Gendering the Development Subject: A Critical Feminist Exploration of the Gates Foundation's Approach to Gender and Agricultural Development

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Introduction

Since the initiation of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) in 2006, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation—one of the program's largest funders—has become a target of academic and civil society critiques about the spread of industrial agriculture to the global South, the privileging of technocratic solutions to hunger, and a somewhat modified revitalization of the Green Revolution's singular model for agricultural development. Critics see AGRA's mission—to help millions of small farmers to lift themselves out of poverty—through the boosting of farm productivity as limited by their basic assumptions. Specifically, organizations such as Food First, the African Center for Biosafety and various institutes argue that AGRA's model will marginalize farmers in decision-making and will promote increased production rather than equitable distribution. The Gates Foundation has been responsive to a number of critiques of the first Green Revolution, and has attempted to incorporate a greater emphasis on local participation, market dynamics, soil fertility, and, crucially, women's participation in agriculture. This latter emphasis is most clearly elucidated in the 2008 Gender Impact Strategy on Agricultural Development, one of the Foundation's more recent comprehensive public statements about its approach to integrating gender and agricultural development.

Examining the Gender Impact Strategy through the lens of feminist theory suggests that the Gates Foundation's take on gender features a particular philanthropic or developmentalist feminism, one which promotes gender mainstreaming at the expense of critical questions about divisions, differences, and transformative capabilities. Philanthropic or developmentalist feminisms can and do have important practical effects on women's lives in the Global South, but the purpose of this essay is to offer a critical but constructive feminist analysis that challenges the de-politicization of both "gender" and "development" within this framework. Although the Gates Foundation approach to gender and gender sensitivity is not exceptional among development organizations, its work, in particular, merits a close feminist investigation because of its status as the largest philanthropic foundation in the world, with an endowment of $36.2 billion and enormous influence over international development agendas and trajectories.

In this essay, I first sketch the broader trends in which the Gates Foundation's strategy is situated, and then focus on an analysis of the Gender Impact Strategy for Agricultural Development. I seek to investigate how and on what terms women are produced as development subjects within the Gates

Foundation's approach to gender and agriculture in Africa. This critique highlights the ways in which the Foundation's language of gender reproduces a number of problematic assumptions and expectations of women that have been critiqued more generally among transnational feminists. Although I focus here on the work of discourse, there is a need to further develop an impact assessment based more heavily on interviews and on-the-ground research into these policies.

Historical and Conceptual Frameworks

The idea of "development" has been critiqued and deconstructed by a number of theorists influenced heavily by Marxist and Foucauldian traditions. Walter Rodney (1982), Samir Amin (1976), and dependency theorists criticized narratives of modernization that failed to account for the historical conditions through which the colonial capitalist mode of production accumulated wealth through the under-development of Africa and the Global South. Arturo Escobar (1995) has addressed the historical processes through which poverty was produced as a social problem that could be overcome through development. Similarly, James Ferguson (1994) has articulated the discursive frameworks through which development institutions produce particular modes of knowledge that facilitate practical, technical interventions, and he has equally examined the ideological functions performed by failed development plans and faulty knowledge.

However, many of these critiques of development do not explicitly emphasize gendered discourses of development and their functions in producing institutionalized knowledge about gender, power, and economic disparities. Women, though continuing to produce much of the world's food, have borne the brunt of the negative social and economic consequences of liberalization, particularly in agricultural and care work. A number of African feminist scholars and organizations have furthered discussions of links between land, livelihood, neoliberalism, and gender issues. The contributors to the 2009 issue of *Feminist Africa*, for instance, generated multi-layered analyses of what patriarchy, agribusiness, land rights, and labor have meant for women's rights and lives (Tsikata, 2009). In contrast to these political economic perspectives, the adoption of the "gender agenda" within development agencies tended to mainstream feminist engagement with development (Cornwall, 2007). Feminist concerns with gender as a locus of power relationships have been mainstreamed, diluted, and depoliticized within the frameworks of Women in Development (WID) and Gender and Development (GAD). The development industry has largely reduced gender to essentialisms that are divorced from historical and material power relationships, and has presented women either as abject victims or heroines. This bureaucratization of gender works to redefine it as reducible to a normative empirical reality that can be a point of philanthropic intervention. For instance, women's marginalization in access to inputs and land and their consequently

lower yields has become a major motivating factor for investing in women, as a means of achieving other ends (i.e. higher overall agricultural productivity).

Philanthropic activities cannot be separated from the conditions under which the philanthropy itself is produced. As Christine Ahn explains, "Foundations are made partly with dollars which, were it not for charitable deductions allowed by tax laws, would have become public funds to be allocated through the governmental process under the controlling power of the electorate as a whole" (2007, p. 65). The majority of US foundation trustees and decision-makers are white men who have strong connections to banking, industry, universities, and businesses, and are deeply connected to capitalist production and ideology (Ahn 2007, p. 66). Consequently, even liberal foundations often direct resources toward technical support rather than fundamental changes in global distribution of resources. For example, Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) facilitate the kinds of wealth accumulation that allowed Bill Gates to make his fortune, but also bar African governments from accessing cheap medications (Ahn 2007, p. 72). The Gates Foundation's Global Health program cannot and will not challenge TRIPs or other systemic causes of global inequality, but instead promotes a form of "conscious" or "socially responsible" capitalism by voluntarily redistributing wealth, resources, and medicines to Africans. According to Ann Vogel, philanthropy exemplifies a number of elements that remain central to the U. S. capitalist ethic and self-image: an emphasis on personal responsibility and a limited state; voluntarism and aspirations to attain the "American Dream;" and the logic of how social welfare and wealth ought to be redistributed (2006, p. 637). Philanthropy in American society thus has enormous power, both ideologically and financially, and is one means through which American values and ideals are exported. For example, since its inception the Gates Foundation has disbursed $26.1 billion toward its Global Health, Global Development and its United States program; large grants within these programs are targeted at educational inclusion, access to financial institutions through microcredit and banking, and improved medical, agricultural and information technologies.

Essentialism of Gender in the Gender Impact Strategy for Agricultural Development

Within these projects and programs, the Foundation consistently stresses the complicated role of women, who do the majority of the world's work but receive far less support or recognition. The Foundation's sensitivity to gender issues is commendable for two reasons: first, it shows responsiveness to criticisms of previous agricultural development approaches (such as the Green Revolution in Asia and Latin America) and economic accounting as ignoring issues of labor, time, and resources among women. Second, it emphasizes women's important roles as members of communities and families. The Strategy

states, "We recognize that in most areas in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia women are afforded less status than men, have less access to resources, and have greater responsibilities given their dual reproductive and productive roles in rural households" (GISAD 2008, p. 3).

However, the Gates Foundation, influenced by biases in Western conceptions of women's rights, privileges the division between women and men over other forms of relationships, such as status and seniority, that Cornwall (2007) argues may play important roles in women's lives. The Gates Foundation generally describes women as "vulnerable" and burdened by increased demands on their labor time, and they appear to be identified primarily by their roles as mothers: as the Strategy notes, "... we must understand that improving the lives of women improves the well-being of her children. Lastly, we affirm that reducing inequity for women and girls in the long term must also involve the inclusion of her family, her community, and the men and boys in her daily life" (GISAD 2008, p. 3).

It is important, however, that the emphasis on women in the family unit does not negate the existence of independent, educated, and/or urban women or deny that women may have spheres of power and dignity in addition to spheres of disempowerment. As Molara Ogundipe-Leslie has asserted, "All African women have multiple identities…Yet African women continue to be looked at and looked for in their coital and conjugal sites which seem to be a preoccupation of many Western analysts and feminists" (1994, p. 251). These "coital and conjugal sites" may accurately characterize some women's relationships in some regions, but they are problematically translated into a stereotype about the configurations of power and gender across the Global South—one that ignores other divisions among people and among women, such as those of ethnicity, age group, and class. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) points out that middle-class African women are often excluded based on being too "Western" to represent the rural, unlettered African woman, while the latter are excluded for being rural and unlettered (p. 248). Admirably, the Gates Foundation is interested in both of these classes of women; but it tends to uncritically collapse distinctions between poor rural women with educated female scientists, as in discussing the motivations for its $14 million grant to the second phase of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research's African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD) grant. In promoting the AWARD program, the Gates Foundation describes the hardships faced by women in Sub-Saharan Africa, their dual roles as mothers and as farmers, and the obstacles they face in accessing resources, and it concludes that "[s]trengthening the role of Africa's women, both on the farm and in laboratories, is an essential step in helping poor farmers feed their families" (*Grantee Profile*). This financial and ideological commitment to supporting the greater representation of women in research and development is worthy of praise; the problem lies in the discursive masking of inequalities, and

the assumption that the needs, obstacles, and interests of all women in African are the same.

Since the initial radicalism of GAD, development policy has shifted away from "supporting initiatives aimed at transforming power relations such as, for example, enhancing women's political agency, and towards funding projects that also involved working with men: not as allies, but as targets for 'gender sensitisation' and 'male involvement' (Cornwall 2007, p. 74). These gender targets have then been incorporated into a broader audit culture viewed by some as characteristic of neoliberal governmentality (Ferguson & Gupta 2002; Rose 2006). The Gates Foundation mainstreams gender as a set of quantifiable, technical indicators of project effectiveness that Program Officers can use as a mechanism for disciplining and managing gender integration. For instance, empowerment is measured by "'women's control of agricultural decision-making' and 'women's participation in leadership positions in farmer organizations'" (GISAD 2008, p. 4). Through a Gender Checklist, the Program Officer and potential grantees can "establish expectations and considerations with regard to gender" (GISAD 2008, p. 7). The checklist, though tailored to organizations' needs and decisions in setting optimum levels for women's involvement, demands that the potential grantee have "specific milestones, processes, or actions" (GISAD 2008, p. 5) that effectively involve women; and the Gates Foundation also offers its own techniques for measuring "gender effectiveness through Monitoring and Evaluation" (GISAD 2008, p. 5). These guidelines are necessary because, as the Foundation states, their partners and grantees "may initially lack the ability or capacity to meaningfully address gender" (GISAD 2008, p. 6). The checklist therefore acts as a disciplinary tool to bring men in the Global South in line with a normative, universalized, and bureaucratized conception of gender.

Neoliberal Empowerment: Women and Capitalism in Agricultural Development

The paternalistic philanthropic intervention seeks to empower women as neoliberal individuals who are compatible with the Gates Foundation's "venture philanthropy" or "philanthro-capitalism." The tenets of venture philanthropy are based on how venture capitalists, including Gates, have addressed risk, growth potential, and innovation. Venture philanthropy is also financially dependent on the ruthlessness of American capitalism, which amasses corporate fortunes with which it voluntarily ameliorates the inequalities it has exacerbated. As *The Economist* states, "… there is an unwritten contract at its heart: that the winners shall use some of their wealth to compensate the losers" (Billanthropy 2006). Women make an ideal target for venture philanthropy because they provide an innovative new opportunity for capital investment, economic growth, and development. The capitalist logic of investment requires returns, whether in

business or in philanthropy—so women must "produce" development by generating income, contributing productive labor, and maximizing profit. Women in the Global South are assumed to be more risk-averse than men and thus safer investments. Cecile Jackson notes,

> … it is argued that women can be relied upon to use incomes to the best advantage of all household members. The implications are that women take a 'safety first' approach in which food production is prioritized over cash crops, and incomes are invested in household nutrition and education. Thus, investing in women is investing in those who are at the sharp end of maintaining food security. Food security, however, continues to be seen as primarily based on food production rather than entitlements, and women are represented as having a special (if not exclusive) commitment to less risky food crops rather than more risky cash crops. (2007, p. 109)

Building off of the premise that women are intrinsically more cautious about risk management, the Gates Foundation's agricultural development programs seek to target the staple food crops cultivated primarily by women, supposedly benefiting women and promoting food security. The Foundation emphasizes "gender balance" and equal opportunity in all levels of project organization, and states that it will "offer innovative approaches to development challenges that engage, empower and invest in women for the long term" (GISAD 2008, p. 3). These innovative investments include supporting the extension of credit and microcredit predicated on the belief that women will more efficiently use and repay loans for agricultural inputs and marketing.

Within this framework there appears to be no contradiction between corporate capitalism and the livelihoods of female small-scale farmers. A Gates Foundation-funded publication touted the possibilities of a "double bottom-line," or "business initiatives that explicitly seek to provide social and economic benefits to small-scale producers, as well as meet key commercial needs or objectives of the company" (Chan 2010, p. 62). Through the examples laid out by the authors, such as Mars, Inc. and Starbucks, the fetish of "women's products" is used to target female consumers in the West for whom "the concept of supporting (other) women in less fortunate circumstances is likely to have significant consumer appeal" (Chan 2010, p. 62). In contrast, Maria Mies (1986) and other Marxist feminists have illuminated the roles of women in the international division of labor, the impacts of primitive accumulation on women, and the pauperization and proletarianization of women through capitalist integration. Thus, developmentalist and liberal capitalist forms of feminism supported by the Gates Foundation do not address that it is *through* such

unequal distributions of labor and *through* historical processes of accumulation by dispossession that corporations have cultivated both a base of women who can consume these products and also a base of women whose labor-power is systematically exploited. The two are incommensurable, given that, according to Chandra Mohanty, "It is especially on the bodies and lives of women and girls from the Third World/South—the Two-Thirds World—that global capitalism writes its script…" (2003, p. 235).

According to the Gender Impact Strategy, women face a number of social and economic limitations in accessing opportunities to maximize and profit from their "contributions" (GISAD 2008, p. 3), i.e. their "activities," as opposed to their (often uncompensated) productive and reproductive *labor*. The dilemma faced by small farmers is understood, in the Gates Foundation's view, as follows:

> Their soil is often degraded from overuse. They lack quality seeds, fertilizer, irrigation, and other farming supplies. Their crops are threatened by diseases, pests, and drought. When small farmers do manage to grow a good crop, they frequently lack access to markets (Agricultural Development Overview).

The Strategy asserts that "[t]hese limitations constrain both female farmers' ability to improve their lives and that of their families. These limitations also constrain the transformative power of agriculture to alleviate poverty and hunger" (GISAD 2008, p. 3). As these are conceptualized in the Foundation's work, however, this transformative power of agriculture does not lie in agriculture as currently practiced by women. It is linked to the ability of agriculture to absorb capital in the form of technological improvements, i.e., mechanization, "improved" seed varieties, and the commercialization of staple food crops.

For the Gates Foundation, hunger and poverty are caused by absences and lacks that are ahistorical and intrinsic rather than produced through various forms of dispossession; by exclusively natural forces rather than by a combination of natural and political ones; and by a misuse and over-use of existing resources. The solutions prescribed for these problems include more market participation, increased productivity, and infrastructural development. Central to this effort is the development of agricultural technologies and hybrid seeds that are compatible with women's labor, lives, and bodies. The Strategy states that consultations with women will ensure that new crop varieties will be adopted on the ground:

> Women are also generally the food preparers, which needs to be taken into account when developing varieties of subsistence crops by taking into account taste preferences, and relative ease of preparation or impact on labor. Close consultation with the

> ultimate beneficiary will help prevent the development of a variety that is not adopted due to lack of consultation and consideration of the users [sic] needs (GISAD 2008, p. 12).

Women's involvement is based on several assumptions: first, that women will benefit from the reductions in labor time that are offered by technological advancement; second, that women's tastes must be included at preliminary stages of research to ensure that hybrid or genetically-engineered seed varieties can be effectively marketed and consumed; third, that women are apolitical agents/beneficiaries who are willing to put their faith in the Gates Foundation's and others' trusteeship over seeds and agricultural resources and who accept the theory that global poverty and hunger are motivated primarily by under-production of crops.

Technologies of the Body: Biological and Social Reproduction and Agricultural Development

The sense of urgency regarding women's empowerment and agricultural development is also built on a pervasive image of women as a reproductive threat. As Maria Mies states, "…Third World women as potential 'breeders' and consumers are seen as one of the gravest threats to the world as a whole" (1986, p. 121). The threat of population growth, combined with the spectre of Communist insurgencies among the poor and disenfranchised, was also invoked in the Rockefeller Foundation's first Green Revolution, which began in Mexico in 1941 and sought to end world hunger by introducing Western scientific agriculture to farmers in the Global South (Ahn 2007, p. 71). The Green Revolution dramatically increased crop yields, but it led to environmental degradation, dispossessed small farmers of their means of livelihood and labor, and fundamentally failed to solve world hunger in spite of increased food supply (Ahn 2007). In promoting an improved Green Revolution for Africa, the Gates Foundation echoes similar philosophies about population, agriculture, and the root causes of hunger. According to Bill Gates (2009), the situation has become an "emergency," in which "in the poorest, hungriest places on earth, population is growing faster than productivity, and the climate is changing." In various instances he has decried the danger of declining yields and starvation "at a time of rising population, in a region with millions of poor people (TED 2009).

Alongside agricultural development, the Gates Foundation maintains a commitment to population reduction. In a Question & Answer session with Chris Anderson in 2010, Bill Gates stated that the foundation's focus was initially on reproductive health, based on the idea that population growth among the poor was the major problem in the Third World. His perspective at that time was that "You've got to help mothers who want to limit family size, have the tools and education to do that." According to his narrative, after finding articles that

suggested that improvements in health would reduce the need among poor people to have many children, he shifted his foundation's approach on this basis. Thus, the Gates Foundation does not only act on women's social and economic roles, but also manages their bodies through funding in reproductive health and agricultural development. In this way, increasing women's agricultural productivity can compensate for the emergency caused by their reproductive bodies, and can teach them to self-regulate as (potential) mothers, as agents of consumption, and as generators of productivity.

Women in the Gender Impact Strategy and the Gates Foundation's broader agricultural development policies are thus produced as doubly neoliberal subjects: first, as empowered capitalist agents and second, as the caretakers of the community who step in where the state and the market will not. It would appear that amid the failures of state-led agricultural development programs or free market policies, women's increased agricultural productivity and market involvement are the way forward; these objectives are expected to be fulfilled through philanthropic intervention in extending microcredit, introducing new crop technologies, and labor-saving technologies, which then are expected to enable women to continue in their producer and caretaker roles with greater returns to their labor. The Gender Impact Strategy draws a somewhat simplistic link between women and development, in which investing in women will solve social problems of health, nutrition, and poverty that have not yet been solved. Viewing gender and accumulation in relation to historical and geographic specificities thus challenges the Gates Foundation's belief that corporate profits can be redistributed in a way that allows small-scale and subsistence farmers to lift themselves out of poverty.

Conclusion

The Gates Foundation's philanthropic approach instrumentalizes gender as a means of realizing and improving development. As in other development agencies, gender is "targeted" as a point of (capitalist) intervention, not because of the inherent value in gender equity but because it is "proven" to increase output and growth (O'Laughlin 2007, p. 24). The Gates Foundation's conception of gender does material work in the world, and it may indeed offer women improved opportunities. However, it does so within a social, political, and economic context wherein other, more locally accountable sources of opportunities have disintegrated. By rendering this context invisible in its work, the Gates Foundation presents women in Africa and the Global South and their societies as waiting for rescue from poverty, hunger, and disease, thereby effacing significant and already existing socio-political agency.

The financial clout behind this de-politicized gender mainstreaming also ignores other types of feminisms, including African feminisms that confront gender issues while also addressing racism and exploitation in international

feminism (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994, 208). As Ogundipe-Leslie argues, this requires the liberation of African women, not merely their inclusion and empowerment. She offers the alternative of "Stiwanism," built off of her acronym Social Transformation Including Women in Africa (STIWA), as a means of understanding indigenous African feminisms within their social contexts (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994, pp. 229-230). This theory and others like it work to liberate women in the Global South both from the international feminist movement and from patriarchy. It views gender as central to social analyses of sovereignty and independence, rather than as a side issue that can be "incorporated" and instrumentalized in order to make agricultural development, technology, and capitalism more effective. Offering another model, the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme's "transformative feminism" conceptualizes a form of solidarity and social justice that stresses the role of gender alongside class struggle, corporatism, and varied social, political, and economic positions (Mbilinyi and Shechambo 2009).

These are a few among many local articulations of gender and women's rights; they are offered here as a means of probing the nuances and political contexts that may be overlooked in streamlining conceptions of gender. Although quantifiable, universal measures of ensuring women's participation are effective in women's increased access to resources, we must continue to interrogate what historical nuances and power are omitted, and how this may impact the implementation of policies in diverse, multifaceted contexts. In light of the enormous amounts of money being invested in development by philanthropic organizations, we must have better ways of linking particular configurations of gender and power to a broader transformative feminism that addresses not only participation, but also decision-making power. It remains to be seen whether large philanthropic organizations are capable of adopting more transformative forms of gender analysis or feminism in agricultural development work and incorporating greater attention to historical processes, differences among women, and political economy.

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