DETERMINING DEVELOPMENT: THE IMPACT OF WHITE FEMINISM ON WOMEN OF COLOR

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"Against White Feminism" has been called a "counter-manifesto" and a "call to arms," but most importantly, it is a propulsive synthesis of how American feminism fails women of color—propulsive because by succinctly capturing all those dimensions in one place, Zakaria has created the force needed for the discourse on feminism to move forward, and in some ways, to move beyond its current "whiteness."

This essay will elaborate upon the consequences of white feminism for marginalized women of the south. I attempt to highlight how the objectives of white feminism—identified as "shared power over systems with men"[1]—reinforce the obstacles of patriarchy for women of color. Instead of creating inclusive institutional solutions, white feminism privileges women of one dominant culture, situating them as the new norm that every other woman must navigate. The dangers of white feminism play out on two parallel stages: first, women of color situated in the west must conceal cultural diversity to lay claims to any feminist policy. Second, the

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    1. KOA BECK, WHITE FEMINISM: FROM THE SUFFRAGETTES TO INFLUENCERS AND WHO THEY LEAVE BEHIND 12 (2021).

trajectories through which women of the global south can attain development are determined by the tenets of white feminism. From determining which women "really need saving,"[2] to what development policies will help save them, the narratives of marginalized women are written by proclaimed white feminists even as the agencies of marginalized women are written off.

I.   MULTICULTURALISM AND FEMINISM: FAILING AT WHITE FEMINISM IN AMERICA

The debate on whether feminism can accommodate multiculturalism is not new. In "Is multiculturalism bad for women?,"[3] Okin stresses the importance of individual human rights over special group rights. She argues that minority groups cannot claim exceptions to women's rights based on cultural differences. To draw out the tension between feminism and cultural diversity,[4] Okin cites polygamy as an example of a practice shielded from criticism under the guise of a cultural norm. This is to show that minority cultural norms can be oppressive towards women when men have more power within these cultures. Feminists should not, therefore, create excuses for the brutalization of women in minority cultures. Instead, she urges liberals to understand that within-group gender hierarchies can disadvantage minority women and that the job of western liberals is to guarantee them the same set of rights as white women. She, therefore, creates a justification for assimilation based on the progress that white feminists have made: progress that need not nuance itself to create room for cultural diversity.

Yet, this spiel in favor of assimilation fails to account for the privilege, the whiteness, and the implicit biases of the author herself. Several responses to Okin's essay point to her choice of examples in speaking of patriarchal minority cultures. Politt questions why violence against women in some cultures is considered to emanate from rigid religious or cultural rites, while violence against women in the west is seen as corrigible.[5] Politt suggests "that is partly because of multiculturalism's connections to Third Worldism, and the appeals Third Worldism makes to white liberal guilt, and partly because Americans understand that Russia and Italy are dynamic

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2.   Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and its Others*, AM. ANTHROPOLOGIST 104(3), 783 (2002).

3.   Susan Okin, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women, in* IS MULTICULTURALISM BAD FOR WOMEN 7, 7-24 (Joshua Cohen et al. eds., 1999).

4.   *Id.*

5.   Katha Pollitt, *Whose Culture?, in* IS MULTICULTURALISM BAD FOR WOMEN 27, 27-30 (Joshua Cohen et al. eds., 1999).

societies in which change is constant and cultures clash."[6] Whiteness, therefore, drives the bias in identifying the cultures that feminism might need to accommodate. It then imposes stereotypes on those cultures to incorrectly assume that certain patriarchal norms are unchanging and, in doing so, strips the agency of minority women who have been fighting against these norms from within.

In the chapter of "Is Solidarity a Lie?," Zakaria fleshes out the role that minority women are expected to play in white feminism. [7] "We are expected to be tellers of sad stories, where we detail how our particularly brutal men, our inherently flawed culture, our singularly draconian religion (but never the actions or inactions of white people) have caused us indescribable pain."[8] These women are not expected to know what they want or how to mount a fight against the patriarchy on their own. Instead, they serve as trophies that white saviors can amass as mementos of their feminist efforts.

Casting women from non-white cultures as women who need saving effectively silences them. No one is listening to minority women when they seek safeguards that could help them succeed within their own cultural frameworks. This is true, both in how women of color are treated in the west, and how they are purportedly "saved" in their homes. Policies are drafted for the betterment of women that ascribe to the dominant white culture, including nuclear families, the absence of multigenerational households, and a stoic resistance against the gendering of household chores. To want to succeed despite these circumstances is seen as a betrayal of feminism's core ideals. In short, women who want a share of the advances of feminism should first prove their "whiteness." What white feminism overlooks is that instead of rescuing women of color, stipulating whiteness worsens their burden. They are now tasked with the dual charge of tackling structural hurdles and concurrently proving their commitment to white feminism.

Early on, Zakaria writes, "you do not have to be white to be a white feminist," rather than a white feminist is someone who "refuses to consider the role that whiteness and racial privilege play in universalizing white feminist concerns, agendas, and beliefs as being those of all feminism and all feminists."[9] Any idea, behavior, or policy that—in the name of feminism, professing to better the situation of a woman or a group of women—ends up upholding a social structure that favors white women

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6. *Id*. at 28-29.
7. RAFIA ZAKARIA, AGAINST WHITE FEMINISM: NOTES ON DISRUPTION 34-55 (2021).
8. *Id*. at 55.
9. *Id*. at 3.

over other women is a manifestation of white feminism. In other words, the normative ideal—the aspirational equality that all women are struggling for—is defined by the white woman. If white women are sex-positive, choose to procreate later in life or not at all, wear pantsuits to work, and let their hair down, then progress for other women is measured by their ability to appropriate this reality for themselves. Effectively, white feminism replaces—for white feminists—the ethnocentric ideal of a white man with the equally ethnocentric ideal of a white woman.

The violence that this new ideal unleashes against women of color often comes from people who self-profess to be feminists. This violence happens in schools, the corporate workplace, and academia. This violence happened to me: a publicly Muslim immigrant and woman of color who became a mother during the early years of graduate school. Like Zakaria, I often dressed in bright colors—going against not only the white feminist aesthetic but also the NYC aesthetic—and was quick to share domestic troubles with my graduate school advisors. This was a cultural misstep. In white culture, academic advisors are only interested in metrics of professional success and envision the same conversations with their female students as they do with their male students. Successful women aren't the ones who give birth and own it, they are the ones who either choose not to give birth or on the rare occasion that they do, try to hide it. Successful women shield their advisors from their immigrant worries and pretend to be white (and anchored in the country); they emulate the lifestyle choices of their advisors. At one point, one of my advisors asked me why my work was slow even though it had been a while since I had given birth. Instead of recognizing birthing as purely feminine labor, she wanted to equate it to a medical problem a white man would face and overcome. I had to overcome my motherhood, my race, and my religion to be successful. The unfortunate part is that these people—who committed violence against me by letting their expectations of whiteness gatekeep me from academia—professed to be feminists. They taught courses on affirmative action and engaged in feminist conversations. They drowned their liberal guilt by sectioning out their feminism to only that subset of "white enough" women who deserved it. To me, they advised ways to shed my identity or to understand that owning it would mean divorcing academia. One of my colleague's unsolicited advice touched on this explicitly when he wrote, "this is a tough moment, and for young women and especially mothers the tradeoffs are brutal. You can be successful in this program but it probably requires a restructuring of your life, such that you have a lot more time for school." While I do not question my colleagues's commitment to liberal (white) feminism, they place the burden of change squarely on my shoulders. The

school and the program are not tasked with changing their structural inequities to help a woman in my situation succeed; in fact, the structural flaws are not even acknowledged. Yet, I, by being a woman and a mother, have now situated myself to face "brutal" tradeoffs and must choose. This incident exemplifies what whiteness does to feminists: it effectively blinds them to their acts of dispossessing women of opportunities, because those opportunities exist only for those who can adequately assimilate.

Whiteness then encapsulates the tension between assimilationism and multiculturalism that Okin foregrounds in her book.[10] My advisors could ask why you expect to succeed if you are willing to bear the inequities that your culture mounts against women. But who gets to define what is an inequity, or an act of resistance? And how are you choosing to understand my culture? What are your sources?

II. WHO PUT YOU IN CHARGE OF DEVELOPING ME? WOMEN IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH AND THE WHITENESS OF DEVELOPMENT POLICY

The implicit biases of white feminism also have an impact on the conceptualization of and contributions to the development of women in the global south. Starting from funding allocations to the choice of projects, going all the way to the monitoring and evaluation, development policy is riddled with racism. It continues to center whiteness in the practice of foreign policy, with white experts choosing to make decisions on behalf of marginalized women. White women have historically participated in colonial agendas, and continue to do so in the contemporary strategizing of developing the third world. They extend their "whiteness" to foreign policy: "from a postcolonial feminist view whiteness may be treated as an assumption that several white women make that they have the knowledge and obligation to be ready to jump to the aid of 'Other' women (whether Other women need it or want it or not)."[11] Let us focus on the two aspects of this "whiteness": knowledge and obligation.

The unquestioned assumption that experts in the west have better knowledge of development strategies has guided the trajectory of how developmental foreign policy unfolds in the global south. This racialized hierarchy of knowledge cannot be addressed simply by diversifying the faces of development agencies around the world. Take the example of the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) in Pakistan, an unconditional cash

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10. *See* Susan Okin, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women, in* IS MULTICULTURALISM BAD FOR WOMEN 7, 7-24 (Joshua Cohen et al. eds., 1999).

11. Jawad Syed & Faiza Ali, *The White Woman's Burden, in* 32 THIRD WORLD QUARTERLY 349, 350-51 (2011).

grant program targeted toward women. The program seeks to empower women by providing them with a quarterly cash payment that amounts to almost $9 per month; this is a substantial amount in a country where the poverty line is about $13 per month. This program was launched against the backdrop of the microfinance revolution and a "ghost statistic" that women spend almost ninety percent of their income on their children, as compared to men spending only thirty to forty percent.[12] While this statistic has never been verified, Moeller warns that "even when quantitative data are valid, they often produce very limited understandings of the complex realities of girls and women's lives and the conditions that produce poverty and inequality."[13] Most of this research relies on statistical methods that have poor external validity and are often contextually specific; yet, development agencies are quick to cite studies housed at large universities as they draw up plans to meet their obligations. The big data revolution also disadvantages the implementation of these programs by imposing the need for continued monitoring and evaluation. Again, taking the example of BISP, the payments are disbursed using a biometric verification system which allows the program to collect regular data on how well the program is functioning and how any corruption-related leakages are. This data determines future tranches of aid for the program and incentivizes the take-up of technology that prioritizes the placement of multiple points of data collection, but also introduces myriad last-mile gaps. In my dissertation research, I show that households receiving BISP are more likely to demand last-mile services to address problems of access introduced by donors' need to be data-driven and corruption-free. Both these concerns ignore realities on the ground and attempt to, as Zakaria writes, depoliticize poverty in the global south. Underdevelopment is not something that can be magically "fixed" by the knowledge and the money generated in the west: particularly not by shifting its development on brown and indigenous women of color who are more suited as the subjects of development than its drivers.[14]

But "whiteness" is not just about the knowledge that steers development; it is also about the obligation. It defines the "white women's burden" and their continued blindness to the racialized hierarchy that maligns their efforts to address their own liberal guilt. Recently, I came to know of an organization, "Open Philanthropy," a research and grantmaking

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12. Kathryn Moeller, *The Ghost Statistic that Haunts Women's Empowerment*, THE NEW YORKER 1, Jan. 4, 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/science/elements/the-ghost-statistic-that-haunts-womens-empowerment.

13. *Id.*

14. Rafia Zakaria, *What Makes Foreign Policy "Feminist"?*, THE BAFFLER, Mar. 28, 2022, https://thebaffler.com/latest/against-german-feminism-zakaria.

non-profit institution in the U.S. This organization is part of a larger group of such likeminded organizations, including GiveWell and Good Ventures. I was introduced to Open Philanthropy through my graduate school; they recently hired several newly minted PhDs in Political Science, citing their commitment to effective altruism (i.e., generosity based on substantive empirical research). This is again a nod to big data and the ability to signal transparency and rigor. Even though I'm a quantitative social scientist, I worry about how empirical research is defined. The credibility of empirical research is often couched in how statistically sophisticated it is, which already excludes many areas of giving where data collection is difficult or cannot produce savvy graphics. But moving beyond this knowledge aspect, it is interesting to note that Open Philanthropy was founded by two white billionaires, Dustin Moskovitz and Cari Tuna. Inspired by Singer's *The Life You Can Save* (2009), they joined a club of rich Americans committed to channeling their obligations through evidence-based giving by signing Bill Gates' and Warren Buffet's Giving Pledge. It is not objectionable that a set of white liberals have chosen to address their obligations, but they do so through organizations they create, direct and monitor closely based on their principles of what does or does not count as "effective altruism."

Zakaria elaborates on why the need to be a helicopter philanthropist via foreign development policy is problematic: "to be clear, it is not that FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) is not a cruel practice—it is the fact that white feminists in Germany are deciding which issues are central to women's empowerment in heavily Muslim countries like Mauritania and Burkina Faso."[15]

III. RECOGNIZING AGENCY AND MAKING ROOM FOR DIFFERENCE: MARCHING IN STEP FOR FEMINISM, NOT JUST WHITE FEMINISM

In feminism, the notion of effectiveness without inclusivity is flawed. If effective development is dictated by where agencies get the most bang for the buck, then they will gravitate towards disproportionately placing the burden of development on women since it is easier to show an impact when you choose to help the very destitute. On the other hand, if effectiveness is grounded in empirical research, only programs that have instituted data collection processes such as BISP will receive foreign aid flows. Research itself is closely shaped by the notion of effectiveness: it is cheaper to do a large-n survey in some areas that already have well-established survey companies than in difficult-to-reach populations. The big data revolution is

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15. *Id.*

partially responsible for the move towards developing countries: while graduate students could do a field experiment in the global south, they were usually unable to afford one in Europe or North America. This, paired with the path dependency of research, can lead to skewed priorities for development. For example, Punjab is the most heavily studied region of Pakistan because of the prevalence of survey companies and research think tanks, all part of a broader research infrastructure that was established by early Pakistani-American academics, most of whom hailed from the country's affluent region of Punjab. This has only served to cement inequities, rather than address them, through development.

Recently, Open Philanthropy circulated an open prompt, winning responses to which could win up to $25,000. The prompt asked, "[w]hat new cause area should Open Philanthropy consider funding?" When I received this prompt, I knew that I could most convincingly justify increased funding to BISP because: a) data on its transparency and effectiveness vis-à-vis selected metrics of women development exists and b) because I could propose to conduct a new survey with BISP recipients *in Punjab* to better understand how the increases in money could be used. Even I, a brown immigrant academic, had to cave into some existing structural inequities, which continue to inform how development can unfold. But for Open Philanthropy, this prompt, its circulation amongst elite U.S. graduate schools and its evidence-based responses manifest its core "whiteness."

The most compelling way to move from white feminism to inclusive feminism is to recognize women as agents, across different cultures and different contexts. Whether it is recipients of foreign aid, or the expats involved in foreign policy making, there needs to be cultivated a renewed accommodation for cultural diversity. As Zakaria contends, in its current form, aid not only imposes saving on women who haven't asked for it, but it also chooses for them *how* they should be saved.[16] Similarly, the move towards community-driven development in the aid literature, which emphasizes seeking input from the natives, essentially assumes away the agency of the recipients. The idea that giving a marginalized woman X will change her behavior in predictable ways has formed the thrust of developmental social science, focusing narrowly on the predictive power of policies. Yet, this predictive power is itself biased by those who launch the studies (white), those who fund the studies (white), and those who field the studies (often natives aspiring to be white). It has become imperative to

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16. ZAKARIA, *supra* note 7, at 56-74.

question our predictive margins and to acknowledge that people/women in other cultures have agencies of resistance that might surprise us. We must build that capacity for surprise into our social scientific development models and the consequences of foreign aid. And concurrently, we should be open to that capacity for a surprise when we are dealing with women from other cultures and when we are dealing with women from our own cultures who might not yet have achieved whiteness successfully or may simply not be interested in getting there. We should not focus on exiting whiteness to replace it with another idea but let go of the idea of one perfect ideal altogether.

Finally, I just want to respond to Zakaria's opening by suggesting that the next meeting should not be in a wine bar. It should be at a chai spot, where some good ol' doodh patti can provide the caffeine kick that encourages us to be our true, authentic selves.

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