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Author(s): Lisa Bloom

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Introducing the Special Issue on Gender, Colonialism, Technology and 'Development'

Lisa Bloom

The six essays and one response collected in this special issue were commissioned from an exciting range of international writers, activists, academics, and intellectuals whose work has raised significant questions about the issue of gender, colonialism, technology and 'development' from a multi-disciplinary perspective. The majority of the contributors came together for an international symposium on the intersection between gender, technology and 'development' that was held in Japan at Josai International University in October, 1997. One paper by Ibrahim Samater, the former Minister of Finance and Planning of Somalia and the former leader of the Somalia National Movement, is a response to the symposium. The three remaining papers (Hotta, Ueno, and Waylen) were added to the special issue as a way to extend

and develop further some of the ideas raised by the symposium participants. All the papers suggest some of the innovative ways that scholars are currently remapping and rethinking both their scholarship and activism by bringing considerations of gender and colonialism together to critique normative discourses of 'development,' reproductive technologies, and popular science.

The power and value of the work in this special issue attests to the emergence of such an inspiring multidisciplinary field of critical feminist inquiry. The journal issue has two parts. Part one includes the papers from the international symposium as well as an additional article by Georgina Waylen that sets the terms of approach for the symposium participants on issues connected with gender, development, and technology. 'Analysing Women in the Politics of the Third World' by Waylen focuses significantly on the shortcomings of the conventional politics literature especially in relation to the Third World. She argues that any meaningful discussion on this issue that attempts to understand women's contribution must begin by rethinking the conventional construction of what constitutes politics. Waylen also cautions against using universalistic discourses of patriarchy and women's oppression to examine the part played by different groups of women in political activity outside of conventional politics. Calling for an

Lisa Bloom is an Associate Professor in Women's Studies at Josai International University. She is the author of *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (University of Minnesota Press 1993), and the editor of the anthology *With Other Eyes: Race and Gender Politics in Visual Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, Critical Aesthetics Series, forthcoming Fall, 1999). Professor Bloom is currently working on a third book project entitled *Ghosts of Ethnicity: Rethinking Ethnicity and Feminist Art Practices in the U.S.*

'approach which can look at the complexity of women in the Third World from a perspective of the multiplicity of difference rather than "otherness,"' (3) her article anticipates the approach taken by the conference participants Suresht Bald, Wachi Yasuko, Lisa Bloom, and the respondent Ibrahim Samater.

Suresht Bald's article 'Women and Healthcare: A Critique of USAID Policies in India' raises questions about how class and gender has affected the very constitution and implementation of USAID funded projects in India despite the passage of the Percy Amendment in 1973 which made the integration of women in funded development projects mandatory. In her article, Bald specifically examines the USAID Integrated Rural Health and Population Project (IRHPP) focusing on the district of Bhiwani to provide a concrete example of how 'USAID funded projects continue to use *women* to achieve developmental goals rather than use *development* to further women's interests.' (15) For Bald, the control of women and their sexuality seemed to determine USAID's emphasis on family planning in Bhiwani and explained why menopausal or post-menopausal women and their health interests were ignored by USAID. Bald's article also provides an example of how current feminist fieldwork coming out of the U.S. challenges older models of Western feminist discourse and political practice in the sense that Bald's research on her working-class sisters in India does not assume her own middle-class culture as the norm; nor does she present the women of Bhiwani as mere passive victims of the USAID politics since she also presents these women as self-consciously questioning the agency's policies.

For Wachi Yasuko, a Japanese anthropologist writing on NGO's in Nepal, it is not enough to reintegrate women as actors into the study of conventional politics but to include those activities Nepalese women are involved in outside state-funded institutional spaces. Her paper focuses on three small alternative women's groups in Nepal: a women's bank which provides credit to women engaged in economically productive work, and two

non-governmental NGO's — TEWA (In Nepalese meaning self-help or support) and ABC Nepal (Agro-forestry, Basic Health, and Cooperative). Wachi focuses on the ways that these organizations are trying to change how 'Nepalese women are situated, recruited or excluded in regional, national and international economic development projects.' (30)

What makes her paper, 'Swabalamban Bikas or Self-Reliant Development: Nepalese Women Activists in Development Today,' particularly significant is the way that she historicizes the activist activities of elite Nepalese women in order to challenge the assumptions of cutting-edge feminists such as Chandra Mohanty, who in her well-known article from 1984 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses' tends to dismiss the contributions of Third World elite women in her theorization of them as a monolithic and unchanging category rather than as a diverse and historically changing group. The other significant aspect of Wachi's argument is the way she challenges official Western definitions and constructions of Nepal as an exotic and wild legendary place frozen in the past, and puts a feminist analysis to work on issues of Nepalese development and modernization, an area that has only recently taken into account the workings of gender.

Lisa Bloom's paper 'Gender, Popular Science and *National Geographic* in the Age of Multiculturalism' reveals how the publications and television specials of powerful U.S. media companies like the *National Geographic* still contribute to the colonialist stereotypes that circulate in the media about so-called 'innate' differences between Third World and First World women. Taking as her subject of study a widely circulated TV show that celebrated the *National Geographic*'s 100th anniversary entitled *The Explorers: A Century of Discovery*, Bloom shows how the figure of the 'Third World woman' is either sexualized or presented as a passive and silent victim of barbaric and primitive practices. By contrast 'First World women' are presented as educated, professionally competent and in control,

as in the example of Carol Jenkins, a medical anthropologist depicted as working with the Hogahai people living in the remote highlands of Papua New Guinea. Jenkins, in this portrait, is represented as a welcomed messenger of Western science, bringing science and enlightenment to 'needy' Third World peoples. Bloom argues that the *National Geographic*, which has been notoriously slow to incorporate even white Western women as autonomous agents of its own discourse, now presents women professionals such as Jenkins as transmitters of U.S. science in order to enable the National Geographic Society to appear as if it had shifted the paradigm of exploration and science away from the structural racism and sexism of its past

If Bloom argues that media programs and publications of the *National Geographic* still use a colonialist 'come and help us' mentality to justify a more feminized U.S. interventionist policy, Ibrahim Samater sees parallels between Bloom's argument and the colonial mentality that seems to still characterize the policies of the development discourse and its gendered effects as it has become institutionalized by the World Bank, the IMF, and its bureaucracy. As Samater writes: "'official' development theories and their applications are Eurocentric and capitalistic and therefore, benefit the capital-rich First World, rather than the poor which they are supposed to serve.' (60) In his paper entitled 'Gender and Development: An Observer's Reflections on the JIU Symposium,' Samater both fleshes out his thesis on how the World Bank, the IMF, and its bureaucracy remain insulated from critiques such as his own and reviews at length the critical feminist literature on women, development and the Third World as well as the specific papers from Josai International University's symposium proceedings. What makes Samater's paper noteworthy is the way his experience as a 'development practitioner' is incorporated into his theoretical analysis of Women in Development and the significance he attributes to the work of Third World feminist theorists and

activists who he sees as providing new and important ways of changing the existing state of affairs.

If the first section critiques the West as authoritative subject of popular scientific and economic knowledge and the persistence of binary oppositions such as First World vs. Third World, colonizer vs. colonized, modern vs. primitive in the official discourses around 'development' and technology, the second section, entitled 'Japanese Feminism's Relationship to National, Racial, and Colonial Concerns' particularly the article by Hotta Midori, lays out the difficulties of dealing with such dualisms within a Japanese context. According to Hotta, to understand the colonialist legacy and its impact on Japanese feminism one must have an understanding not only of European and American colonialisms but of multiple colonialisms in East Asia. For this reason, Hotta insists that Japan's history and geopolitical position (positioned doubly as colonizer and colonized) does not easily lend itself to categorizations in the binary structures that have dominated available descriptions of global relations. In attempting to explain the peculiarity of Japanese feminism and why the debates around feminism in other countries do not easily translate into a Japanese context, Hotta sketches some of the specific historical circumstances that shape Japanese feminism today in her article 'Beyond Our Invisibility—Diverse Feminisms and the Quest of Japanese Women for Self-Defined Identity':

[W]hen Black feminists and Third World Feminists criticize the feminism of white, Western women, there are many puzzling questions as to where Japanese feminists stand, and moreover where we should stand. Such bewilderment stems from the ambiguous 'place' of the Japanese in the contemporary world where a complex relationship between exploitation and discrimination exists: the relationship of East and West, Third World and First World, South and North. The Japanese are not white but colored, and are positioned culturally and geographically in the East; further, within the

mechanism of racism which forms the essence of white supremacy, we are discriminated against. At the same time, however, Japan as an “industrially advanced nation” continues to exploit Asia and the Third World, and it is a fact that the Japanese have a deeply rooted tendency towards discrimination against other Asians and Blacks. (67)

Hotta's article is representative of some of the recent feminist interdisciplinary scholarship coming out of Japan that examines how ‘race’ is tied to questions of gender and sexuality, and linked to questions of nationalisms and colonialisms in Japan. Within such feminist writing there is a shift to a theoretical perspective critical of not only colonial discourse (the process of internal colonialism within the Japanese nation) but also the nationalist ideologies underwriting a discourse of either Third or First World politics. For Hotta, however much she has learned from studying and reading about the debates in cultural and women's studies in the U.S. and the U.K., she cautions against simply theorizing Japanese feminism along the lines of a feminist post-colonialist critique used in Britain or that of African or Asian-American feminist scholarship coming out of the U.S.

Ueno Chizuko is also careful to differentiate between Japanese feminist issues regarding reproductive rights and certain American feminist polemics on the issue. In “‘Reproductive Rights/Health’ and Japanese Feminism’ Ueno argues that for an understanding of Japanese feminism's own peculiar position on abortion and new reproductive technologies one has to consider how women were constructed as producers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups as well as ‘mothers of the Japanese nation.’ In order to explain how the issue of ‘healthy babies’ is tied to questions of reproductive rights, and linked to recent scholarship on nationalisms in Japan she points out the significance of the Eugenic Protection Act and how it is still synonymous with

Japan's abortion law today. Ueno goes on to historicize the debates about abortion and reproductive rights in Japan detailing how the legalization of abortion was connected to national eugenic policies meant to discourage women from having ‘children who should not be born.’ (According to Ueno, the term was used as a euphemism for the handicapped in one publicly distributed survey.) Significantly, Ueno argues that first-wave feminists in Japan were not innocent as regards eugenics thought. She goes on to further explain that the reason that many Japanese feminists were pro-motherhood unlike their counterparts in the U.S. is that access to safe and relatively cheap abortions as well as economic incentives were connected to a desire on the part of the nation to lower Japan's fertility rate. According to Ueno, Japanese feminists tried to challenge and subvert the official discourse constituted by the nation-state in their demands for the ‘right to give birth’ most importantly in a ‘Society Where We Want to Give Birth.’

All the articles in this special issue are reevaluating traditional discourses about women to acknowledge the diversified differences at work in the field of feminist thought internationally. The first section, ‘Gender, Technology, and Development’ ties questions of gender and colonialism together to critique normative discourses of ‘development’ and technology. This section sets up the context for part two on ‘Japanese Feminism's Relationship to National, Racial and Colonial Concerns.’ All the papers focus on the issues that are still not discussed within the traditional disciplines or official international health or ‘development’ organizations. It is my hope that these essays have much to offer in terms of enabling a new form of dialogue to take place that acknowledges the complexity of what is actually happening in women's studies scholarship and women's activism at this present moment in the U.S., the U.K., Nepal, and Japan.