JACQUELINE MARIE POTVIN

Mobilizing Motherhood: The Use of Maternal Myths in Popular Development Discourse

Abstract: In this paper, I examine how maternal myths are deployed in popular development literature. Using critical discourse analysis and working within a feminist postcolonial framework I analyse five texts produced by development organizations for popular consumption. I identify how maternal myths are constructed in each text and conduct a contextual analysis of four myths to identify their ideological significance within the development sector. I conclude that that in their construction of maternal myths, these texts, while intended to elicit support for gender and development interventions, reinforce exploitative gender roles and relations and limit women's experiences of development.

Keywords: development discourse, gender and development, motherhood, altruism, empowerment

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Every day, those of us living in the so called 'developed' world are bombarded with descriptions, representations, stories and facts about the 'developing world'. Often these representations are designed to elicit our support for organizations, projects, and interventions. They call on viewers to give, to sign, to support; in other words, they call on us to participate in the project of development. In doing so, they call on us not only to feed a hungry child or give a village water, but also to participate in a system of global power relations in which western development organizations, institutions and 'experts' define what 'development' is and how it should be achieved. Through the mobilization of the general public to contribute money, time, and political support to development endeavours, the power to determine the meaning and terms of development is extended to those situated outside the mainstream development sector. In this paper, I interrogate what images, stories and discourses are deemed useful in convincing audiences in the 'developed' world to support development projects aimed specifically at women in the Global South. In particular, I examine why, in popular development literature, women are so often represented as mothers; mothers who are altruistic and self-sacrificing; who seem to share a universal experience; and who are in need of our help to care for their children, to build their communities, and 'change the world'.

This research is based on a contextual, critical discourse analysis of five development texts produced for and accessible to the 'general public'; that

is, for audiences positioned outside the sphere of development 'expertise'. My discourse analysis shows that each of the five texts analysed relies upon and reinforces common assumptions about motherhood in order to construct women as legitimate, and even ideal targets of development. In this paper, I explore three of the most prominent maternal myths identified in these texts; that mothers are altruistic; that mothers are in need of 'empowerment'; and that all women share a universal mothering identity and experience. I provide several illustrative examples of how these myths are invoked and reproduced in the analysed texts while also addressing how these myths reflect and reinforce instrumentalist attitudes towards women living in the Global South. I argue that the deployment of 'maternal myths' allows organizations and programs to discursively construct 'developing world women' as both efficient and entrepreneurial neoliberal subjects 'worth' investing in, as well as appropriately feminine and morally 'good' mothers deserving of help. Furthermore, I argue that these texts appeal to gendered understandings of the 'deserving poor', reinforcing the discursive and material authority of the western development sector and its supporters. This study adds to the growing body of literature on gender and development discourse by demonstrating how popular development campaigns not only replicate the instrumentalist arguments towards women that dominate development policy, but also by outlining how these arguments are articulated through gendered ideologies of motherhood.

Theoretical Frameworks

Based on a critical discourse analysis, this study treats language as a form of social practice and seeks to uncover the processes by which discursive representations shape conceptualisations of reality, with material consequences[1]. In adopting this methodology, I draw on Foucauldian theorizations of the dialectical relationship between power and discourse, treating development discourse as both produced by and productive of development ideology and practice. Furthermore, I rely on feminist and postcolonial understandings of language, representation and power, recognizing the power relations that are involved in representing 'developing world women' for the gaze of potential donors in the so called 'developed' world. My theoretical focus derives largely from the body of work that has emerged from Said's theorization of 'Orientalism' as an institution for dealing with 'the Orient' by making knowledge claims over it[2]. Treating development discourse as a form of Orientalism acknowledges the ways in which representations of the 'developing world' may serve to legitimize

1 N. Fairclough and R. Wodak, 'Critical Discourse Analysis', in T. van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse as Social Interaction* (London: Sage, 1997), 258-284, p. 258.

2 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979).

western authority over, and intervention, in it. This acknowledgement is supplemented by consideration of postcolonial theorizations that specifically inquire into the gendered aspect of Orientalism by exploring the discursive construction of sexual and gendered identities.[3] In particular, I draw upon Mohanty's arguments that scholarship from western feminists has discursively constructed 'third world women' as a homogenous analytical category.[4] Mohanty argues that this discursive construction erases the heterogeneity and agency of women living within the 'developing' world while eliding the ways in which their gendered and racialized identities are produced through social relations.[5] Using Mohanty's work to inform my discourse analysis, I want to make clear that my analysis focuses on the construction of 'developing world women' as a discursive category, rather than one that is representative of material reality. That being said, taking seriously Mohanty's consideration of discourse as a 'relation of ruling', I do draw connections between the discursive colonization of 'developing world women' through development discourse, and the material effects development interventions and programs have on women's lives. In doing so, while I acknowledge the diversity of development programing, as well as the differences within the texts being analyzed, my focus is on the coherent effects these texts produce in constructing 'developing world women' as both in need of, and worthy of development aid and intervention.

Because my analysis is based on textual evidence, it is limited in its engagement with those who produced the texts, and with those who are represented within them. Although it is not within the scope of this paper to engage with the variety of ways in which women in the developing world negotiate development discourse, I wish to acknowledge the various ways in which women participate in and strategically negotiate development interventions in order to pursue their own interests. In conceptualizing development discourse as a 'relation of ruling' I do not conceive of power relations in binaric terms; that is, I do not understand the development industry as all powerful, nor do I understand women within the 'developing world' as powerless.[6] Indeed, such a binaric understandings risks re-instating the discursive construction of 'developing world women' as purely victims; a construction that postcolonial feminism seeks to disrupt. Rather, I am interested in the role of development discourse in colonizing 'developing world women' by erasing their diversity, their agency and in upholding the imagined and material authority of the western 'development sector'.

3 Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Meyda Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

4 Chandra Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', in Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres (eds.), *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 51-80.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

This study also relies on Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead's theorization of 'gender myths' in development discourse.[7] Cornwall et al. argue that the need to mobilize support for gender and development has often resulted in the use of simplistic slogans, soundbites and 'gender myths' that perpetuate overly simplistic or problematic understandings of the complex relationship between gender and development. Cornwall et al. theorize 'gender myths' not necessarily as falsifications, but as a specific kind of discourse that serves to reinforce the moral and ethical foundations of interventions while confirming the ability of these interventions to instigate change. While the assumptions on which these 'myths' are based may have some material basis, their significance rests not on their accuracy, but in how their 'truths' are packaged as coherent storylines and simplified axioms that justify intervention. Employing Cornwall et al.'s theory of gender myths while working within a feminist postcolonial framework I examine, 'how gendered and orientalised visual representations of the Eastern Other have been deployed to facilitate intervention'.[8] I do so with an understanding of the dialectical relationship between discourse and practice, in which development discourse both reflects and redeploys particular ideological assumptions. Within the development sector, discourse has been identified as an important site for study because it can help us identify and deconstruct the ideological underpinnings of development practice and to understand why particular interventions are seen as possible, appropriate and effective. Analyzing popular development texts can thus tell us about the ideological contexts in which they are produced, and can help us work through the implications of these ideological contexts when translated into practice.

Methodology

This study is based on a critical discourse analysis of five development texts that were distributed within the United Kingdom with the purpose of eliciting support for international development projects aimed at women and girls. I selected texts for analysis that were accessible to the British public with minimal effort and that referenced or represented women and/or girls in the 'developing world' or living in 'poverty'. Texts could be from charity organizations, government organizations, or corporations and could include written texts, as well as images and videos. The five texts chosen were the first five I came across that fit these criteria, after these criteria had been determined. I chose this selection method because I believe that it is representative of the ways in which audiences come

7 Andrea Cornwall, Elizabeth Harrison and Ann Whitehead, 'Gender Myths and Feminist Fables', in Andrea Cornwall, Elizabeth Harrison and Ann Whitehead (eds.), *Gender Myths and Feminist Fables: The Struggle for Interpretive Power in Gender and Development* (Malden: Blackwell, 2008).

8 This should read: Maryam Khalid, 'Gender, Orientalism and Representation of the "Other" in the War on Terror', *Global Change, Peace and Security* 23/1 (2011), 15-29, p.16.

across popular development texts. I acknowledge that the selection is influenced by my position as a student of development, by the kinds of people I subscribe to on Facebook and the websites I visit. However, I argue that these factors would apply to many people within the target audience of such texts, which are often intended for individuals who have an existing interest in development without necessarily having to work or study in the field. Given that any selection process is biased in some way, I do not believe that this selection process is any more problematic than alternative, more systematic processes.

The first text selected for analysis is a web-video called 'The Clock is Ticking' produced by the Nike Organization as part of a popular web-campaign entitled 'The Girl Effect'.[9] The second text is a set of cardboard coasters produced by Oxfam and which were used and distributed as part of an International Women's Day event at Leeds University. The third text is a paper brochure from WaterAid which was delivered through the mail slot of my apartment in Leeds. The fourth text is a video entitled 'Choices for Girls' by Plan UK, which played at an interactive bus stop advertisement in London, England and on the Plan UK website.[10] The fifth text is a photo slide show campaign from the UNICEF UK website celebrating mother's day, which can be found on the site's homepage and which was publicized by various celebrities.[11]

My analysis consisted of identifying maternal myths that are utilized, invoked, disrupted or assumed in each of the analyzed texts. The purpose of this analysis is not to uncover the 'truth' of these texts, but rather to identify and de-naturalize the ideological assumptions that they rely upon and reproduce. Because my analysis is based solely on textual evidence, I am unable to speak directly to the intended message of the producers, nor to the specific conditions under which these texts were produced. Rather, I understand meaning as being produced in the space between the text and the reader, through the very act of reading. By conducting an intertextual analysis, I use my existing knowledge of discursive tropes to read and analyze the dominant messages produced by these texts within the broader context of gender and development discourse.

I will now turn to my discourse analysis, providing a brief overview of my primary findings. Although I do not have the space to outline my entire discourse analysis, I offer several demonstrative examples that illustrate how each of the identified myths are relied upon and reinforced within the analyzed texts.

9 This video can be found on the 'Girl Effect' website, found here: http://www.girleffect.org/why-girls/#&panel1-1.
10 This video can be found on the Plan UK website, available here: http://www.plan-uk.org/choices-for-girls/.
11 This slideshow can still be found on the UNICEF website, available here: http://www.unicef.org.uk/Latest/Photo-stories/mothers-day-malnutrition/.

The Myth of Maternal Altruism

One of the most prominent maternal myths I identified in my analysis is the myth of maternal altruism; that is, the myth that all mothers are naturally altruistic. This myth is apparent in the ways that mothers are represented as always putting their children's needs above their own, and as willing to sacrifice their own interests and well-being for the sake of their families. Representations of maternal altruism were present in all but one of the texts analyzed. The exception was Plan's video, which represented girls as altruistic, but not in relation to a mothering role or identity.

The myth of maternal altruism is largely produced through the conflation of a mother's needs with those of her children. For instance, UNICEF's Mother's Day slideshow conflates these needs by encouraging readers to help a mother in the 'developing' world by buying a Mother's Day basket filled with 'essential supplies to help support the nutrition, health and education needs of children around the world.' By filling a gift basket for a mother with supplements for her child, UNICEF's marketing enforces the correlation of mother's needs with those of her children, while also assuming that resources given to a mother will be passed on to her children.

WaterAid's brochure makes a similar conflation, describing the lack of 'choice' faced by mothers who do not have access to safe water thusly: 'Let your children die of thirst. Or give them water with a thick, yellow, smelly film on top'. The mother's lack of choice is expressed only in relation to how it affects her children, with no explicit reference to her own physical need for clean drinking water. The brochure's repeated reference to the mother's need to provide water for her children, paired with the lack of reference to her own physical need implicitly assumes that the mother's needs can be equated with those of her children, and that their well-being takes priority over her own.

The myth of maternal altruism is also invoked and reinforced through the assumption that resources and training provided for a mother will benefit her children and, by extension, her community. For example, one of Oxfam's coasters states that a twenty-seven pound donation to support small-scale farming can help a woman 'earn more money for her family', while also describing how one woman (pictured on the front of the coaster) is 'already earning more money for her family'. A second coaster states that traditional beekeepers in Ethiopia 'struggle to earn enough to support their family' before describing how, with Oxfam's support, 'they can produce more honey…and earn an income to support their families'. The coaster goes on to say that '£40 helps to start a small business…so women can lift their families out of poverty'. These statements repeatedly frame the significance of women's increased income in terms of how

this income will be used to help her family, assuming that resources will be shared with her family as opposed to being spent only or primarily on herself.

While Plan's 'Choices for Girls' video was the only text that did not represent women as altruistic mothers, the video does represent adolescent girls in the developing world as having an altruistic desire to help their families. The video shows numerous shots of girls in Thailand and Mali helping with chores, while Sur, the girl from Thailand, states; 'I want to study to a high level and support my parents'. This quote shows a familial altruism that, although not directly linked to maternity, does reflect gendered assumptions that girls and women care for their families and put their family's needs above their own. This altruism, however, is contrasted by representations of Jasmine, the girl from the UK, who is shown engaging in more leisure activities than the girls from Thailand and Mali, and who states: 'Once I've left school I'll be completely free.' Thus, the video represents altruism as a characteristic specific to 'developing world' girls, albeit not in relation to motherhood.

The Myth of Maternal Empowerment

A second overarching myth to emerge from my analysis is the myth of maternal empowerment; that is, that mothers in the 'developing world' need only be 'empowered' in order to pull themselves, their families and even their countries out of poverty. As it is articulated in the analyzed texts, this myth is tied to the myth of maternal/female altruism, as it depicts women in the developing world has having the desire, but not necessarily the ability to care for their families. Mothers are thus constructed as both victims in need of 'empowerment', as well as saviours who will use their newfound power and resources to better care for their families and communities, and hence, will drive development forward. Although not all texts used the explicit language of empowerment, all texts represent women as in need of relatively small interventions in order to expand their choices and contribute to the project of development.

The double positioning of mothers as both victims and saviours is perhaps best exemplified by Nike's 'The Clock is Ticking' video. The video follows two possible life trajectories of a twelve year old girl living in poverty. In the first scenario the girl (who soon becomes a mother) is positioned as a passive victim through narrative, imagery, verb construction and word choice. Her future is described as being 'out of her control' and she is repeatedly shown falling, running away from something, or trapped. The events of the sequence are positioned as happening *to* her, constructing her as passive object rather than active subject. For example, the video's text states that she 'faces the reality of being married by the age of 14; pregnant by the time she is 15'; phrasing that

connotes something which the girl must react to but which she cannot control. Similarly the use of the passive verb 'being married' as opposed to the active 'she marries' repeats the positioning of the girl as passive object.

In the second scenario, the girl is constructed as an active agent in that her movements are controlled, and she is shown evading obstacles that had trapped her in the previous scenario. Phrases such as 'she is calling the shots' connote control and choice. She is positioned as an active subject in verb constructions such as 'she visits a doctor' and 'she uses her education'. She is also said to choose to have children 'when she is ready'. Furthermore, in her new, agentic construction the girl (who has by now become a woman) is shown improving the lives of others. She is depicted opening a door for her daughter, an action which implies an opening up of new opportunities, and one which the daughter then repeats for another girl. The text concludes that '50 million twelve year old girls living in poverty equals 50 million solutions'. While the text never explicitly states how the girls will solve these problems, it does imply that once they are given the right opportunities they will be empowered to improve their own lives, and the lives of others. It should be noted that the outcome of the second narrative appears to be a result of access to medical care and education. Thus, the girl/woman in question is depicted as a force for change whose potential must simply be unleashed through access to 'empowerment' in the form of social services.

While the myth of empowerment constructs women as caring for their families and working towards 'development', their ability to do so is constructed as dependent on interventions from the organizations in question. For instance, UNICEF's slideshow portrays mothers in the 'developing world' as wanting, but being unable to care for their children without help from UNICEF. The first image depicts a mother breastfeeding her baby, accompanied by a caption stating: 'in Niger, a mother breastfeeds her baby.' The caption continues; 'a million children across West Africa are at risk of malnutrition', implying that despite the breastfeeding depicted, malnutrition is a continuing problem. The caption ends by stating 'UNICEF is helping to provide vital healthcare services to remote areas and educate communities about life-saving practices like breastfeeding'. In this caption, we see the establishment of the mother's care work; an indication that alone this care work is failing; and an indication that UNICEF is helping. The order of these statements is significant, as it positions UNICEF's intervention as the solution or conclusion to an ongoing problem that mothers cannot resolve on their own. Similarly, Oxfam's coasters depict women who 'struggle' to support their families, while describing how the organization has helped women 'lift their families out of poverty'. Such depictions again

construct women as needing support in order that they might eradicate poverty, at least for themselves and their families.

The Myth of Motherhood as Universal

The third myth identified in my analysis is the myth that motherhood is a universal identity and experience. This myth is deployed in two ways; through the construction of motherhood as an experience that is similar for all mothers, and through the assumption that all women are, or will someday become mothers. This myths allows development texts to construct mothers in the 'developing world' as familiar and relatable to viewers in the 'developed world', while also implying that maternal characteristics and roles are generalizable to all women. The myth of motherhood as a universal experience was deployed in all analyzed texts, with the exception of Plan's 'Choices for Girls' video.

WaterAid's brochure draws upon and reinforces the myth of a universal maternal identity and experience by constructing Beauty, the mother on whom the text focuses, as representative of all mothers living without clean water. Beauty is referred to as 'one of the millions of mothers around the world who don't have access to safe, clean water' and twice, the text speaks of 'mothers like Beauty'. These phrases direct the reader to infer that these mothers share similar experiences, challenges, and emotional responses. Similarly, Nike's the 'Girl Effect' constructs the life and experiences of one hypothetical girl/mother as representative of the lives of 50 million girls living in poverty.

The UNICEF photo-story also constructs motherhood as a universal identity. In the text's introduction, the word 'mother' appears only once, as part of 'Mother's Day', while the word 'mum' is used four times. In addition to establishing an informal tone, the word 'mum' is a British idiom, and thus one that readers are likely to use in relation to their own mother. By using this same familiar term to refer explicitly to both the viewer's own 'mum' and a 'mum on the other side of the world', the text implies a shared identity between the two. This shared identity is underscored by the statement that 'these photos recognize the importance of mums everywhere'.

The myth that motherhood is a shared identity, not just among mothers but among all women, is perpetuated through the assumption that all women will one day become mothers. This myth is visible in Nike's 'The Clock is Ticking', in which both of the girl's possible life trajectories lead to motherhood. In the second, 'positive' life trajectory, the girl in question is said to get married and have children 'when she is ready', obscuring and excluding the possibility that she may never want or be ready to have children. This implication is particularly significant as the girl in the video is visually and discursively constructed to be

representative of all girls living in poverty; all of whom, it is therefore implied, will one day become mothers.

This myth of a universal motherhood is also perpetuated through the interchangeable use of the words 'mother' and 'woman' in both UNICEF's slideshow and Oxfam's coasters; a conflation that elides the differences between these two identities. For example, in one of Oxfam's coasters women's health is talked about solely in relation to maternal health. Another coaster reinforces this conflation by stating that women are frequently 'hit hardest' by natural disasters, in part because they are often at home caring for children and the elderly when disasters hit. This same coaster describes Oxfam's work building shelters for 'Women and children', a grouping that again assumes that women and children would be together in a disaster. Although these statements may reflect the material circumstances of many women who experience natural disasters, by articulating gendered risks solely in terms of women's care roles the text constructs women as caregivers regardless of maternal status.

Maternal Altruism and the Feminization of Responsibility

I will now turn to the significance of my findings, examining why these maternal myths might be problematic, as well as how they illuminate the ways in which neoliberal and gender ideologies converge in the production of gender and development discourse. Following from my theoretical framework, I consider my analysis within the larger context of gender development discourse and practice, examining how popular development discourses both reflect and reinforce particular gender and development ideologies. Understanding discourse as being in a dialectical relationship with development practice, I consider the implications of these ideologies when they are put into practice through gender and development interventions.

As my discourse analysis demonstrates, the development texts outlined above utilize the myths of maternal altruism and maternal empowerment to elicit support for development projects targeting women. By indicating that development projects targeting women will result in the diffusion of benefits beyond participants themselves, these myths contribute to constructions of 'developing world women' as a 'good investment'. Within a neoliberal context in which efficiency is highly valued, this strategy might indeed be successful in eliciting financial and political support for development endeavours. However, these strategies also reflect the development sector's tendency to instrumentalize women in the 'developing world' by emphasizing what women can do for development rather than what development can do for them.[12] Furthermore,

12 Ruth Pearson, 'The Rise and Rise of Gender and Development', in U. Kothari (ed.), *A Radical History of Development Studies: Individuals, Institutions and Ideologies* (London: Zed Books, 2005), 157-179.

when translated into practice, understandings of 'developing world women' as altruistic mothers who must be empowered risk increasing women's burden of labour and hence limiting the extent to which they benefit from the interventions in which they are involved.

The widespread acceptance of the maternal altruism myth in gender and development discourse and practice can be linked to studies that have demonstrated a correlation between maternal income and child survival rates, and that have found evidence that women are more likely than men to allocate household expenditure to food.[13] Critics of this myth do not necessarily question the validity of these findings, but rather question the assumption that they result from a natural maternal instinct, suggesting instead that women are often socialized into altruism through differences in gendered expectations, obligations and responsibilities.[14] Furthermore, although altruism is often framed as a positive attribute, it is important to consider how socialization into self-sacrificing behaviours negatively affects women's lives. Acknowledging the potential social and cultural motivations behind seemingly altruistic behaviour can help us deconstruct the myth of a natural, universal maternal altruism and to recognize the role development discourse plays in this myth's construction and proliferation.

In thinking through the implications of this myth, it is useful to examine how assumptions regarding maternal altruism continue to underlie gender and development practice, and with what consequences. In particular, it is important to consider how development projects that justify inclusion of women based on maternal altruism may end up exploiting the women they seek to help by 'capitalizing' on women's altruism rather than relieving their 'altruistic burden'.[15] Similarly, projects that help women 'mother' more efficiently may bring positive results for these mothers, but without contributing to radical changes in gender roles and power relations.[16] For instance, research on social policy in Latin America has indicated that government programs that depend on women's labour in order to achieve child-oriented development goals rely on, reinstate and even institutionalize women's roles and identities as self-sacrificing mothers.[17] These findings can be linked to Chant's conceptualization

13 E. Kennedy and B. Cogill, 'Commercialization of Agriculture in Southwestern Kenya' (Washington: International Food Policy Research Institute, 1987); D. Thomas, 'Intra-Household Resource Allocation: An Inferential Approach', *The Journal of Human Resources* 25/4 (1990), 635-664.

14 N. Kabeer, *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development* (London: Verso, 1994).

15 K. Brickwell and S. Chant, 'The Unbearable Heaviness of Being: Reflections on Female Altruism in Cambodia, Philippines, the Gambia and Costa Rica', *Progress in Development Studies* 10/2 (2010), 145-159.

16 R.B. Swain, 'Impacting Women Through Financial Services: The Self Help Group Bank Linkage Programme in India and its Effects on Women's Empowerment', in S. Chant (ed.), *The International Handbook of Gender and Poverty: Concepts, Research and Policy* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2010), 594-598.

17 M. Molyneux, 'Mothers at the Service of the New Poverty Agenda: Progres/Oportunidades, Mexico's Conditional Transfer Programme, *Social Policy and Administration* 40/4 (2006), 425-449.

of the 'feminization of responsibility', which she uses to refer to the growing burden of family and community care on women within the 'developing' world.[18] Thus although the myth of a maternal altruism might be useful in increasing women's inclusion in development projects, its invocation and deployment have the potential to naturalize women's care roles and to reinforce cultural expectations of maternal sacrifice. Invocation of this myth thus risks obscuring the ways in which development projects that rely on seemingly natural maternal altruism increase maternal burdens of care, increasing women's workloads while limiting their inclusion in development to their maternal roles. In their invocation and construction of the myth of maternal altruism, the popular development texts I have analysed contribute to this construction, extending its deployment beyond the development sector and into popular understandings of development. In doing so, these texts reinforce the acceptability and even desirability of development interventions that rely on and naturalize women's self-sacrificing behaviour.

Empowerment as Instrumentalization

The myth of maternal empowerment similarly instrumentalizes women in the developing world, justifying intervention by constructing mothers not only as in need of help, but also as being able and willing to use the this help to work towards 'broader' (often vague) development goals. In turn, development interventions that target women are constructed not only as providing resources or alleviating poverty, but as providing a sustainable and efficient means of pursuing 'development'. Once again, justification is based on constructing women as a 'good investment', who can translate seemingly small interventions into large scale development progress.

Central to the myth of empowerment is the assumption that while development interventions are necessary to 'empower' individuals, it is these empowered individuals themselves who will bring about development. From a postcolonial feminist perspective, acknowledging the agency of those living in poverty to work towards their own development goals can be understood as a positive alternative to constructing them solely as helpless victims. However, rather than acknowledging the political agency of those living in poverty, current understandings of empowerment risk placing responsibility for achieving 'development' on those who are most vulnerable without necessarily allowing them to define their own development goals.[19] Instead, empowerment is understood as a quick, technological fix that does not disrupt the current power

18 S. Chant, 'Towards a (Re)conceptualisation of the Feminisation of Poverty': Reflections on Gender-differentiated Poverty from the Gambia, Philippines and Costa Rica', in S. Chant (2010), 111-116.

19 Srilatha Batliwala, 'Taking the Power out of Empowerment: An Experiential Account', *Development in Practice* 17/4-5 (2007), 557-565; M. Baaz, 'The Paternalism of Partnerhips: A Postcolonial Reading of Identity in Development Aid (London: Zed Books, 2005).

configurations that characterise mainstream development interventions.[20] Furthermore, portrayals of women living in poverty that depict these women as empowered agents of change risk romanticizing images of hard working women, obscuring the constraints and challenges they face at the same moment that they are given responsibility for achieving development through their own labour.[21]

While the myth of empowerment is not applied exclusively towards mothers, my discourse analysis suggests that mothers are in particular constructed as ideal objects of empowerment. This construction is deeply intertwined with the myth of maternal altruism, which supports and naturalizes the idea that once gained women will use their empowerment to improve the lives of others. Programs that rely on the myth of maternal empowerment risk further increasing women's burdens without significantly challenging gendered or global inequalities, particularly those that characterise the development industry itself.[22] As with the myth of maternal altruism, the myth of empowerment can therefore be used to instrumentalize women without facilitating or allowing challenges to gendered power relations. The analyzed texts increase the likelihood of such interventions by normalizing and promoting a model of development that relies on problematic understandings of women's empowerment.

Altruism and Empowerment in the Neoliberal Context

The instrumentalization of women within development discourse is far from a recent phenomenon. Despite ongoing critiques, instrumentalist arguments for including women in development have consistently dominated development discourse since their deployment by the Women in Development (WID) advocates of the 1980s.[23] My analysis demonstrates that such arguments are pervasive, not only in the language and policies of the development sector, but also in the discourse utilized in popular development advertising campaigns. In exploring why women continue to be instrumentalized in both institutional and popular development discourse, some gender and development scholars have looked to the ideological context of neoliberalism, and specifically, the contemporary development sector's preoccupation with efficiency.

As a term that is often used to describe an array of economic and social

20 Batliwala (2007).

21 Kalpana Wilson, '"Race", Gender and Neoliberalism: Changing Visual Representations in Development', *Third World Quarterly* 32/2 (2011), 315-331

22 Rosalind Eyben and Rebecca Napier-Moore, 'Choosing Words with Care? Shifting Meanings of Empowerment in International Development', *Third World Quarterly* 30/2 (2009), 285-300.

23 Sylvia Chant, 'Fixing Women or Fixing the World? "Smart Economics", Efficiency Approaches and Gender Equality in Development', *Gender and Development* 20/3 (2012), 517-529.

values, neoliberalism can be a difficult concept to define.[24] For the purposes of this analysis, I will use neoliberalism to indicate a market-driven approach to development that especially values economic efficiency, individual entrepreneurialism, and market privatization. These are elements that currently characterize the international development sector, creating a neoliberal context in which development programs that can demonstrate their ability to maximize measurable outcomes while minimizing organizational and/or state costs are valued and supported.[25] It is within this context that inclusion of women in development has been marketed as 'Smart Economics'; as a good investment with high returns.[26] Yet, as outlined above, such approaches are considered 'smart' in part because they outsource the costs of service provision to women, adding to many women's burden of labour without challenging structural oppression.[27] Within this context, both empowerment and altruism are attractive discourses to development institutions because they demonstrate how technical interventions that 'empower' women (presumably) lead to a proportionally significant increase in women's contributions to development.

Increasingly, frameworks such as 'human development' and 'rights-based' approaches to development have been adopted in attempts to push back against the negative impacts neoliberal policies have had on people's lives. However, rather than replacing or problematizing the construction of gender equality as 'Smart Economics', rights based language is being used alongside and even being conflated with, efficiency arguments.[28] My analysis demonstrates that although popular development texts do not explicitly frame women's inclusion in development as 'Smart Economics', they rely on many of the same ideological assumptions and implicitly construct 'developing world women' as good economic investments who will presumably use their 'empowerment' to diffuse the benefits of interventions at no extra cost to the organizations themselves.

Good Mothers: Affect and the Construction of the 'Deserving Poor'

Given the pervasiveness of instrumentalist arguments for women's inclusion in development, it is significant, but not surprising that similar discourses permeate popular development campaigns. Although the target audience may not be familiar with these arguments as they have been deployed in the development sector, neoliberalism and its associated values are nevertheless ideologies that

24 Andrea Cornwall, Jasmine Gideon and Kalpana Wilson, 'Reclaiming Feminism: Gender and Neoliberalism', *IDS Bulletin* 39/6(2008), 1-9 .

25 Chant (2012), Cornwall, Gideon and Wilson (2008), Wilson (2011).

26 Chant (2012).

27 *Ibid.*

28 Sylvia Chant, 'The Disappearing of "Smart Economics"? The World Development Report 2012 on Gender Equality: Some Concerns about the Preparatory Process and the Prospects for Paradigm Change', *Global Social Policy* 12/2 (2012), 198-218.

permeate our day to day lives and hence likely shape our readings of popular development texts. Yet while recognizing how neoliberalism and its focus on efficiency has shaped development discourse, I am also interested in exploring why, in four out of the five texts analyzed, women's instrumentalization is specifically expressed through narratives of mothering. In particular, I am interested in how this maternal focus reflects and reasserts gender ideologies, constructing 'developing world women' as efficient neoliberal subjects while containing them within traditional understandings of appropriate femininity. I argue that through this construction and containment development advertisements are able to represent 'developing world women' as both 'smart investments', and as members of the 'deserving poor'.

In her own analysis of development advertising, Wilson argues that neoliberal understandings of 'the deserving' poor as hard-working, entrepreneurial agents are at least partially responsible for the shift in representations of developing world women from passive victims to active agents.[29] She argues that these representations implicitly construct 'developing world women' against popular understandings of the 'undeserving poor' as lazy and dependent. As discussed above, such representations are dangerous because they suggest that women need only a small 'boost' to get them on track, invisibilizing the ongoing structural barriers, both economic and gendered, that they must continue to negotiate. Yet even as they hide structural barriers, these representations suggest that 'developing world women' are victims who are not poor due to their own failure as economic subjects. In constructing 'developing world women' as hard working, the advertisements Wilson analyzes draw not only on economic valuations of efficiency, but also on ideological understandings of who does and does not deserve help. Acknowledging this largely affective, value-laden component of development ideology is critical to understanding why 'developing world women' are constructed not only as 'good investments' but also as 'good mothers' and hence 'good women' who are worthy of our help.

By constructing 'developing world women' as hard-working, neoliberal subjects while situating them within the 'private sphere' of the family, the texts I have analyzed contain any anxiety surrounding female participation in the market economy, reasserting the value of 'traditional' gender roles.[30] In doing so, these texts re-naturalizes 'traditional' gender roles, invisibilizing the ways in which the private/public divide is a distinctly upper class, European construct that should not be taken as reflective of local norms, nor of individual women's lived experiences.[31] Through this process, these constructions instrumentalize

29 Wilson (2011).
30 Cornwall, Gideon and Wilson (2008).
31 Mohanty (1991).

'developing world women' while simultaneously folding them into conservative, western understandings of appropriate femininity.

Through their representation as altruistic mothers 'developing world women' are not only characterized as fulfilling traditional feminine roles, but also as complying with the cultural ideal of the 'good mother'. As feminist scholars have demonstrated, the figure of the 'good mother' has long permeated western culture, and continues to function as a primary means through which women are judged and disciplined.[32] Linked to understandings of a (specifically feminine) moral goodness, good mothers are expected to be dutiful and self-sacrificing, while 'bad mothers' are predominantly characterized as selfish.[33] Hence, by constructing 'developing world women' as altruistic mothers, the development texts I have analyzed further position 'developing world women' as 'morally good' members of the 'deserving poor'.

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, it is significant that 'developing world women' are represented as sharing a 'universal' experience of motherhood that maps onto white, middle class ideals of maternal sacrifice. Such representations homogenize women's mothering experiences, naturalizing and asserting the dominance of these raced and classed maternal values. Yet these representations might also be understood as a push-back against the negative stereotypes that have come to be associated with racialized mothers; stereotypes such as the 'Sapphire' or the 'Welfare Queen', the latter of which combines racialized understandings of the 'bad mother' and the 'undeserving poor'[34]. By offering representations of racialized women that are in direct contrast with these stereotypes, the development texts resist characterizations of 'poor' racialized mothers as 'bad mothers', folding them instead into white, middle class maternal ideals. While, again, these attempts might be well-intentioned responses to negative racialized stereotypes, they disrupt these stereotypes without disrupting the negative value judgements that are associated with non-normative mothering practices and identities, re-naturalizing and reaffirming cultural idealizations of maternal altruism.

The discursive construction of 'developing world women' as the 'deserving poor' homogenizes developing world women while reaffirming neoliberal values and normative gender roles. Furthermore, such constructions reassert the authority of western values and of western audiences by implicitly constructing western readers as entitled and able to judge who is and who is not worthy

32 Aminatta Forna, *The Mother of All Myths: How Society Moulds and Constrains Mothers* (London: Harper-Collins, 1998).
33 *Ibid.*
34 K. McCormack, 'Stratified Reproduction and Poor Women's Resistance', *Gender and Society* 19/5 (2005), 660-679.

of help. With the increasing 'NGO-isation'of development, such discursive constructions are reflective of the material need for development organizations to raise funds and support from western audiences. While this discursive authority is complicated by the gap that often exists between NGO activities and their marketing strategies, the material reliance on individual donors and the discursive constructions used to solicit support position readers within a space of authority wherein we are, at the very least, able to imagine ourselves as determining who should and should not receive help. While more research is needed to determine the extent that positive and/or negative donor responses shape NGO policy and practice, as part of the discursive landscape of gender and development, appeals that rely upon and reinforce ideologically informed constructions of the 'deserving' poor threaten to limit the kinds of interventions that are envisioned and pursued.

Orientalism and the Politics of Empathy

In addition to folding 'developing world women' into western, middle class ideals of 'good motherhood', representations of 'developing world women' as sharing in a 'universal' mothering identity constructs them as familiar and relatable to western readers. In doing so, this construction facilitates empathetic responses among readers that might result in increased willingness to support development campaigns, yet while further reasserting the authority of western viewers. In her critique of the neoliberal politics of empathy, Pedwell acknowledges that empathy can be a powerful tool in motivating commitments to social justice and care for others, as directing readers towards an empathetic response calls them to create a bond of care and responsibility with the figure being represented.[35] This bond is made possible by constructing the represented subject as familiar enough to the reader that they can imagine themselves in this subject's situation. Thus, despite its potentially positive effects, empathy can also work to sustain unequal power relations by functioning as a form of Orientalist knowledge production. This is because the ability to empathise with another, as opposed to sympathize with them, rests on the assumption that that one can know what this person is experiencing and feeling.[36] Therefore, when empathy occurs across geographic and racialized power dynamics, it involves the assumption of knowledge over the racialized 'Other'. Such knowledge is particularly problematic when it is produced through the construction an 'Other' as 'like us'; as with the construction of 'developing world women' as sharing a 'universal' mothering experience that conforms to western norms and ideals.

35 Carolyn Pedwell 'Economies of Empathy: Obama, Neoliberalism and Social Justice', *Environment and Planning* 30/2 (2012), 280-297.

36 *Ibid.*

This is problematic because if empathy becomes the bases of social justice work, those who are discursively excluded from shared experiences, such as non-normative mothers, may be excluded from empathetic relations and hence, from development interventions. Furthermore, empathetic relations potentially reinforce the construction of western development practitioners and supporters as sites of authoritative knowledge; for if one knows what a mother in the developing world is experiencing and feeling, one can presumably determine her needs and interests. In this way, the construction of an empathetic relationship in which the viewer can empathize with and thus know the 'Other' – but not vice versa – reinforces the authority of the western development sector and those who support it.

Empowerment and the Authority of the Development Sector

While the myth of empowerment constructs 'developing world women' as drivers of development, it also functions to reassert the authority of the development sector by constructing it as the site from which 'developing world women' receive their power. In its early usage, empowerment was a radical concept that sought to disrupt binaric, top-down understandings of power by recognizing the agency and power possessed by even the most vulnerable individuals.[37] Indeed, while representations of 'empowered' 'developing world women' can in part be linked to neoliberal ideologies, they also emerged as a reaction against representations of 'developing world women' as passive victims of poverty and passive recipients of development aid.[38] However, despite its radical potential, the concept of empowerment has largely been used to sustain the configurations of power it was initially intended to disrupt. By depoliticizing the term and turning empowerment into a 'set of largely apolitical, technocratic and narrow interventions', development institutions re-center their own power as distributors of material resources.[39] Furthermore, through claims that they can 'empower' targeted beneficiaries, development organizations reassert the power of western organizations over women in the 'developing world', while ignoring and diminishing the power these women do exercise.[40] In their co-optation of empowerment discourse, development organizations have transformed 'developing world women' into 'objects' of empowerment rather than agents of empowerment.[41] Thus, even as those employing the discourse of empowerment seem to recognize the agentic potential of 'developing world women' they do so while sustaining understandings of these women as at least initially dependent

37 Batliwala (2007).
38 Wilson (2011).
39 Batliwala (2007), p.559.
40 Majid Rahnema, 'Participation', in W. Sachs (ed.), *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power* (London: Zed Books, 2010), 127-144.
41 Aradhana Parmar, 'Micro-credit, Empowerment, and Agency: Re-evaluating the Discourse', in *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 24/3 (2003), 461-476.

on development organizations and institutions to unlock this potential. In the construction of development organizations and institutions as holding the power to empower, the myth of empowerment legitimizes these organizations' development activities. Furthermore, development texts that call upon western donors to donate to empowerment campaigns extend this perceived power to their supporters. Thus, the myth of empowerment acts as a relation of ruling that serves to justify the activities of the development sector by reasserting and normalizing the power and authority of the 'developed' world

Counter Discourses in Plan's 'Choices for Girls' Video

Plan's 'Choices for Girls' Video stands out from the other texts I have analyzed in that it is the only text that does not engage explicitly in maternal discourses. This lack of maternal discourses can perhaps be attributed to the text's focus on adolescent girls. While Nike's 'Girl Effect' shares this focus, Plan's video does not indicate that the girls depicted will one day become mothers. The absence of maternal discourses in Plan's video is significant, particularly given that development discourse scholars have noted a distinct increase in development texts that focus exclusively or predominantly on adolescent girls.[42] Given that four out of five texts analyzed in this study did engage significantly in maternal discourses, I would hesitate to presume that this emerging preoccupation with adolescent girls necessarily means a shift away from maternal discourse. However, I would argue that the relationship between maternal discourses and this emerging focus on adolescent girls represents an important area of further study in gender and development discourse.

One way of understanding the lack of maternal discourse in Plan's video is through the myth that motherhood is a universal female experience. Although Plan's video does not itself enforce the myth of motherhood as a universal experience, my broader analysis indicates that the video is being read in a context where motherhood and femininity are often conflated. Notably, this myth encourages assumptions that whether or not girls and women are mothers, they nevertheless possess maternal characteristics. Thus, the video's depiction of female altruism can be understood as implicitly linked to the ideal of maternal altruism observed in all four of the other analyzed texts.

In addition to being the only selected text to focus exclusively on adolescent girls, Plan's 'Choices for Girls' video is the only text to offer viewers a representation of young women in the 'developed world'. The video shifts between shots of, and interviews with three thirteen year old girls; Bintou from Mali, Sur from

42 Kate Grosser and Nikki van der Gaag, 'Can Girls Save the World?', in Tina Wallace, Fenella Porter (eds.), *Aid, NGOs and the Realities of Women's Lives: A Perfect Storm* (Warwickshire: Practical Action Publishing, 2013), 73-88.

Thailand and Jasmine from the United Kingdom. As demonstrated in my discourse analysis, while Sur is depicted as making sacrifices to support her family, Jasmine is represented as being free from familial obligations. Within the video, Jasmine's freedom is constructed as a desirable alternative to Sur's, familial duties. While this configuration disrupts the construction of altruism as a universal and as a positive characteristic, it does so by reiterating the discursive construction of 'western women' as liberated, and 'developing world' women as oppressed by traditional gender stereotypes.[43] By constructing their campaign as that which can help Bintou and Sur be more like Jasmine, Plan's video reiterates the conflation between 'development' and 'women's liberation', reaffirming the construction of development as a source of female empowerment and thus reasserting the (feminist) authority of the development sector and the 'developed world'.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have demonstrated that popular development campaigns deploy maternal myths to construct 'developing world women' as ideal targets of development. Specifically, I have demonstrated how the instrumentalist arguments that have come to dominate gender and development literature are deployed by popular development texts in distinctly gendered ways. I have argued that these popular development texts rely not only on neoliberal understandings of efficiency to construct women in the developing world as a 'good investment', but that they do so while simultaneously constructing these women as 'good mothers' who comply with dominant understandings of appropriate femininity. My analysis thus allows for stronger, more nuanced understandings of how popular development texts use, respond to, and reassert neoliberal and gendered understandings of 'developing world women' as the 'deserving poor'. I have also argued that by appealing to ideological and affective understandings of the 'deserving poor', the popular development texts I have examined function to reassert the authority of the western development sector, and by extension the (presumably) western audiences to which they are appealing. My analysis thus highlights that although these texts were likely produced with the best of intentions, they were also produced in a context wherein women's inclusion in development is contingent on convincing those in the developed world to help them.

In their theorization of gender and development 'myths', Cornwall et al. are careful to acknowledge the difficulties inherent in negotiating the need to

43 Mohanty (1991).

mobilize support for gender and development projects and the risks of utilizing simplified and problematic (if effective) representations of 'developing world women'. Indeed, given the material difficulties facing many women in the developing world it is difficult to blame development organizations for deploying discourses that help them secure much needed resources – and this certainly is not my intention. Rather, in conducting this analysis I hope to point to the dangers of a system whereby raising funds and political support is reliant upon convincing western audiences that particular groups and individuals are not only in need of help, but that they deserve it. As I have demonstrated, this model is one that sustains existing power configurations, reasserting the authority of western audiences to determine how development should be achieved and who it should benefit. Bearing this in mind, it is important that development organizations proceed with caution, and think critically about the implications of their fundraising strategies, particularly when read as part of the larger context of gender and development ideology. In moving forward, it is important not only to think about alternative narratives that development organizations might deploy, but also to consider alternative forms of representation that might disrupt the discursive authority of the western development sector. For instance, we might consider participatory development campaigns that allow women in the 'developing world' to represent their own stories – although such strategies are hardly without risk. Ultimately, this paper represents a call for those of us who produce and consume development texts to think critically about the ideological messages we are sending and what the implications might be for those we are trying to help. This includes asking ourselves, as both practitioners and donors, what messages we are sending about who we are willing to help, and why.

Jacqueline Marie Potvin
Department of Women's Studies and Feminist Research,
University of Western Ontario, Canada
email: jpotvin2@uwo.ca

the global justice network