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Book review for *Gender and Development*
Engendering Transformative Change in International Development
By Gillian Fletcher

Reviewed by Lata Narayanaswamy

That dominant frameworks and ideas, identified here as 'fixed knowledge', frequently and detrimentally undercut the more fluid and situated knowledge of people in the communities that international development claims to exist for is an important issue and here is tackled with a welcome sense of outrage and urgency, with gender inequality a recurring theme throughout. The book starts with an overview of how and why 'development', in both theory and practice, operates as it does. Fletcher offers a whistlestop tour of the origins of development's dysfunction and the inability to tackle what she identifies as development's 'wicked problems'. She suggests that ideas and programmes follow the (donor) money, which represents a built-in hypocrisy, particularly on the question of gender equality, where the largest donors are not themselves faring very well on the metrics for this measure that they champion.

Moving from the SDGs to problematise the nature of 'knowledge', Fletcher seeks to reframe the ways in which we validate people's lived experience and their associated 'wisdom', set against what she calls 'fixed knowledge' that, whilst undeniably worthwhile, is not equipped to solve 'wicked' problems that are themselves 'social system problems'. In moving from the MDGs and then again the SDGs demonstrates steps in the right direction, she argues, even these do not feature 'one word of explanation for where poverty, inequity, injustice and abuse of human rights *come from* ... that underneath the rhetoric lie webs of power and politics' (Fletcher, 2019: 23; emphasis in original). Whilst meandering at times, this introductory point is very powerful – why DO we accept this as the status quo? And what, she asks, should we do about it?

She moves on to consider the question of 'knowledge' – how we know what we know in international development discourse and practice. Here again is a whistlestop tour that takes in Socrates, Plato, Freire and Escobar, and seeks to problematise why 'the world continues to become less fair and less equal' (ibid: 28). Chapter 2 focuses on knowledge and the need to work in ways that are what she terms 'generative', meaning contextually specific and starting with asking 'why' problems exist in each context in which development seeks to engage. Here she draws on her experience of working with HIV in Myanmar, arguing that there is an over-emphasis on sharing 'facts' such as condom use with at-risk populations rather than any real attempt to understand and engage constructively with the complexities of the lived realities of these groups. There are plenty of powerful examples of her frustration with what she terms the 'charmed circle of social hierarchies' (ibid: 28), where elites control resources and the rest are 'left behind'.

Fletcher devotes an entire chapter to questioning the 'gender norms' that underpin how international development has approached the vexed question of sex work, raising nuanced insights into the multiple subjectivities of sex workers. Whether self-identifying as men, women or trans, she highlights the tendency to erase the 'complexity' of people's lives with a 'widespread focus on sex workers as "vectors of disease"' (ibid: 55). Fletcher has meticulously documented her work over many years with people who identify as sex workers, and grappling with difficult questions about the continuum from outright trafficking and coercion, to treating people engaged in selling 'sex' as agentic and exercising some degree of choice, is a compelling narrative. Her in-depth and nuanced insights into the diversity of lived experiences of sex-workers draws attention to their exclusion and invisibility in the wider sphere of development work that is associated with gender equality and/or women's empowerment. As Fletcher emphasises, 'I have never met a woman who identifies as a sex worker and is included in an international development *women's* project ... they can only ever be engaged with in terms of one aspect of their lives' (48). Yet what she has observed is the incredible diversity of engagement with sex work – full-time, part-time; younger, older; standalone and small business owners; married, single; parents, childless. It is surely an indictment of the pigeon-holing tendencies of development practice that this diversity is largely overlooked, and that the gendered nature of sex work (and the particular invisibility of trans women that also results) and its salience as a human right issues has, as Fletcher points out, been reduced to a narrow focus on HIV prevention. How, Fletcher rightly asks, do we work in ways in this context such that 'no one is left behind'?

Subsequent chapters then draw out concerns in relation to the practice of sorcery in Papua New Guinea. Fletcher suggests that there has emerged a tendency to label this as a form of gender-based violence (where women are accused of sorcery and/or witchcraft) rather than a question of a range of inequalities combining with religion and belief systems that vary across those islands, and with varying effects between and among men and women. She details attempts of successive PNG administrations to tackle this, where a lack of understanding of 'social stresses or 'increasing inequity' (ibid: 118) are largely overlooked in favour of a criminal justice response (including more widespread use of the death penalty).

This is followed by a chapter on the Australian aid programme's relationship with Africa through a community engagement programme entitled *The Promoting Rights and Accountabilities in African Communities* (PRAAC) project across 11 African countries, implemented in partnership with Plan International. She offers some broad and sweeping insights into 3 of the countries in this programme – Kenya, Uganda and Zimbabwe – before going into the details of the programme itself. Whilst noting the positive ambition of the programme's commitment to 'transformative change' with marginalised groups designed to be 'deeply place-based and empowering' (ibid: 140), Fletcher is critical of the emphasis on numerical metrics to measure 'success' in these programmes that she has described as 'the tyranny of scale' (ibid: 138). This tyranny, she argues, fundamentally undermines the participatory and bottom-up approaches the programme professes to extol and prioritise.

This has been a difficult book to review. On the one hand, there is a practical dimension in the tone of the writing that makes it quite accessible and the anger is both palpable and entirely justified in my view. Yet the literature reviewed does not properly map on to the problems the case study chapters subsequently investigate, nor indeed, do these seem to map on to her own experiences.

What is beyond doubt is the in-depth knowledge Fletcher has of Cambodia, a passion that comes through in how she lays out the myriad historical and contemporary challenges that have shaped, and continue to shape, Cambodia's so-called 'development' trajectory. I wish this had been her starting point – reflections on her deep, abiding and long-term commitment to a country facing profound and dramatic change and how sex-workers, in all their gendered forms, fit into this shifting landscape. Building on her more recent experiences in Myanmar that related to the key themes about fixed versus situated knowledge, taken together, would have made for a more coherent narrative.

Instead Fletcher has inexplicably chosen to focus on second-hand insights and literature on PNG, which she admits she only visited for a very short time, and on AusAid's PRAAC programme, which she critiques for its approaches to training without, as she admits, having 'had access to training curricula or awareness raising materials', but what she 'suspect[s]' has happened (ibid: 143), where to find out more about projects sites, she admits that she 'turned to Google' (ibid: 148). Given the many years that she has worked in international development more generally, this seems an unnecessarily cavalier approach to building a robust case study.

What is perhaps more worrying about her approach is the lack of problematisation of her own lens, wherein the notion of 'marginality' and 'bottom-up' are valorised and elevated as markers of (gendered) exclusion that are both identifiable and, if properly tackled, the most important and only valid starting points for tackling the 'wicked' problems of development. This is not entirely unfair, but it is a partial reading of the development studies literature, which is extensive and damning in its critique of the institutional apparatus that supports development practice in the form she rejects. Whilst she is rightly critical of this apparatus, there is no sustained engagement with the literature that would in fact support her analysis.

Instead of building an in-depth, place-based insight in a way that she herself notes is needed for the transformative, bottom-up change she envisions, she instead starts her analyses with broad insights variously on prehistoric migrations, a wide range of statistical indicators on poverty or HIV or gender inequality, or detailing the groups that fall inside and outside what she calls the 'charmed circle' of people who benefit from the existing system.

I can appreciate the ambition here –a broad, systemic re-telling is necessary if what you are demanding is nothing less than bottom-up, systemic change. Her final chapter tries to end on a positive note by invoking what she suggests is an effective project led by The Healing Foundation entitled 'Our Men Our Healing' in their work to tackle violence, including gender-based violence, and promote healing amongst indigenous communities in Australia. But here she introduces yet another lens explicitly – the colonial encounter – and in detailing the historical harm does not really engage with the structural inequality that has resulted or the relevance of this lens to the other case studies. Are 'projects' designed to 'heal' or 'community engagement' really answers for centuries of systemic, structural inequality? The history of change processes would suggest that solutions need to be both top-down and bottom-up to lead to longer-lasting change, with a large and critical literature that would have supported her to make this case more robustly, an opportunity she has, I feel, largely missed.