of women, and working together with fledging women's organisations and newly established NGOs taking up gender and poverty issues. I had also visited in the late 1990s and 2000s to talk about sexual health and reproductive rights as part of public health campaigns. This landscape was part of the training team's formative knowledge about "the other" in body politics and our solidarity work as feminists. As one of those "others", the local trainer had met us in extended visits to Europe, and an implicit part of the invitation was for us, as friends, to visit the local institution as peers in a training exercise. This would, it was suggested in emails before the funding application was made, enable us to engage in the current debates and discussion on body politics in South Asia and to explore further research possibilities.

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isscrossing of connections across Europe and South Asia, and across time, enabled al media, is typical of the stretched, progressive, professional feminist friendships ake up body politics in development. People meet first in political campaigns, sities or movement venues, and then adapt the engagement, desire and tion into professional encounters. This type of networking is described by Alison ward (2012) as the "velvet triangle" of informal governance among gender activists in the EU context as their "demands are taken on board thanks to a patterned dance of needy bureaucrats, dedicated activists and eager academics who are active at national and international levels and frequently linked to each other through informal as well as formal processes" (Woodward 2012, 145).

20 Such "patterned dances" are required in order to have access to resources made available by the development industry. Indeed, in this training, there were many

patterned dances around the resources, set by European rules and regulations. Rules could be bent to meet South Asian participant expectations (in terms of transport, food, comfort, and living expenses). The whole training was set up with a “shadow” intent that was not explicitly set out in the proposal – the official project aim was to deliver and exchange up-to-date knowledge on sexuality and gender and to build a network of feminists already engaged in development practices who wanted to work professionally in this area. Not stated was that it wanted to continue a sense of connection and belonging of different generations, bringing together the teachers and former students of a development institution to simply meet again, consolidate friendships and support each other in their different jobs (in non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations, governments, and research institutions). In this sense, it blended feminist desires for connection and networking into a sense of belonging to a community of feminists working in transnational development process. It reconfirmed past friendships and ties to the European institution, creating possibilities for future connections, and, as a certificate course, a further professional line to add to the CV for both the trainers and the participants. The enjoyment of the event, the renewal of friendships and connections, and the feminist intent to network and support peoples’ work in improving gender and sex education jarred with the concerns of co-optation of the development industry and with the differences of privilege not only in terms of race and geography but also in terms of access to certain forms of “sellable” knowledge and social and economic resources among the trainers and the participants.

Performativity in development encounters

21 Reflecting on my own responses to this story, there are many discomforts and contradictions with ideals, desires and needs to be “acting in solidarity” and yet not really “knowing” culturally and politically how “to be”. There is the performance of “being the gender expert” in a public context where I find my white, educated, historical privilege and otherness creating a “strange shadowy version” of feminism and a sense of co-optation. These experiences and feelings stemmed from many other meetings I attended in South Asia in the 2000s. In this particular meeting, I was unexpectedly invited to speak on body politics at a university. Having packed for a training workshop, I [illegible]d not have any appropriate clothing. I rushed to a fair trade shop to pick out a [illegible]fully embroidered dress in bright greens and pinks. I was aware that it would be [illegible]t to wear such a dress in a European university setting – its otherness (the [illegible]ate embroidery) would not have been suitable to what is considered the “white [illegible]n professorial role”. But, I wanted to wear it at the lecture as part of the [illegible]mance in order to use it as a way to discuss embodied otherness. I also felt my otherness in my drab European clothes and felt it would have been disrespectful to wear jeans. I was aware of the cultural awkwardness and therefore checked with the local organiser about the appropriateness. The issue of what clothes to wear, how to behave, what to look like as feminists or foreigners, and how to use clothes to position ourselves in places other than our own, particularly when there are many knowledgeable people in the room, is difficult. That the personal is political is also place-based knowledge, so we rely on being given clues by those who invite us – whether we are others from Europe in

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South Asia or others from South Asia in Europe. Wearing certain clothes to signal modernity, awareness of local culture, respect, education, age and gender is a highly conscious feminist act. I see this feminist knowledge of how to strategically adapt one's appearance and behaviour as part of body politics – and this is discussed by many cross-cultural feminist connections as we strategically bring friends to public events. In contrast to my dress choice, at another public occasion during the training programme, a well-known businesswoman was impeccably dressed in western attire, with eye-catching jewellery and a chic handbag and shoes. Her appearance and story of why she was a feminist, linked to family and professional fortunes, was clearly encouraged by the local organiser to assure the audience that feminism is part of the discourse of the political and business elite. Something similar could be said about why I was asked to speak by the organiser in my role as part of the academic elite, and why I chose to dress in another style in order to query that assumption and open up the issue of what clothes represent in different places and contexts.

22 In analysing the issues of body and appearance, the question of co-optation of feminism extends to how we perform in such public events. What does a dress say about feminism in those performances of development? The different attire signalled various messages of "what it is to be feminist" to an elite audience that understood that doing gender was about such events – to influence students to think differently about body politics (sexuality and gender) or to demonstrate that business elites can also be feminists and challenge male economic and social practices. We were both part of the elite NGO and business world that makes up the "Aid-land" community, with the economic resources to buy the clothes and to speak about liberal notions of feminist choice and desire as part of our own personal "empowerment". As discussed below, such a notion of empowerment does little to unsettle the economic privilege which allows such choices to be made.

23 The issue of funding was not on the agenda of the training workshop either, but it was still very much part of the event, along with the orchestration of decisions on whom to invite to events, how to appear, and what to do in order to show that everything was a success. Engaging with donors was key to the success of the training in order to promote the local host institution, reassure them that donor money was well-spent, and create ...ilities for further events. These "polite" visits to embassies and government ...ments are not minor side thoughts; in order to survive in the development ...y, the host-country institution needs to build its political positioning in a scene ... gaining funds and prestige is highly competitive. Everyone in the training ...mme was aware of that, so they discussed how to make those slightly awkward meetings work.

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24 The question here is how much this behaviour differs from any other business dealings – the use of personal connections and inside knowledge and people working out how far to stretch the rules according to whom (and what) you know "in the scene". Such political savvy is part of movement knowledge as well, even if the rules are normally less bureaucratic. The velvet triangle literature (Woodward 2012) looks at this informal governance network as a strategic and highly successful way to access resources. I will

return later to this question of co-optation as part of a particular neoliberal moment where feminism and neoliberalism have merged, as discussed by Kothari (2005), Fraser (2013a) and Ferguson (2015), among others.

Limitations and disconnects

25 There has been close scrutiny of transnational friendships, developmental tourism and claims of solidarity in post-colonial feminist literature – bringing out the continuity with colonial-style maternalism, the capture of knowledge and unacknowledged power relationships (Mohanty 1988; Grewal and Kaplan 2000; Spivak 2000; De Jong 2016). In particular, the need for a sense of belonging among progressive feminists within development practices is something I have noted, and felt, in other development encounters. Mixed with this sense of belonging to a community, there is a deep sense of unease with the layers of privilege, class, caste, age, marriageability, sexual identity, and emotional pain that can be discussed in the training exercise, but not outside the room or back home. The difficulty of describing and narrating experiences in English and building on texts, exercises and visuals often from somewhere else, that are not translated or maybe untranslatable, underlines certain power differentials. It also, quite simply, creates frustration about what can be taken away from development training.

26 Feminist practice in body politics is about challenging the givens and making visible that which is invisible, but it is also about collective practice. The difficulty of translating what is personally learnt and observed in development trainings into other political realities is a common observation. How can trainings where participants learn and speak away from "reality" be reproduced outside? Capturing the multiple levels of analysis that make up body politics, transporting it to trainings and then taking it out again is a fraught process. It is difficult for the technical expertise of a training workshop to allow for the messiness of body politics, which requires understanding the context as well as the disconnects in the development industry with life "outside the training room".

27 In this particular training, one disconnect is revealing. In a Saturday morning session, four young Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) activists presented their newly founded magazine on LGBT rights, the first in the country. The glossy magazine [illegible]sted with the sheets of paper around the room with crudely drawn female and [illegible]gures as part of a body mapping exercise. The magazine and presentation were a [illegible] visual and sophisticated queering of the fashion and the meanings of modernity [illegible]outh Asian" femininity and masculinity. The presentation positioned the magazine [illegible]obal media world where issues of sexuality were discussed and human images [illegible] deliberately styled as androgynous. The session moved the training out of its comfort zone as the divide between masculine and feminine was blurred and the logos of NGOs, universities and embassies were replaced with the branding of the art and fashion industries. The strategic networking possibilities at the meeting with the LGBT activists were evident, but it was difficult to connect their presentation with the discussions of the training.

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28 What that session exposed was how the training discussions were constrained within the development model of how to deliver knowledge. The tools and methods used in the training were in sharp contrast to the LGBT group's use of social media and their openness to issues of sexuality, pleasure, and non heteronormativity. The edginess of speaking about sexuality and pleasure in gender and development was revealed. Even if discussions on marriage normativity could be held within the classroom, sexual expression and pleasure outside those norms were difficult to encompass within the framing of body politics in development. The participants found it difficult to talk about non-heteronormative behaviour at the training in the first place, and could not imagine taking the discussions back home to deliberate with the communities and people they worked with.

29 The LGBT activists' presentation, and the gloss of the magazine, were outside the prescribed role of a training workshop on body politics, which was bound by an approach to reproductive health and sexuality that was seen as presentable or understandable to the imagined norms of people in "developing", "poor" communities and villages. We, the European trainers, were caught in the discourse, using the tools of capacity building and imagining the norms of women and men in oppressed patriarchal rural lives, where just speaking about sexuality and gender difference was daring. The discussion with the LGBT activists also raised other issues about funding, bodies and sexuality on another level, linked to the global fashion. On the one hand, it was about breaking down heteronormativity and opening up discussions on issues of sexual pleasure and issues around erotic justice. On the other hand, as with the development industry and Aid-land, there were other questions to ask about the art magazine: Who funded it? Who read it? And how did the strong business interests impact LGBT movement politics – what were the class, race, age and gender dimensions? Literature on LGBT movements has pointed to how policies and practices of neoliberalism have made room for LGBT movements but at the same time shifted the focus onto individual rights and pleasure and away from more radical agendas around the need to change power relations based in wealth and property, race and sexuality (Mananzala and Spade 2008, 55; see also Sycamore 2004; and Lind 2010). Was this an example of neoliberal co-optation of the more radical roots LGBT movement, mirroring the concerns Ferguson and others raise about the eral co-optation of feminist movement by the international development industry?

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liberal constructions of feminist praxis

uld cynically interpret the whole exercise as "how to make a living out of being a ational (jet-set?) feminist" or "how to dilute radical ideas of feminism so they are palatable enough for development trainings and policy practices". Sara De Jong (2016) outlines the considerable literature that discusses how gender and development practices are undermining feminist practices in the mainstreaming of gender into development via development projects that require gender "experts" to simply "tick the boxes", reducing gender complexities into simple, static, one-dimensional studies that ignore decades of feminist academic research, such as the *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development* (World Bank 2012), all couched in simple

messages that are apolitical and ahistorical representations of gender (Ferguson 2015, 386). The institutional co-optation of the feminist agenda into an increasingly neoliberal corporate model of development is reflected in the training where boxes were ticked, methods applied from one place to the next by gender experts funded to deliver knowledge to participants who were then expected to take those skills to other places and success measured by the completion of the training (and numbers trained) rather than a transformational change for the eventual “recipients”.

31 In their study of transnational feminist movements, Linda Carty and Chandra Talpade Mohanty describe neoliberalism as “an ideology, and a political and economic practice” (Carty and Mohanty 2015, 84). They argue that the neoliberal state is “pernicious for women’s organizing because it is so adept at appropriating the discursive elements of those struggles and undermining the actual attempts to forge a politics of change” and argue for greater “awareness of the multiple negative roles of neoliberalism” as part of a counter vigilance by feminists (Carty and Mohanty 2015, 85). Nancy Naples depicts the neoliberalism of the 1990s and 2000s as a systematic effort to dismantle progressive social and economic policies in a process of subjugation, co-optation and delegitimation (Naples 2013, 133).

32 Taking up this viewpoint, we could understand the training as a type of co-optation. Different feminist knowledge around bodies, reproductive rights, and health and sexuality is moulded into a portable package paid for by donors, that delivers agreed upon gender, sexual, and reproductive rights, and health goals that are, in the moment of delivery, redesigned to fit the expectations of the participants.

33 As De Jong (2016) comments on an article by Mukhopadhyay (2004) such an apolitical process becomes a “de-contextualized and technical project that leaves the prevailing and unequal power relations intact” (2004, 95). The training – building on toolkits, mapping exercises and checklists – is part of a technical expertise that can be adapted and brought easily into development as it both professionalises and depoliticises the original feminist intent. Feminists are kept busy in projects and advocacy work to prove their professionalism as they are engaged in bureaucratic practices, delivering “how to ...der equality”, in processes that wash out more nuanced and politically difficult ... around sexuality and difference. This South Asian training programme can be read ... an apolitical professionalised project that pulls feminist concerns into the ...eral project of delivering a skill set that can efficiently achieve measurable goals of ...ber of professionals now trained to educate other recipients about gender and sex ...ion.

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34 But, as De Jong also points out, we have to push harder against this reading of how feminists operate in development processes as part of a “counter vigilance” that recognises the possibilities of discursive strategies to effect cultural and political change. In my first writing about body politics, ten years ago, I analysed how the global women’s movement post Cairo became a part of the apparatus that:

> created the truth, theory and values around women, environment, population and development in the social institutions and practices, managing and defining women as an object of development discourse… Women were tied into an array of procedures, analyses, reflections, calculations and tactics that continued the oppression of women through micro strategies that captured the female body as an individual and social subject of development discourse or – what Foucault labelled bio-power. (Harcourt 2005, 38)

35 De Jong also sees feminist engagement in the development process as a form of biopolitics that creates new selves and subjectivities, or “new managers capable of taming the negative productivity of difference through the application of techniques” (Prügl 2011, 84). In this Foucaultian understanding of power, feminism is not outside of development processes but part and parcel of it – the political is part of the technical aspect of doing development as feminists. As Prügl states: “[F]rom a Foucaultian perspective, the question of whether an engagement with the mainstream co-opts feminist struggles loses its meaning. There is no pure feminist knowledge outside governmentality untouched by the workings of power” (Prügl 2011, 85).

36 In opening up these processes to scrutiny, it is important to recognise how power is operating at different levels. Feminists need to be vigilant not by denying the feminist process of engagement in development but by recognising in what way feminist strategies of body politics are able to be reached when engaging in development. And to ask themselves how to work the change from within, fully aware of the power dynamics and their own roles and responsibilities.

37 Given the considerable literature referred to above about how development is part of “neoliberal ideology, political and economic practice”, what is interesting to consider is how feminists working in development bring about discursive change as they engage in “patterned dances.” The feminist engagement is fraught with tension, power and messiness. By being open and honest about the messiness, we can see both where neoliberal framings are undermining feminist goals and needs and where feminists are engaging in ways that run counter to neoliberal ideology and politics. As Prügl points [illegible]ere are no pure spaces for feminism. Feminist choices to engage in development [illegible]ses are political choices, including the developing of different technical elements, [illegible] on personal connections, and working out how to perform and where, with whom [illegible] what setting to strategize. By looking at what happens at the discursive, [illegible]sational and individual levels, you can see the negotiations and possibilities. We [illegible]at what Fraser (2013a) in the quote above calls a “strange shadowy version” of feminism cannot be fully embraced or disavowed, but it does move alongside the official development speak. What the narrative shows is that the training was a feminist space that could allow feminists of different generations and regions to support and work with one another with a sense of collective well-being within institutions and organisational structures, despite the disconnects and discomforts. The deliberate aim to set up feminist encounters through the training, which enabled the use of resources to pay for

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feminists from different regions and generations to meet and strategise, meant that they were not simply “passive victims of neoliberal seductions” (Fraser 2013b).

38 On the other hand, the training did belong to a particular discourse on sexual health and reproductive rights in development, one that was challenged by the LGBT social media activists. The particular narration that came out of a post-Cairo debate could not easily take up cultural queering of the sexual subject in art and fashion as the subject of gender equality debates. Such a disconnect, particularly in a training on sexuality and generations, was interesting, as questions about the LGBT neoliberal subject of fashion and desire did not fit the idea of the subject of a heteronormative framing for how to empower women so that they can gain state support to end gender oppression and provide resources for their sexual and reproductive choices and health.

39 In a move to what Spivak calls a “productive acknowledgement of complicity” (Spivak 2000), it is not enough to say that all modern feminist practices take part within the neoliberal project. There is also the responsibility of feminists working in development processes to look critically at the impact of our neoliberal positioning to see how it muddies feminist intent and outcome.

The privilege of the middle in feminist praxis of development

40 To conclude, I would like to reflect on what Carty and Mohanty call the “privilege of the middle”, which resonates with my current role as a feminist working in an academic institution (from which the participants in the training had graduated).

41 Since all institutions are complicit with the neoliberal project in many ways, those who straddle academic lives and employ feminist praxis within communities outside of the hallowed halls, often are positioned to act as intermediaries betwixt and between, breaking the age binaries of formal and informal education/knowledge production, and have a great burden in re-positioning and reconciling these multiple spaces (Ahmed quoted in Carty and Mohanty 2015).

42 Carty and Mohanty (building on Harding and others) speak of “situational feminism” and [...]at those in the middle – feminist activists, teachers and practitioners – be aware of [...]vileged “middle” position. As we undertake different work, build diverse alliances [...]dertake struggles, we need to be cognizant of our own positions and [...]ainties while we teach/train/advocate/write/connect with others in collective [...]ational feminist engagements in the development industry. As the description of the training suggests: “all struggles are long, with imperfect and incomplete victories which are conditional and that this is what living means” (Carty and Mohanty 2015, 96). Nevertheless, such admissions are not reasons for not changing or challenging the privileges; it is important to do more than reflect.

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43 What my analysis of this particular story illustrates is that feminist praxis is embedded within geographies of power relations, in neoliberal practices that we cannot step outside of, but we can reflect and refocus when we see disconnects. And in my case as a

feminist teacher and activist, it challenges me to think carefully about the "privilege of the middle." Body politics, as mentioned at the beginning of this essay, has been a key narrative that feminists have brought into development discourses; it has highlighted how the experiences of bodily oppression, violation, exploitation and commodification are integral to power relations in development. Academics, advocates and activists have engaged in this discourse (the patterned dance of Woodward). As a result, even if it feels somewhat accidental, many (including me) have made careers out of it. Does this "domestication", as Cornwall in the quote above suggests, mean a betrayal of some "other" way of "doing feminism"? Can there be a non-complicit way of doing feminism? Aren't feminist struggles about changing hierarchical power structures, a strategy that implies some form of engagement with that power?

44 Body politics has led to legal, political and social change around once-taboo issues as violence against women, and in the process, feminists have become teachers and high-level bureaucrats and politicians (and perhaps we should add also film stars and singers) who have supported and made those changes possible. There is, unsurprisingly, clear evidence now of an "old girls" network, both formal and informal, around body politics that is running parallel – and no doubt interlinking with – the more evident "old boys" network. The difficult question is whether such co-optation simply makes us complicit in neoliberalism, as Fraser says, "supplying the justification for new forms of inequality and exploitation… in a dangerous liaison with neoliberal efforts to build a free-market society" (2013b).

45 Or does it mean that those with the privilege of the middle need to look more carefully at what collective actions are needed to help understand a situation inflected by neoliberalism, but fluid and changeable? There is no "outside" of neoliberalism to which we can retreat. Given the disorganised, globalising, messy form of neoliberalism today, there are many spaces for feminists to speak up and rethink about how to conceptualise our relation to co-optation and strategies. We need to resist it while not being coy about the personalised benefits co-optation offers. What this detailed description suggests is that if we are attentive to the disconnects, we can find ways to disrupt the co-optation. The engagement of the LGBT group was one such rupture that potentially opens space … how to link feminist practice related to sexual health and reproductive rights (the … t of the workshop) to queer politics and culture within different localities. It may … ve worked entirely in that particular moment, but it did open up the possibility of … gning future encounters that would focus not only on the reproductive body and … normative sexual practice, but also on how globalised cultural values are embedded in neoliberal practices. Such future encounters would bring the economic together with the social in an analysis of body politics that is inclusive of many types of bodies.

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46 The awkwardness of the training in its air con bubble, though, still remains. It is not an event that directly challenges neoliberal ideology or political and economic practices – although it does negotiate along the edge. I would prefer to see it as a reflection of the realities of feminists in the development world who "tread the line between pessimism

and hope between failures and corruptions of the development industry and the promise that it can really reach the people it aims to" (McKinnon 2011, 2). There are alternative feminist ways to act in solidarity that challenge neoliberal ideology and political and economic practices, even from within, that are part of movements and campaigns that have no need for training by gender or other experts. Body politics around abortion rights, the fight against violence against women, and rights for transgender and queer politics are challenging and changing neoliberalism. From the privilege of the middle, I consider it is important to make the connections in my writing, teaching and engagement in activism, between what is happening in neoliberal development processes and the alternatives in order to question and unmake the hegemonic world view of neoliberal capitalism, via "new narratives, new ways of thinking and doing" (Escobar 2012, 2). As we create these new narratives in classrooms, in the streets, and in social media, we can move beyond seeing co-optation as a transplanting of feminist discourse into "other terrains." Feminists are in those terrains, shaping and making policy, teaching and researching, and engaging in development practice (in many places, face to face, on and off line). We need to be sure that we are clear in our positioning and strategies by revealing our personal doubts and fears, as well as recognising our potential collective successes.

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concerns raised by academics such as Cornwall are echoed in the thousands of web pages, blogs and social media of transnational feminist movements concerned with women's sexual and reproductive health and rights (*Development* 2009, 124).

2. The Swiss International Relations Collective, L.H.M. Ling, Marysia Zalewski, and Wendy Harcourt discuss these issues methodologically in dialogue (Harcourt *et al.* 2015).

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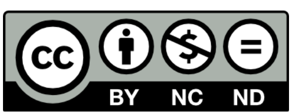

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