

## Gendered Discrimination Against Women and the Failings of Empowerment

There have been increased efforts in the past 50 years to end poverty, inequality, and injustice. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals are several objectives designed to combat the issues in underdeveloped countries.<sup>1</sup> While these issues have been met with solutions, there is a long history of gendered discrimination against women, throughout the world. This discrimination takes place in several forms. There are unequal job opportunities. There are unequal rights, pay, and protections. Culturally, women are expected to be child bearers and homemakers as their primary role. Women are more financially dependent on men, as well as more likely to be uneducated, unprotected by the law, and unable to provide for themselves as well as vulnerable to violence.<sup>2</sup> The gendered division of labor leaves women behind as well. Women's labor is private, characterized as informal and often goes unpaid for. This labor is typically cooking, cleaning, or other work that takes place in the home. In contrast, men's labor is productive and public. It is formal. There are labor laws and contracts that protect them. They are paid for their services.<sup>3</sup> This discrimination leaves women significantly behind when it comes to development.

Similarly, there are solutions that leave women out, perpetuating the discrimination. The idea of "empowerment" has been used to justify solutions to the issue of discrimination against women. There is an idea of empowerment that is supposed to give more rights, and therefore power, to women. The theory is that women are deserving of power to overcome their circumstances, like poverty. They are deserving of power to make decisions for themselves, like

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<sup>1</sup> Kazue Takamura. INTD 200-Week 2-2.

<sup>2</sup> Takamura. INTD 200-Week 7-1.

<sup>3</sup> Takamura. INTD 200-Week 7-1.

reproductive rights or education rights. They are deserving of power to self-worth, for example, doing jobs that are not humiliating or degrading. They should have opportunities for worthwhile jobs. The goal of empowering women is to give women the ability to do everything they would want to.<sup>4</sup> However, empowerment fails women for several reasons. The first is gender inequality.

<sup>5</sup> The practice normalizes women's limited access to rights and legal protections. This sustains the patriarchal, systemic barriers that oppress women. The second failing of empowerment is that it mainstreams human rights abuses.<sup>6</sup> It makes the origins of gendered oppression more obscure, and therefore harder to fix. The third failing of empowerment is "gender fatigue."<sup>7</sup> In a similar way, "gender fatigue," like mainstreaming, lacks clarity which makes it harder to solve. It also has clear Western biases. These Western biases homogenize oppression and oversimplify abuse.<sup>8</sup> These biases make it harder to solve oppression in Eastern or Southern countries.

The calls for feminism and empowerment have good intentions but they sometimes fail to solve the problem. Instead, these solutions either fail to solve the problems, or create new problems entirely. Microfinancing, giving small loans to women, seems well intended in theory, but in practice, the process does little to actually fix the oppression of women.<sup>9</sup> Instead of empowering women, it creates a new system where women are oppressed. The problem is not solved, only shaped into something slightly different. Women do find empowerment through microfinancing but not all women. Labor mobility is another issue that is connected to women's rights. Migrant workers move to new countries as a way of getting better job opportunities, in the

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<sup>4</sup> Takamura. INTD 200-Week 7-1.

<sup>5</sup> Takamura. INTD 200- Week 7-1.

<sup>6</sup> Patricia Nilsson. (2013). "Gender and Development. The Challenge of Mainstream." *Consilience*. Pg. 127.

<sup>7</sup> Takamura. INTD 200- Week 7-1.

<sup>8</sup> Nilsson. (2013). "Gender and Development. The Challenge of Mainstream." *Consilience*. Pg. 126.

<sup>9</sup> Kazue Takamura. INTD 200- Week 7-2.

pursuit of better lives for themselves and their families.<sup>10</sup> However, in practice, new problems are created. These migrant workers, especially women, are vulnerable for several reasons. Firstly, they are expendable, so they have no power when it comes to bargaining for fairer wages, better hours, safer conditions, or even legal protections.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, migrant workers are at the mercy of their employer, because their employer controls their immigration status.<sup>12</sup> This furthers the unbalanced relationship between employees and their employers.

Microfinancing, through microloans, is the unique loan process that is empowering to women. This process is characterized by a non-governmental organization giving a loan to women, often in rural communities. Microfinancing challenges conventional banking practices, giving women the ability to bypass the structural barriers that prevented them from getting loans in the first place. These structural barriers include collateral requirements, which rural women do not possess, as well as legal documentation when traveling abroad, which requires funds and a fairly comprehensive understanding of immigration law. This practice was first legitimized as late as the 2000's when the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Grameen Bank. The Bank stated they had a 98% loan recovery, an impressive number.<sup>13</sup> As stated, women lack power for themselves. Money and power have a close relationship. By giving women money that they can use for themselves, they can become more independent, thus more empowered. However, these gendered empowerment methods have their limits. By creating methods that bypass the barriers, rather than remove them, the system that oppresses women continues to exist.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, by

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<sup>10</sup> Kazue Takamura. INTD 200-Week 11-2.

<sup>11</sup> Takamura. INTD 200-Week 11-2.

<sup>12</sup> Takamura. INTD 200-Week 11-2.

<sup>13</sup> Lamia Karim. (2011). *"Microfinance and its Discontents: Women in Debt in Bangladesh."* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. xiii- xxxiii (Introduction). Pg. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Takamura. INTD 200- Week 7-2.

promoting non-governmental organizations, they are weakening the official state. Weakened states are more susceptible to human rights abuses, including gendered abuse. Lastly, microfinancing is the process of generating business and economic growth. This is good when it is done responsibly. However, the emerging critique is that microfinancing leads to neoliberal practices.<sup>15</sup>

The non-governmental organizations that give the loans are perceived as good. Grameen Bank was one of the dominant loan companies in Bangladesh. The Bank distributed 86% of the loan money in a region of Bangladesh.<sup>16</sup> That created a monopoly over microfinancing. This creates an unbalanced power dynamic between the non-governmental organizations and the women they are supposed to work with. They have such power over the women, they can do what they want. The culture in Bangladesh remained unchanged despite the presence of these non-governmental organizations. Culturally, these rural women in Bangladesh are not free to do as they please with the money. This created an economy of shame where women could be manipulated in to doing what their families wanted them to do. According to a study done by Hashemi and Schueler about the effects of microfinancing, it was discovered that women had greater mobility and autonomy after successfully securing and using a loan.<sup>17</sup> However, in contrast, another study found that children of women who used microloans were less likely to be in school.<sup>18</sup> This is an issue because while it might create an autonomous generation of women, the problem will persist with the next generation, if the next generation is illiterate. The second study could be interpreted to mean that microfinancing is a short-term solution. The loans that

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<sup>15</sup> Takamura. INTD 200- Week 7-2.

<sup>16</sup> Karim. (2011). *"Microfinance and its Discontents: Women in Debt in Bangladesh."* Pg. 17

<sup>17</sup> Karim. (2011). *"Microfinance and its Discontents: Women in Debt in Bangladesh."* Pg. 28

<sup>18</sup> Karim. (2011). *"Microfinance and its Discontents: Women in Debt in Bangladesh."* Pg. 28

are used by women are not helpful. The families will remain mostly in the same situation prior to receiving the money.

The most vulnerable people in many countries, particularly the developed countries, are the migrant workers or undocumented workers. This vulnerability is only exacerbated by gender. Developed and underdeveloped countries have a unique relationship. Developed countries face labor shortages. Underdeveloped countries face high unemployment, foreign debt, and low productivity. Labor migration creates opportunities for people to move to developed countries. This may seem beneficial to the migrant workers as they can get jobs with higher wage opportunities. They also have a greater chance of improving their standard of living.<sup>19</sup> However, while this phenomenon is beneficial to labor receiving countries, because they are solving their problem of labor shortages, and labor sending countries, because they are lowering their unemployment rate, it is not that beneficial to migrants, especially women. Migrant workers have less legal protection from corporations and immigration. This makes them powerless to stand up to human rights abuses. The gendered division of labor in markets makes it dangerous for women. Women perform unskilled, often manufacturing, jobs.<sup>20</sup> Their labor is devalued because they can be easily replaced. Since they are expendable, they are vulnerable. The solution to this issue of migrant worker vulnerability is that the proposed solutions are not effective. There are international human rights laws which could prevent abuse. However, it is voluntary to sign these laws and there is limited effect. This sustains legal power to domestic governments.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Takamura. INTD 200-Week 11-2.

<sup>20</sup> Kazue Takamura. INTD 200-Week 11-1.

<sup>21</sup> Takamura. INTD 200-Week 11-1.

In conclusion, the sustainable development of women is necessary. Women are consistently oppressed. Women are more frequently underprivileged, undereducated, and unprotected. These women need help. Empowerment seems like the best solution. The goal of empowerment is to give rights and privileges back to women themselves, so they can overcome obstacles, be involved in decision making, and have autonomy. However, the dilemma is that often the solutions do not fix the problems at hand. Microfinancing is supposed to solve the issue of women's economic oppression. While it does provide empowerment for some women, it does not help all women. In some situations, it creates a new oppressive system against women. It also can lead to the under-education of the following generations. A crucial step to true empowerment is education. Fair and free education for is important to solving gendered discrimination. This is a complicated issue because often children do not attend school to work to survive and support their families. Migration work is supposed to solve the issue of weak economies in underdeveloped countries. The feminization of labor contributes to the issue of oppressing women. There is little solution to this problem. International law is weak when it comes to combating these human rights violations because of a lack of compulsion to sign these documents. A potential solution to solving this would be forcing countries to sign and actively support these laws.

### Bibliography

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### Lectures

Takamura, Kazue. INTD 200 Week 2-2.

Takamura, Kazue. INTD 200 Week 7-1.

Takamura, Kazue. INTD 200 Week 7-2.

Takamura, Kazue. INTD 200 Week 11-1.

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